

“A correspondence is a poetry enlarged”:  
Robert Duncan, Elizabeth Bishop, Amy Clampitt  
and Post-War Poets’ Letters

by

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the work of three post-war American poets—Robert Duncan, Elizabeth Bishop and Amy Clampitt—for whom the practice of letter writing was already a disappearing art. In placing these poets and their letters side-by-side, the thesis makes connections between poets who have previously been seen as inhabiting different and largely discrete poetic spheres. The thesis intervenes in the growing field of epistolary scholarship, extending and amending the findings of previous critics who have observed the close relationship between letters and poems. It challenges a recent critical emphasis on letters as sources that should be considered independent from poems, arguing instead that the two art forms are deeply interwoven. Through an examination of particular case studies and detailed close readings of published letter collections and unpublished archival material, the thesis demonstrates how Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt used letters as inspiration and material for their poems. The thesis uncovers a shared lineage with nineteenth-century and earlier letter writing conventions, showing how these poets replicated prior practices including the coterie circulation of poems in letters, an Emersonian concept of friendship, a “baroque prose style” and miniature portrait exchange. For three poets who existed on the margins of various literary movements, as well as often being geographically isolated, letters were a vital source of friendship and companionship. However, in each case, letters were not perfect models of harmonious friendship and community. In fact, the sense of connection created through letters proved to be nearly always, and necessarily, virtual and delicate.

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## Abbreviations

<i>Collected Early</i>	Duncan, Robert. <i>The Collected Early Poems and Plays</i> . Ed. Peter Quartermain. Berkley: U of California P, 2012.
<i>Collected Later</i>	Duncan, Robert. <i>The Collected Later Poems and Plays</i> . Ed. Peter Quartermain. Berkley: U of California P, 2014.
<i>CP</i>	Clampitt, Amy. <i>Collected Poems</i> . London: Faber and Faber, 1997.
<i>EAP</i>	Bishop, Elizabeth. <i>Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments</i> . Ed. Alice Quinn. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
<i>H.D.-RD Letters</i>	H.D. and Robert Duncan. <i>A Great Admiration: H.D./Robert Duncan Correspondence, 1950-61</i> . Ed. Robert J. Bertholf. Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1992.
<i>KL I</i>	Keats, John. <i>The Letters of John Keats, Vol. I: 1814-1818</i> . Ed. Hyder E. Rollins. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1958.
<i>KL II</i>	Keats, John. <i>The Letters of John Keats, Vol. II: 1819-1821</i> . Ed. Hyder E. Rollins. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1958.
<i>LA</i>	Clampitt, Amy. <i>Love Amy: The Selected Letters of Amy Clampitt</i> . Ed. Willard Spiegelman. New York: Columbia UP, 2005.
<i>OA</i>	Bishop, Elizabeth. <i>One Art: The Selected Letters</i> . Ed. Robert Giroux. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994.
<i>P</i>	Bishop, Elizabeth. <i>Poems</i> . London: Chatto & Windus, 2011.
<i>Pr</i>	Bishop, Elizabeth. <i>Prose</i> . London: Chatto & Windus, 2011.
<i>RD-DL Letters</i>	Duncan, Robert and Denise Levertov. <i>The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov</i> . Ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelphi. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.
<i>WIA</i>	Bishop, Elizabeth and Robert Lowell. <i>Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence</i> . Ed. Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

## Introduction

### “A correspondence is a poetry enlarged”<sup>1</sup>

“I’m in the midst of a commission for the *Voice of America* series—a half hour talk ‘on my poetry’ which I hope to use to get across (in a half-hour?) the concept of the poem as a lasting event contributing to the human reality we call language—but I want to use a term that does not refer finally to the tongue alone. Could I render *communication* free from its bourgeoisie uses, as if it were an affair of the market place, and bring it back into its company with *commune*, *communion*, *to commune with*, *communicant*, *community*” (Robert Duncan, *RD-DL Letters* 439).<sup>2</sup>

“I have to get to Cambridge early in September to arrange my new flat—and do some work on my new seminar, on ‘Letters!’ [...] Just *letters*—as an art form or something. I hope to select a nicely incongruous assortment of people—Mrs. Carlyle, Chekhov, my Aunt Grace, Keats, a letter found on the street, etc. etc. But I need some ideas from you both—just on the subject of letters, the dying ‘form of communication’” (Elizabeth Bishop, *OA* 545).<sup>3</sup>

“The writing of letters—real old-fashioned ones, as distinguished from the copiously scripted and distributed appeal to its recipients’ worse or better instincts, or even to both at once, that like weeds in an untended plot may soon crowd out all else—is a dying art” (Amy Clampitt, *Predecessors* 84).<sup>4</sup>

In the trio of comments above, which were made in 1964, 1971 and 1989 respectively, the poets Robert Duncan, Elizabeth Bishop and Amy Clampitt expressed a shared sense that letters, and forms of intimate address more broadly, were a “dying ‘form of communication.’” The idea that letter writing is a dying form is not a new one. As Jonathan Ellis observes in his introduction to *Letter Writing Among Poets: From William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop* (2015), the death knell of the letter appears to have tolled regularly and

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<sup>1</sup> A one-line poem by Robert Duncan titled “Motto” taken from the collection *Writing Writing* (1964), published in *The Collected Early Poems and Plays* (457).

<sup>2</sup> From a letter by Robert Duncan to Denise Levertov dated January 3, 1964 published in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov* (2004).

<sup>3</sup> From a letter by Elizabeth Bishop to Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale dated July 8, 1971 published in *One Art: The Selected Letters* (1994).

<sup>4</sup> From an essay by Amy Clampitt titled “Purloined Sincerity” in *Predecessors Et Cetera* (1991). Originally published in the *Kenyon Review* 11.4 (1989): 178-183. The essay is a review of *Writing the Female Voice* (1989), a collection of scholarly essays on epistolary literature edited by Elizabeth C. Goldsmith.

consistently since the introduction of the Penny Post in 1840 (1). In our current age of rapid electronic communication and social media, the disappearance of the handwritten letter is a familiar refrain. Recent years have seen a spate of popular accounts of a romanticised bygone age of letter writing.<sup>5</sup> These accounts point to the internet as the culprit responsible for the so-called death of the letter, citing the ability to connect instantly with others as a reason for the obsolescence of slow forms of communication. Yet, a cultural fascination with letters, in Bishop's words, "as an art form or something" persists, and for a form that has repeatedly been declared dead or dying, correspondence (in paper and digital forms) displays a surprising vitality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The internet has in some ways reinvigorated a fascination with handwritten correspondence, and provided new ways of engaging with letters. The blog *Letters of Note*, for example, is a web-based archive of letters by notable figures including writers, artists and actors.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the literary journal *The Letters Page*, edited by Jon McGregor, publishes original handwritten letters primarily in digital form and states on its website: "We are interested in the literary traditions of letter-writing, and the idea of correspondence in a digital age."<sup>7</sup> Literary archives are also starting to reflect changes in communication. While it was once the case that a writer's archive consisted primarily of notebooks, handwritten drafts and correspondence files,

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Philip Hensher's *The Missing Ink: The Lost Art of Handwriting* (2012), Ian Samson's *Paper* (2012) and John O'Connell's *For the Love of Letters* (2012). These authors mourn the loss of the materiality of letters in comparison to the impersonal, disembodied nature of emails. They argue that elements such as handwriting, drawings and paper give fundamental clues to the writer and their historical context.

<sup>6</sup> A number of these letters have been published in book form in *Letters of Note: Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Audience*, ed. Shaun Usher (2013).

<sup>7</sup> A selection of letters from the journal has recently been published in the form of a loose-leaf letter-filled box: *The Letters Page: Vol. 1* (2016), ed. Jon McGregor.

now the archives of contemporary writers are very likely to include a digital record of their creative life in the form of Word files, floppy discs and hard drives. In 2011 the British Library purchased the “hybrid” archive of poet Wendy Cope, which contains 15 boxes of paper material including poetry notebooks, handwritten drafts and letters as well as a substantial amount of “born-digital” material including approximately 20,000 of the poet’s emails.<sup>8</sup>

While it is not within the scope of this thesis to speculate on questions of whether, when or why the practice of letter writing died, it is clear that it has continued in various guises—both in terms of real letters and fictional forms—in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The persistence of the epistolary form has been matched by a renewed critical interest in letters in the last few decades, although this has largely been limited to a study of the reappearance of the epistolary novel. Many of these critics make the point that, contrary to the long-held view that the epistolary novel peaked in the eighteenth century and then gradually declined, its impact has in fact been far wider and more diverse, stretching well into the twentieth century. For example, in her highly influential study, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982), Janet Gurkin Altman points to a neglected reappearance of the letter in twentieth-century narratives such as Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* (1964) and Natalia Ginzburg’s *No Way* (1973): “almost no one has investigated the reappearance of the letter in mixed forms in twentieth-century narrative” (196).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I was involved in cataloguing the emails in Wendy Cope’s archive held at the British Library. For an account of the opportunities and challenges presented by emails in digital literary archives see Baldock, “Responses” (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Other critics also note the persistence of epistolary forms in twentieth-century novels. Thomas Beebee remarks: “The close of the twentieth century saw a remarkable revival of form” (199). In *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (1992) Linda Kauffman highlights the postmodern, parodic potential of the epistolary form as it appears in twentieth-century fiction



Subsequent epistolary critics have so far focused almost exclusively on fictional letters in novels. Only a handful has attempted to theorise real letters. Those that have note that the letter is a uniquely malleable form that resists standard generic categorisation, often sliding into other genres. In their article on “Letters As/Not A Genre,” Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley observe the “leaky borders” between letters and other genres of life writing including autobiographical and diary forms (94). One of the defining characteristics of letters appears to be their very resistance to standard definition. Rebecca Earle argues that “the letter form is a protean, all-inclusive genre, whose very shapelessness is its strength” (8). However, one element that is certain is that “real letters” often have a complex relationship to notions of truth and sincerity. The idea that letters are always sincere, spontaneous outpourings of the true self is one that many reject. Almost every critic of “real” letters observes that real and truthful are not always synonymous concepts, and that letters are often crafted performances with literary qualities.<sup>10</sup>

However, while increased attention has been paid to the inherently protean, performative genre of the letter, critics are still defining what an analysis of the “art of letter writing” might look like, whether it is possible at all,

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and theoretical texts, including Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Jacques Derrida’s *The Post Card*. Rachel Bower makes the case for a “resurgence” in epistolary forms in world literature in the last decades of the twentieth century, arguing that a “return to epistolary conventions and techniques in this period was underpinned by a set of ideals that relate to the pursuit of dialogue” (4). Bower analyses a diverse range of texts by authors whose work has not often, or never before, been considered in terms of its epistolarity, including J.M. Coetzee, Monica Ali and John Berger.

<sup>10</sup> Recent critics treat the idea that letters are transparent windows into the writer’s true self with suspicion. For Jolly and Stanley, a letter’s “truth” must be viewed in terms of “relationship” and its position within specific social circles and particular historical and political contexts (92; 97). Mary Favret writes, “We accept too readily the notion that the letter allows us a window into the intimate, and usually feminine, self” (10). Rebecca Earle observes: “personal correspondence may allow the writer to construct ‘fictions of the self’” (2).

and how we should treat correspondence in relation to other genres.

Connections between the genres of the novel and the letter are well-covered territory. Significantly less work has been done on the subject of poetry and letter writing, and connections between these two often-overlapping genres.

Why were so many poets also prolific letter writers? Why does there appear to be a particular and enduring kinship between letters and poetry? How do poets use their letters in the business of crafting poems? Are letters an inferior form of draft material in which poets are able to test out ideas that they later develop in published poems? Or are they, as a handful of recent critics have argued, in fact an art form in their own right worthy of the kind of sustained literary analysis that is more usually focused on their published poems? Finally, if we consider poets' letters an art form on an equal footing with their poems, how do literary critics approach the many and diverse relationships between letters and poetry?

This is where my thesis intervenes. I ask why three post-war American poets were so fascinated with letter writing, both in the form of real letters and letter-inspired poems, at a time when correspondence already seemed to be an anachronistic form of communication. I take three poets and their letters as case studies—Robert Duncan (b. 1919 d. 1988), Elizabeth Bishop (b. 1911 d. 1979) and Amy Clampitt (b. 1920 d. 1994)—all of whom came to maturity in the decades following the Second World War. They can broadly be grouped under the heading of “Middle Generation” poets.<sup>11</sup> However, though Clampitt

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<sup>11</sup> The term “Middle Generation” is most often used to describe a limited group or constellation of poets who were the successors of modernism. Stephen Burt writes: “These poets are sometimes called mid-century modernists, or ‘the middle generation,’ because they came after the High Moderns—for them, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Hart Crane, W. C. Williams—they had grown up reading” (128). The poets most frequently termed

was born in 1920, thus making her the same age as Duncan and nine years younger than Bishop, she did not publish any poems until the age of 63 and therefore she sits slightly apart from her contemporaries, wedged between poetic generations.

Although these poets were not members of a single school of poetry, there are compelling links between their poetry and their use of the epistolary form. All three were prolific letter writers and avid letter readers, and there is a clear relationship between their letters and poetry in all three cases. All three used letters as a form of animated draft material, so that ideas and images first hatched in letters can be seen to carry over to and take shape in published poems. Letters are a testing ground for ideas and a prompt for poetry, as well as informing the tone and structure of the poems that overlap with and spin off from letters. Each poet borrows elements from their own and others' correspondence in an effort to render poems more immediate and as a means of signalling a poem's status as part of a dialogue with predecessors and peers. This raises important aesthetic and ethical questions about the nature of collaboration, sharing, borrowing, and stealing from others' work in the poetic process.<sup>12</sup> Their epistolary relationships with other poets, friends and mentors have an important bearing on, and are in many ways inseparable from, the poems they produce. Each chapter in this thesis turns on an epistolary

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Middle Generation are Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell. See, for example, *Jarrell, Bishop, Lowell, & Co: Middle Generation Poets in Context* (Ed. Suzanne Ferguson, 2003). However, recent critics have questioned the narrowness of the term, arguing that it could and should be expanded. Brendan Cooper criticises the term's "limiting exclusivity" pointing out that other poets, including Robert Duncan, could be compared to the group's core members in terms of birth date and themes in their work (3).

<sup>12</sup> Siobhan Phillips has written about the ethics of epistolary exchange, particularly regarding Lowell's use of his ex-wife Elizabeth Hardwick's letters in *The Dolphin* ("Ethics of Correspondence" 347-349). This is not the main focus of my thesis, although questions do arise about the ethics of collaboration and borrowing.

relationship in some form, either in the form of a real correspondence with peers or predecessors, or in the form of an imagined correspondence via the reading of previous poets and writers' letters and diaries.

The ambition of this thesis is to provide a detailed account of the complex and various connections between letters and poems in the work of Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt. In doing so, I am drawing links between three poets whose work has not been linked before in this way. There is inevitably an element of arbitrariness in the selection. I am not arguing that these three poets were the only Middle Generation poets who were also prolific letter writers, nor that other poets in this period did not also use letter writing as a practical way into writing poems or a fertile imaginative trope in their poetry. There are other poets who would also fit these criteria.<sup>13</sup> However, in selecting these three poets, I aim to broaden the range of poets whose letters, I argue, should be seen as playing a central and shaping role in their poetic oeuvre. By analysing these poets in parallel, I am also making links between poets who have previously been seen as inhabiting largely different poetic spheres. Although alike in age, Bishop's status as a member of what Thomas Travisano has called the "midcentury quartet" (*Midcentury Quartet* 3) of mainly Confessional poets and Duncan's frequent categorisation as a Black Mountain poet, has meant that Duncan and Bishop are very rarely compared, and have never before been

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<sup>13</sup> Other collections of post-war American poets' letters that might have been considered alongside their poetry include: *Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence* (9 vols, 1980-1990); *Sylvia Plath's Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963* (1975); *We Dream of Honour: John Berryman's Letters To His Mother* (1988); *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (1991); *Randall Jarrell's Letters: An Autobiographical and Literary Selection* (2002); *The Letters of James Schuyler to Frank O'Hara* (2006); *Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: The Letters* (2010) and *The Selected Letters of Anthony Hecht* (2012). Part of the reason for the selection of the three poets in my study was practical, based on material that was readily available, and what could reasonably be consulted within the space and time constraints of the thesis project. There are doubtless many more unpublished collections of post-war American poets in archives or private hands.

placed together in the same study. This ignores a number of manifest connections between their biographies and their poetic processes.<sup>14</sup> The fact of Clampitt's relatively late blooming as a poet makes her an outlier or anomaly in studies of post-war poetry, and scholars have had great difficulty in placing her within particular poetic traditions and schools. Her poetry has been compared to Bishop, an acknowledged influence on Clampitt, but these studies neglect the affinity between Bishop and Clampitt as devoted and frequent letter writers.<sup>15</sup> All three poets evade definitive categorisation within particular poetic schools or movements. I argue that there is a strong connection between the three poets' resistance to categorisation and peripheral, outsider status and their use of letter writing, a form that is itself fluid and undefined, as a means of creating virtual and shifting forms of poetic community.

While scholarship exists in relation to all three poets singly (although not collectively), an assessment of the significance of their letters in relation to poems is either less well represented or entirely missing. Bishop's letters have deservedly already received a significant amount of praise and critical

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<sup>14</sup> Both Bishop and Duncan lost their parents at a young age. Bishop's father died when she was eight months old. Her mother admitted herself to a psychiatric hospital when Bishop was five years old, and died there when Bishop was in her early 20s. Duncan's mother died in childbirth. His father could not afford to keep him so Duncan was adopted soon after birth. Both poets were homosexual and felt the pressures of living in a homophobic society. Duncan was very open about his sexuality (he published an essay titled "The Homosexual in Society" in 1944), whereas Bishop was only open about her sexuality with close friends. Both poets had complex mentor relationships with experimental female modernist poets. Duncan with H.D., as I explain in Chapter One, and Bishop with and Marianne Moore, as is well-known. Both poets also visited Ezra Pound in St. Elizabeths Hospital. Crucially, in the context of my thesis, Bishop and Duncan were prolific letter writers who placed a value on everyday and quotidian experience in their poetry. Although their poetic styles were often very different, both incorporated material from letters in poetry and wrote letter-like poems. The two poets knew each other and "got along marvellously" (Thom Gunn qtd. in Jarnot 277). Lisa Jarnot gives an amusing account, quoting the poet Thom Gunn's story, of an occasion when Bishop baked hash brownies for Duncan, who had not tried them before (277).

<sup>15</sup> Bishop and Clampitt have been compared in terms of their poetic engagements with nature. Bonnie Costello links the two poets in *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (2009) as does Robert Boschman in *In the Way of Nature: Ecology and Westward Expansion in the Poetry of Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Bishop and Amy Clampitt* (2009).

attention. However, in recent years new editions of her letters have been published, and new archival material made accessible, thus calling for further exploration and reassessment of the relationships between her published works and previously unpublished drafts and correspondence.<sup>16</sup> Robert Duncan and Amy Clampitt, though both considered important figures in post-war American poetry by critics, are less well known and less frequently studied.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, editions of their letters, although praised by critics and reviewers at the time of publication, have received very little or no critical attention in relation to their literary and artistic qualities, or the intrinsic and illuminating connections to their poems. In a related sense, no critic has yet made central to their analysis a consideration of the epistolarity or letter-like and letter-derived qualities of their poems. My thesis, in looking at Duncan and Clampitt's letters not simply as a contextual backdrop or useful biographical source, but fundamental to the poems that they simultaneously produced, fills in a number of these gaps. It is not the goal of this thesis to analyse the three poets' letters to one other. Although they were all writing letters during the middle and later decades of the twentieth century, there is no evidence to show that they corresponded at any length with each other. Instead, I approach these poets as case studies for the exploration of the connections between poetry and letter writing in this period. I aim to draw links between the creative methods of all

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<sup>16</sup> Editions of Bishop's letters and drafts published in recent years include: *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts and Fragments* (2006); *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (2008); *Elizabeth Bishop and the New Yorker: The Complete Correspondence* (2011). The complete correspondence between Bishop and Moore is forthcoming.

<sup>17</sup> This is particularly the case for Amy Clampitt. Despite receiving praise from influential poetry scholars, including Helen Vendler, Bonnie Costello, Stephen Burt and Willard Spiegelman, there has not yet been a single-author study of her work. Moreover, her relatively extensive archives at the New York Public Library remain uncatalogued and largely unexplored.

three, and to reveal significant continuities, as well as some discontinuities, in the ways in which their individual letters and poems overlap.<sup>18</sup>

Through the simultaneous close reading of letters and poems, this thesis makes a number of new observations that confirm, extend and amend previous assessments of poets' letters. Critics have observed that letters are often a form of poetic draft material, functioning as a laboratory for the creation of poetic ideas.<sup>19</sup> I argue that it was not necessarily the case that these poets kept copies of their own letters, but that the very act of writing a letter to a specific other triggered key elements of the poetic process. Furthermore, it was not just the writing but also the reading of letters that initiated processes of self-exploration and self-other comparison that inspired and informed individual poems. In light of this, I offer detailed evidence of the way that Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt incorporated elements of their own and others' letters in their poetry. This involved borrowing specific details and ideas from letters in poems, and, in a broader and more complex sense, simulating and recreating in poems the immediacy and spontaneity of letters, and the intimacy and reciprocity of epistolary relationships.

However, I demonstrate that the journey from letter to poem was not always a smooth one. Building on critics (Treseler, "Lyric Letters" 60; Phillips,

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<sup>18</sup> Duncan and Bishop did correspond. Jarnot cites a letter that Bishop sent to Duncan thanking him for the gift of his Thom Gunn tribute poem. Bishop writes: "I'm sure you know that although our approach to poetry differs a lot—I have the greatest respect for your work and admiration for your life of devotion to it" (qtd. in Jarnot 308).

<sup>19</sup> For example, Bishop critics note that her letters function as a form of draft material, which is then transmuted into poetry. Joelle Biele writes that Bishop used letters as "sentient rough drafts" ("Like Working" 96). Jonathan Ellis observes that Bishop "frequently used letters to begin poems, raiding her own correspondence to aid and inspire the creative process" (*Art and Memory* 142). This thesis builds on these arguments in the chapters on Bishop, and demonstrates that the same process of using letters as material for poetry applies also to Robert Duncan and Amy Clampitt.

“Ethics” 344; Hammer, “Useless Concentration” 178) who argue that, in Bishop’s case, letters offered an artistic model that she sought to recreate in poems, I argue that elements of this model could not be transported wholesale from letter to poem. If letters offer spontaneous, impromptu, in-the-moment observation, along with models of artistic collaboration and reciprocity, poems frequently necessitate more meditative, nuanced exploration of these themes. In Bishop’s case, the surreal delights of living in Brazil that spill forth so amply in her letters reappear, in altered form, in poems that question the dangers of attempts to control and contain the external world. Duncan’s letters are inspired by an idealised vision of shared influence, friendship and community. However, the poems that emerge from Duncan’s correspondence with fellow poets H.D. and Denise Levertov wrestle with elements that complicate and threaten these idealised visions, such as irreconcilable differences in approaches to the poet’s role in a time of war. Clampitt’s poems that draw on the historical letters of literary figures, such as those of John Keats to his brother George in America, make use of real correspondence as a way of connecting seemingly disconnected temporalities, places and people. Yet Clampitt’s poems also underscore the ways in which letters fail to bridge distances, and can paradoxically both affirm a sense of community as well as re-affirming one of solitude and alienation.

By comparing the ways in which Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt use their own and other’s letters, this thesis also establishes a shared lineage with nineteenth-century letter writing. This is a facet of the poets’ interest in letter writing that has received very little critical attention. I argue that their fascination with letters and letter writing derived, in all three cases, from a deep



immersion in the letter writing cultures of nineteenth-century literary, and occasionally also non-literary, figures. I argue that, for all three poets, a simultaneous focus on past and present in letters and letter-inspired poems offers a way of distinguishing themselves from their mid-century peers, and fashioning their own distinctive poetic voices.

### **Poetry and letter writing: corresponding activities**

My interest in the literary status of poets' letters arises from, and builds on, recent work that seeks to elevate letters, particularly poets' letters, from a secondary to a primary source. A handful of critics observe that letters are all too often treated only as sources for biographical information. In a review following the landmark publication of Elizabeth Bishop's selected letters in *One Art* (1994), Tom Paulin called for a radical reassessment of the genre of the letter. Taking his cue from Bishop's 1971 letter to her friends Arthur Gold and Robert Fisdale in which she outlines her ideas for a Harvard seminar on "Just letters—as an art form or something," Paulin argues that all too often poets' letters are read and enjoyed by critics, only to be used later as "sources for biography" or intriguing glosses for poems that remain always "anterior" to, and "lesser" than, the poems they appear to inspire (Paulin 216-217).

Other critics make similar observations about the "secondary" status of poets' letters. In an article on Bishop's letters, Langdon Hammer writes: "Critics typically approach a poet's letters as information: they provide statements of intention or belief; they give context (of many different kinds); they record a life. The personal letter is in this sense oddly supplemental" ("Useless Concentration" 163). Hugh Haughton observes that letters' status as a quasi-

literary form means that they hover on the boundaries of different literary genres and categories: “Falling between ‘text’ and ‘document,’ between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ text, letters occupy a fluid space between a writer’s literary *oeuvre* and its non-literary hinterland, between the work of art and biography. (“Just Letters” 57). Poets’ letters are a central part of the critic’s toolkit, but one that has remained curiously hidden in plain sight.

These three critics offer more careful, illuminating assessments of poets’ letters that delve into this “non-literary hinterland.” They demonstrate that letters have artistic qualities and involve complex performances of literary personae. To treat letters only as prosaic sources of contextual information is to overlook the light that they shed on the relationships between life and work, public and private personae, art and biography. For Paulin, letters have their own unique significance independent from poems, and should be valued as art works in their own right rather than intriguing supplementary texts. However, their artful qualities rest on the spontaneity and immediacy of letters, what Paulin calls their “throwaway, disposable” character (216). To call them art is therefore to come up against the paradox that a letter’s artistry may lie in its very “refusal of the literary” in favour of a kind of writing that appears deliberately provisional, unfinished and still fizzing with traces of the writer’s turning thoughts.

Paulin’s analysis is tantalising and suggestive in its delineation of the potential for a new field of study focused (in Bishop’s words) on “just *letters*” and their anti-literary qualities. Yet it remains tempting to read poets’ letters in tandem with their poetry as artefacts that, despite their apparently “throwaway” qualities, display evidence of deliberate thought and craft. Despite

his initial protestations, Paulin goes on to explore in his essay some of the multiple and fascinating coincidences of similar thoughts and images in Bishop's letters and poems. I agree with Paulin and others that to treat letters merely as supporting biographical information or illuminating glosses on individual poems is to miss many of their unique, independent, and often "anti-aesthetic" qualities. However, this thesis makes the case for a productive reading of letters alongside poems.

Furthermore, Paulin's essay skirts over the unique kinship that exists between poetry and letter writing as activities that are often intertwined. The essays in *Letter Writing Among Poets* (2015) make a case for the special significance of poets' letters, and the intrinsic connection between epistolary and lyric forms of address. For Jonathan Ellis both letters and poems are attempts to communicate across possibly unbridgeable distances of time and space. Ellis cites the American poet Mary Ruefle's lecture "Remarks on Letters" in which she ponders on the connection between letters, poems and prayers: "For what is a letter, but to speak one's thoughts at a distance? Which is why poems and prayers are letters" (qtd. in Ellis, "Introduction" 2). For Angela Leighton, the epistolary and lyric addresses are linked by both the desire to speak, and also to be heard: "Perhaps letters have this in common with poems: that they constantly look for, perhaps listen for, good listeners" (210). The desire to communicate with an absent other is at the heart of letters and poetry as curiously both distant and intimate forms of communication.

In his essay in the same volume, Hugh Haughton addresses the fundamentally communicative and social impulse that sustains both letters and poetry not just within the poems themselves, but also in the context of the

exchanges that shape them. He argues that letters to friends and fellow poets have a crucial role to play in the creation of poems prior to publication, and that correspondents often act as first readers and essential sounding boards.

Haughton cites famous epistolary relationships that give us an insight into the poems that resulted from them: “[Gerard Manley] Hopkins and [Robert] Bridges, Robert Frost and Edward Thomas, Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell or Marianne Moore” (59). These correspondences reveal the extent to which poems are not products of solitary genius but the result of a network, or “web,” of social relations:

One thing all poets’ letters document is the fact that poets need other people (other poets in particular) to write to. There are no ‘single’ poets, however singular (like Moore) or solitary (like Emily Dickinson).

Without exception poets need a ‘web of friendship,’ a group of friends and editors with which to share poems, exchange gossip, swap shop-talk and be competitive. (Haughton 76)

The idea that the act of writing poetry, although often a solitary endeavour, is one that is necessarily supported by friendship and community, is central to my thesis. The notion that letter writing is what binds these communities together is even more pertinent. As Amy Clampitt, a figure not included in Haughton’s essay, wrote in a lecture titled “Predecessors, Et Cetera”: “Writers need company. We all need it. It’s not the command of knowledge that matters finally, but the company. It’s the predecessors. As a writer, I don’t know

where I'd be without them" (5).<sup>20</sup> Clampitt's own correspondence frequently reflects on the fundamental tension between solitude and community that all writers face.<sup>21</sup> Although she corresponded predominately with friends, rather than a network of other writers, her letters contain the seeds for future poems and facilitate the discovery of her poetic voice. Moreover, as I demonstrate in Chapter Five, Clampitt's own poems amply demonstrate the need for company in the form of literary predecessors, putting her own spin on ideas of poetic community through the creation of imagined networks of writers. In her poetic sequence *Voyages: A Homage to John Keats*, published in her collection of poems *What the Light Was Like* (1985), Clampitt finds vicarious forms of companionship through her reading and incorporation of sections from Keats's letters together with references to the work of American poets including Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens.

Haughton's essay quotes Wallace Stevens in the context of writers' networks: "The web of friendship is the most delicate thing in the world—and the most precious" (qtd. in Haughton 60). Stevens may be referring here to Ralph Waldo Emerson's characterisation of friendship as a web (either of cloth or a spider's web) in the essay "Friendship" in which Emerson writes: "we weave social threads of our own, a new web of relations." (196) The metaphor of friendship as a delicate web is one that I explore in depth in Chapter Two. I look at the letters between Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov as examples of the ways in which letter writing can both sustain and strain the delicate "web of

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<sup>20</sup> The script of the lecture appears in the selection of Clampitt's prose, *Predecessors, Et Cetera: Essays* (1991). Clampitt originally delivered the lecture at her alma mater, Grinnell College, in February 1986.

<sup>21</sup> I explore the idea that letter writing provides a form of companionable solitude in Chapter Five.

friendship.” Furthermore, every chapter in this thesis explores the extent to which poets relied on the friendship and mentorship of peers and predecessors (via letters) as a model to inspire them, but also one that they often resisted, thus supporting and fleshing out Haughton’s assertion that letters are important in the way that they allow writers to “be competitive.”

### **(Verse) Letters and “Middle Generation” Poets**

A further connection between poetry and letter writing that has existed for centuries comes in the form of the verse letter. Although the verse letter, which derives from Horace’s *Epistles* and Ovid’s *Heroides*, might seem an antiquated form, it appears in the work of a number of twentieth-century poets, particularly, as several critics have observed, in the work of American Middle Generation poets. In a comprehensive survey titled “On Verse Letters” (2012), Philip Coleman argues that the form’s flexible and protean nature has meant that a diverse range of poets have adapted it to fit a variety of different contexts. He observes a particular pattern in the use of the form by American modernist poets and their Middle Generation successors. Coleman cites verse-letters, or letter-like poems by Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Pound incorporates historical letters in *The Cantos*, which “re-makes letters drawn from many historical sources in its intertextual weaving of materials, as in Pound’s use of the letters of Thomas Jefferson in Canto LXIX” (Coleman 509). Pound’s contemporary, William Carlos Williams, also experimented with the incorporation of real letters in poetry. In *Paterson*, he used sections from

anguished letters he received from the poet Marcia Nardi.<sup>22</sup> The use of these letters, without Nardi's prior permission, "raised questions for many readers about the ethics of epistolary appropriation in literature, particularly where the use of personal letters is concerned" (Coleman 510). Although Coleman does not cite any of these responses to the poem, Elizabeth Bishop was one reader who found Williams' use of Nardi's letters uncomfortable. Early on in her correspondence with Robert Lowell she writes (of *Paterson*): "I still felt he shouldn't have used the letters from that woman—to me it seems mean, & they're too overpowering emotionally for the rest of it so that the whole poem suffers." (*WIA* 38)

Coleman notes that a number of Middle Generation poets continued to experiment with the verse letter, and the incorporation of real letters in verse, taking Pound and Williams as examples:

[T]he so-called 'Middle Generation' of American poets—including Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Randall Jarrell, Anne Sexton, and W.D. Snodgrass—found the dialectical play of private and public concerns through the use of letters in the work of Pound and Williams exemplary in the formation of a poetry and poetics that could address these contrary poles of human experience in the inter- and post-war periods. (510)

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<sup>22</sup> Williams incorporated verbatim sections of Marcia Nardi's letters in Books I and II of *Paterson* (first published 1946 and 1948 respectively), re-naming her "Cress" in the poem.

It is no coincidence that many of the figures listed fall under the heading of “confessional” poets since there is a close connection between letter writing and confession.<sup>23</sup> Jo Gill observes that several confessional-era poets use the “trope” of a letter as a means of dramatizing the relationship between confessor and confessant in the form of addressor and addressee in their poetry (70-71).<sup>24</sup> She writes, “letters function as a metonym for confessional writing more generally; they represent something private and indeterminate [...] made concrete and offered for public scrutiny” (Gill 71). For Robert Lowell, particularly, the example of Williams’s use of Marcia Nardi’s letters in *Paterson* must have provided some of the inspiration for his own confessional use of his ex-wife Elizabeth Hardwick’s letters in several sonnets in *The Dolphin* (1973). Lowell presents sections from his wife’s letters, in somewhat altered form, in the sonnets “Foxfur,” “Marriage 7: Green Sore” and “Marriage 8: Letter.”

For Elizabeth Bishop, the revelation of private letters in published poems raised significant ethical and aesthetic problems. In her oft-cited response to *The Dolphin* sonnets in a letter to Lowell (dated March 21<sup>st</sup> 1972), Bishop again aired concerns about incorporating, as well as subtly altering, private letters in published poems:

One can use one’s life as material—one does, anyway—but these  
 letters—aren’t you violating a trust? IF you were given permission—IF  
 you hadn’t changed them . . . etc. But *art just isn’t worth that much*. I keep

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<sup>23</sup> Foucault observes: “the examination of conscience begins with this letter writing” (“Technologies of the Self” 27). Altman’s chapter “Of Confidence and Confidants” in *Epistolarity* examines the themes of letter writing and confession in epistolary novels such as *Les Liasons Dangereuses* (1782) by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos.

<sup>24</sup> Gill cites Lowell’s *The Dolphin*, Anne Sexton’s *Words for Dr. Y* (1978), which includes a series of verse-letters to Sexton’s therapist, and, more recently, Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* (1998).



remembering Hopkins' marvelous letter to Bridges about the idea of a 'gentleman' being the highest thing ever conceived—higher than a 'Christian' even, certainly than a poet. It is not being 'gentle' to use personal, tragic, anguished letters that way—it's cruel. (*WIA* 708)

Bishop's letter is an impassioned defence of artistic integrity and a manifesto for the importance of the genre of correspondence itself. Letter writing belongs, Bishop suggests, to a tradition of courteousness and civility derived from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She draws on this tradition in her letter to Lowell, referring to other letters by nineteenth-century literary figures including Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Henry James, all of which address the revelation of personal details in literature in some way. Letter writing for Bishop was part of a separate private sphere, and a relationship of "trust," away from the public stage, the sanctity of which Bishop was very reluctant to desecrate. Bishop adds a moral dimension to what Janet Altman has called the central "pact" of all epistolary writing, "the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent's world" (89). In Lowell's poems Elizabeth Hardwick's letters, originally addressed to him as the specific reader, are now also addressed to a wider audience of readers, and what Bishop calls in her letter his "public" (*WIA* 708). For Bishop, the intermingling the private world of correspondence and public world of poetry, while it might make for good poetry, violates the carefully crafted relationship of trust in letters.

While it is clear that correspondence was a key source for a number of Middle Generation poets, they explored the letter's potential in often very different ways. Confessional poets like Lowell and Sexton used the verse letter

as a means of re-framing the confessor-confidant relationship. Others like Bishop, used letters rather as a model for their poetry, and the act of letter writing as a way into poems. Like Coleman, Heather Treseler and Siobhan Phillips also connect a preoccupation with letters among Middle Generation poets to shifting boundaries between the public and private in the social and political landscape of the period. They look at the ways that Bishop, rather than simply pasting verbatim sections from letters into her poems, instead uses correspondence as an exemplar for poetry.

In “Lyric Letters: Elizabeth Bishop’s Epistolary Poems”, Treseler, like Coleman and Gill, observes that a number of Middle Generation poets re-fashioned the verse letter as a means of tailoring lyric address to the unique context of the post-war and Cold War years, and rendering poems more personal and biographical after the impersonal doctrines of modernist poetry. Treseler writes: “Avid letter-writers and analysts, 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” (6). Treseler hones in on Bishop’s unique adoption of the verse-letter form in her poetry, which she argues Bishop uses as an oblique and coded means of incorporating material from her personal life into poems. For example, Treseler provides perceptive readings of Bishop’s previously unpublished letter-poems written in the 1940s to her psychoanalyst Ruth Foster, arguing that the verse-letter form offered Bishop a means of indirectly accessing personal psychological material.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See also Treseler, “Dreaming in Color: Bishop’s Notebook Letter-Poems” in *Elizabeth Bishop in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Reading the New Editions* (2012). Some of these previously unpublished drafts,

For Siobhan Phillips, Bishop's use of correspondence as a "model" (Treseler, "Lyric Letters" 6; Phillips "Ethics of Correspondence" 344) has a significant ethical dimension, which is directly opposed to Lowell's more interiorised, sensational use of letters. Phillips argues that where Lowell's *Dolphin* poems incorporate sections of his wife's letters in a way that encourages the establishment of a strict binary between self and other, and a kind of narcissistic self-reflection, Bishop uses letters as a model for a more social, collaborative, reciprocal form of lyric address:

Letters link a particular 'I' and a particular 'you' rather than dividing a specific 'I' from a general 'they' (or even a general 'we'). With this duality, they articulate a kind of writing that is neither singular nor collective, personal nor political. Letters are ethical, rather, insofar as that term can indicate a principled attention to intersubjective exchange. Correspondent ethics provides models of selfhood, morality, and publicity that are particularly relevant to a writer of Bishop's time (343-344).

Phillips examines Bishop's previously unpublished poem "Mr and Mrs Carlyle," which is based on Jane Carlyle's correspondence, along with Bishop's friend and fellow poet May Swenson's poem "Dear Elizabeth," which draws on letters between Bishop and Swenson, as examples of poems that model a "correspondent 'two-ness'" (Phillips, "Ethics" 343).

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such as "Dear Dr.—" now appear in *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts and Fragments* (2006).

Treseler and Phillips's insightful analyses of Bishop's epistolary poems and epistolary-inspired poetics illuminate previously unpublished and less well-known material, and in doing so situate Bishop within a "Middle Generation" pattern that incorporates the formal qualities of letters in poetry. However, by emphasising Bishop's use of letter writing as a "model" rather than a practice, Treseler and Phillips miss out some of the more ambiguous and ambivalent movements and transformations between letter and poem in Bishop's oeuvre. I argue that Bishop used letter writing as a formal model for her poetry, but that, on a more practical level, letters functioned as workbook from which she often borrowed. Bishop re-used phrases, images and ideas from her letters (rather than just the model of addressor-addressee relationship) in her poetry and memoirs. This is something that Bishop did throughout her career, but is particularly apparent during Bishop's residence in Brazil from the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s. As I demonstrate in Chapter Three, Bishop re-used images of birds and birdcages from her letters in the poem "Questions of Travel." In the Brazil years, I argue Bishop moved away from the use of letters only as a psychoanalytic metaphor, and instead correspondence became a record and travelogue for first-hand observation and experience of the external world around her, which she then used as a basis for poems.

Moreover, although Bishop certainly aspired to the ideal of letters as a model for collaborative, intersubjective engagement with others, I also point out, in relation to Bishop's epistolary relationship with Lowell, that the reality of letter relationships did not always live up to the ideal. Moreover, it is in the frustrations and failures of person-to-person interaction, and the clash of poetic philosophies, that Bishop is able to clarify and enrich her own creative work.

Demonstrating the extent to which Bishop in fact borrowed from, and re-used, letters to and from Lowell, I re-iterate his importance as another model, which Bishop productively mirrors and reacts against to fashion her own work.<sup>26</sup>

The previous emphasis on a particular, mainly confessional, set of “Middle Generation” poets and their use of verse-letters has obscured other poets from this generation who also incorporated material from letters in their work. Letters and letter writing provided fresh material for members of the Beats and Black Mountain School. For example, many of Allen Ginsberg’s poems use epistolary imagery or are derived from letter exchanges as in “Fourth Floor, Dawn, Up All Night Writing Letters” and “The Green Automobile.” From the Black Mountain School, Charles Olson draws extensively from correspondence in *The Maximus Poems* (1983), experimenting with letters as a way of framing the poetic apostrophe in poems like “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You.” However, for the Black Mountain poet Robert Duncan, epistolarity is even more central and urgent an analogy for poetic practice. Duncan’s *Letters, Poems 1953-1956* (1958) is one of the most original instances of a Middle Generation poet experimenting with, and pushing against the generic boundaries of, the verse-letter tradition. As Philip Coleman rightly observes, it is not just that the poems are framed as verse letters, but rather that Duncan reveals the extent to which all poems might be considered already letters: “Duncan sees poetry *itself* [...] as

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<sup>26</sup> David Kalstone examines the influence of Robert Lowell’s poetry on Bishop’s in his influential study *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (1989). In siding with Bishop against Lowell’s use of letters in *The Dolphin*, critics like Treseler and Phillips tend to over-emphasize the disagreement between Bishop and Lowell and obscure the fluctuating complexities of their epistolary relationship and the evident continuities between their work. These continuities are particularly apparent (and have been previously neglected by critics) in their two complementary memoirs “91 Revere Street” (Lowell) and “Memories of Uncle Neddy” (Bishop), as I show in Chapter Four.

a form of "correspondence," a kind of writing that is always already epistolary" (Coleman 512).

In *Letters, Poems 1953-1956* letter writing, conversation, prose and poetry all become fused. The collection frequently signals its status as a communicative, social creation. Duncan explained that several of the poems were originally dedicated to his peers: "Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, James Broughton, Mike McClure, Helen Adam—it is the presence of companions, named and unnamed, that inspires LETTERS" (qtd. in *Collected Early Poems and Plays* 806). Moreover, the poems include frequent references and addresses to other writers and artists, living and dead. The first publication of *Letters, Poems 1953-1956* by Jonathan Williams in a limited edition in 1958 also plays on the visual and material qualities of personal letters. It reproduces original hand-drawn images by Duncan alongside and as part of poems, for example surrealist sketches of a person breathing leaves and clutching an owl in "An Owl Is an Only Bird of Poetry." Illustrations of what Duncan calls "the ideal reader" (qtd. in *Early Poems and Plays* 635) are printed on tracing paper bound into the book so that images overlay and correspond with elements of the text. These inserts give the book the delicate, personal, ephemeral feel of a handmade book or an airmail letter. I use this collection, and the themes it raises in relation to correspondence, communality and audience as a starting point to explore Duncan's epistolary relationships firstly with his predecessor H.D., and secondly with his contemporary Denise Levertov, in Chapters One and Two.

### Resurrecting “a dying art”

As the quotations at the start of this introduction demonstrate, all three poets expressed an interest in a form of communication that they saw as already anachronistic. Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt’s overlapping comments challenge the idea that the perceived death of letter writing is a phenomenon only of the digital age. All three poets were writing before the advent of the internet and email. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, for Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt, letter writing was not dead, but nor was it wholly alive. For all three, the writing, reading (and, in Bishop’s case, teaching) of letters, along with the composition of letter-inspired poems, was a deliberate and conscious resuscitation of the waning epistolary genre, which, I argue, looks back to a time when letter writing was more regularly practiced and tries to remould old forms for new purposes. All three seemed already to have an awareness that writing letters and modelling poems on epistolary exchanges was somehow different, not mainstream, “old-fashioned” (Clampitt, *Predecessors* 84), and deliberately so.

Although Duncan does not refer to letter writing specifically, his comments were made in the context of a letter to friend and poet, Denise Levertov, thus gesturing at letters as one of these form of written “*communication*.” Here, Duncan outlined his initial ideas for a talk on his poetry in which he sought to “render *communication* free from its bourgeoisie uses, as if it were an affair of the market place.”<sup>27</sup> The letter as a whole includes Duncan’s concerns about disappearing forms of communication and community in the

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<sup>27</sup> The talk was published as “Towards an Open Universe” in *Poets on Poetry*, ed. Howard Nemerov. New York: Basic Books, 1966.

face of increasing marketization. For Duncan, a poem is fundamentally a form of communication, which contributes to the “the human reality we call language.” Duncan’s comments draw attention to a number of key theoretical questions in relation to letter writing and poetry that this thesis explores in relation to all three poets. These include the relationship between spoken and written forms of communication; the idea that letter writing and the exchange of poems in letters as gifts offers an alternative to traditional routes of publication and the sale of artworks; and the use of letters as a means of creating forms of, often idealised, friendship and community. It also signals Duncan’s often retrospective outlook and interest in resurrecting elements of the past, including cultures of letter writing. In Chapter One, I demonstrate that Duncan’s admiration for the modernist poet H.D., whom he adopts as both mentor and correspondent, is based on his recognition of the continuities that exist between modernism and romanticism. In Chapter Two I build on this to argue that his epistolary relationship with his contemporary Denise Levertov is based on an idealised reading of Romantic and transcendentalist thinkers, particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson. Duncan’s letters demonstrate that he viewed poems as social, shared texts, which borrow from a range of sources.

Both Bishop and Clampitt refer to letter writing as a “dying art,” simultaneously signalling its status as a form that is no longer as frequently used, but also elevating it from an everyday quotidian genre to an “art form” in its own right. The opening quotation from Bishop comes from a letter she wrote to her friends, the piano duo Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, in which she outlines her ideas for a seminar she is due to teach at Harvard in the autumn of 1971. Bishop quietly signals a number of key themes in relation to both her



poems and letters in these seemingly off-hand comments. Her words draw attention to the importance of letters at the same time as they appear to dilute and qualify this importance. As is often the case in Bishop's work, the use of the word "just" as a prefix, while it might appear to render something minor or peripheral, in fact often communicates the opposite. Bishop's seminar will be about "just *letters*" but her decision to apply literary-critical analysis to a form that has long hovered at the margins of academic study suggests that they are not "just *letters*" but a form worthy of more careful attention. The air of casualness and spontaneity in this letter, as if Bishop's thoughts about letters as "an art form or something" have been dashed off at speed with little detailed thought, is also an effect that she often seeks in both letters and poems, as I explore in more detail in Chapter Three.

The course reading list, which features "a nicely incongruous assortment of people—Mrs. Carlyle, Chekhov, my Aunt Grace, Keats, a letter found on the street, etc. etc.," appears thrown together but also betrays elements of a more considered and deliberate aesthetic consideration. The figures Bishop chooses are (aside from Bishop's Aunt Grace) all nineteenth-century literary figures. The apparent incongruity of placing "non-literary" figures next to canonical ones—Jane Carlyle (and not her more famous husband Thomas Carlyle) and Aunt Grace with Keats and Chekhov—also emphasises what critics have termed the "democratizing" (Favret 33) power of letters, and the way that in them "authors become ordinary people and ordinary people authors" (Hammer 164), often giving "voice" (Goldsmith vii) to women writers where routes to publication might otherwise not have been available. Bishop's course, when considered in this light, is not an afterthought but a deliberate attempt to give weight to a

marginalised genre. Her comments echo statements elsewhere in her voluminous correspondence that suggest her love of letters went against general trends. For example, in a 1961 letter to Robert Lowell, Bishop commented “I have been worrying so about not-writing you have no idea. Lota keeps saying that after all, most people never write letters at all anymore!” (WIA 355).

Amy Clampitt’s comments about the “dying art” of letters reiterate some of Bishop’s sentiments. They are taken from her essay “Purloined Sincerity,” originally published as a review of *Writing the Female Voice* (1989), a collection of scholarly essays on epistolary literature edited by Elizabeth C. Goldsmith. The essay is a complex meditation on real and fictional letters, which demonstrates that, like Bishop, Clampitt saw letter writing as an art form, but one that was becoming increasingly marginalised. Writing in 1989, Clampitt framed her review as a discussion of the death of the letter in the present context. As the title indicates, with its nod to Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter,” Clampitt was interested in the ways in which forms of communication like the letter are gradually being subsumed by the proliferation of advertising and junk mail being sent in the post. Clampitt’s essay also pits the personal letter against forms of electronic communication and mechanical reproduction that seem in danger of overwhelming it. These include the personal stereo (84), telephone (91) and the tape recorder (91). The essay makes no mention of email, which in 1989 was in a very early stage of development, and not yet widely used, although one wonders what Clampitt would have made of email and social media, which would seem to encroach even further on the territory of letter writing.

Clampitt's essay is startling prescient in its attention to modern technologies that connect people in a way that seem paradoxically to underscore their fundamental isolation from one another. This is in direct and stark contrast to the eighteenth-century novels that Clampitt also analysed; for example, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, which features the epistolary exchanges of the eponymous Clarissa. For Clampitt, letters belonged to codes of politeness and civility derived from the eighteenth century that seem to be losing currency in the modern world. She wrote: "It is, as I see it, part of the continuing attrition of civility that fewer and fewer people, even literate ones, write letters anymore. Does it matter? Richardson, for one, would say it did" (91). Clampitt observed a vogue for modern forms of art that, rather than representing dialogue and conversation, instead represent characters in isolation delivering monologues to lifeless forms of technology, which she sees as leading to "the withering away of communication itself":

[P]erhaps what is happening is a more drastic and fundamental withering away of communication itself—of the individual and particular transaction, as distinguished from that imposed by the Media, so called [...] That direct address is one the wane would be hard to deny since Samuel Beckett—long before *The Handmaid's Tale*, among others, made use of the same device—had the far-seeing wit to extract high drama from a lone man's transactions with a tape recorder" (91).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Bishop makes strikingly similar comments in a 1970 interview with Regina Colonia: "The age we live in, with its terrible *boom* in mass communications, has things about it that endanger poetry as we know it. Nevertheless, I believe that there are well-founded hopes that poetry will not suffer the horrors that have already been visited on music and painting, for example—music by means of radio and tape-player and painting through an advanced technology of

Clampitt is here making a complex series of links between letter writing and forms of communication more broadly. Where a culture that values letter writing celebrates the nuances and complexities of person-to-person interaction, which is reflected in eighteenth-century epistolary novels, modern plays and novels contribute to a sense of alienation and isolation, as symbolised by Samuel Beckett's conceit of the tape recorder in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958).

Clampitt also makes subtle links between the "direct address" of lyric poetry and letter writing, both of which she sees as endangered forms: "perhaps it is no more than a like, if more desperate, instinct for self-preservation that has turned poetry [...] into little more than an overheard murmur" (91). The idea of modern poetry as an "overheard murmur" is a theme that reoccurs in Clampitt's other prose writings, particularly in an essay titled "T.S. Eliot in 1988." Although the essay does not deal directly with letters, it again takes up the themes of modern isolation and poetry as constituting an "overheard murmur." Clampitt identifies a tendency in modern poetry, which she argues derives from T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, to present not a single, personified, lyric voice but many different, seemingly unconnected, voices. T.S. Eliot's poetry, for Clampitt, is figuratively another instance of Beckett's lone man's transactions with a tape-recorder. In Clampitt's view, this dramatic shift from the personal, direct address of the Romantic poets, from Wordsworth and Coleridge to the disparate, murmuring voices in Eliot, is a result of two world wars and "our altered consciousness of the world we live in" (20). It is also tied up with the decline of letter writing. However, at the close of the essay, as in "Purloined

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multiplication that permits anyone to have at home a Van Gogh or a Picasso. And therein lies the great danger—the means of communication have to such an extent facilitated the diffusion of the messages, be they art or not, that nowadays people no longer know how to see or listen" (*Conversations* 52). Clampitt may well have read this interview.

Sincerity,” Clampitt longs to return to a poetry that speaks more directly to its audience (as in a letter), and she imagines that Eliot in his later work is also longing for a return to direct address:

Only there was Eliot himself addressing a Lady—addressing the Deity even, and appearing to mean it personally. There he was—according to his own words, a few years after the fact—not simply addressing but haranguing an audience [...] From the diffidence of J. Alfred Prufrock he had come round unmistakably to wanting, like old Wordsworth, to fill a room. Could he do it? Could it be done? Or are we all condemned to twittering in the hedges, hoping somebody will be kind enough to pause and listen? I think we still don’t know. (*Predecessors* 21)<sup>29</sup>

The reference to “twittering in the hedges” is another instance of the way that Clampitt’s comments seem accidentally prophetic in relation to the present context where tweeting and texting have largely replaced handwritten messages. In Chapter Five I argue that, for Clampitt, letters play an important role in resisting what Clampitt calls the “diffidence” of modern poetry by exploring forms of “direct address” and seeking to link people and places in a way that resists a culture of alienation and disconnection in the context of late 1980s America.

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<sup>29</sup> This is a reference to Eliot’s essay “The Three Voices of Poetry” (1954). Eliot’s “Four Quartets” also contains the line “Not here the darkness, in this twittering world” (17).

## Archival letters

I argue that it is not a coincidence that Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt all look to the past, particularly the nineteenth century, as a means of framing their interest in letter writing as an art and practice. Letter writing was an even more central and necessary way for nineteenth-century writers to connect with friends and circulate their poems in progress. In this thesis I demonstrate a lineage to nineteenth-century letter writers that Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt all share. The same figures reoccur across the writings of all three, especially key figures in American and British Romanticism, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Keats and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. For Bishop and Clampitt, Gerard Manley Hopkins's poems and letters are a major influence. Bishop and Clampitt also both cite Charles Darwin's writings. For Bishop, particularly, Darwin's *Beagle Diary* (first published 1933) is a key inspiration for poems. Although Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt were predominantly inspired by nineteenth-century letter writing culture, I also explore connections to earlier epistolary traditions. In Chapter Five, for example, I examine Bishop and Lowell's replication of eighteenth-century miniature portrait exchange by enclosing photographic portraits in their letters to one another. Moreover, looking even further back to the Renaissance era, all three poets demonstrate a fascination with coterie circulation of poems, which feeds into their interest in letter writing. Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt look back to previous times when poems were handed round among a small audience of friends, and when the borders between letters and poems were frequently blurred.

This thesis examines nineteenth-century as well as twentieth-century correspondence in order to inform the close reading and contextualising of

individual poems. I combine new readings of existing material, along with analyses of some new archival sources. Chapter One makes reference to the manuscript drafts of H.D.'s final collection of poems *Hermetic Definition* (1972) held in the Beinecke Library at Yale University to shed light on Duncan's references in letters to changes that H.D. made to the ending of her poem. I argue that, in his poetic responses, Duncan embraces the more positive, experimental potential of these earlier drafts sent to him for comment by H.D.. Chapter Three on Bishop's Brazil letters and her long poem "Questions of Travel" draws on an unfinished draft of a poem by Bishop held in her archives at Vassar College. The draft links Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins, characterising them as "self-caged birds."<sup>30</sup> (*Pr 412*) The unpublished draft sheds light on the way that images of birds and birdcages connect with letter writing and forms of enclosure in "Questions of Travel," which, I argue, also draws much of its inspiration from Bishop's early thinking about birds in Hopkins, and Dickinson's hummingbird letter-poem "A Route of Evanescence," which Bishop revisited during her time in Brazil.

The thesis also draws on new material in Amy Clampitt's archive held in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library. Willard Spiegelman, the editor of Clampitt's selected letters, *Love, Amy* (2005), makes brief reference to the existence of Clampitt's archive in his acknowledgements. However, since the archive is currently still uncatalogued, no other critics have yet drawn on the material that it contains. There is currently no available catalogue of this archive online, and no indication of the extent of material that it contains. My

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<sup>30</sup> This quotation is taken from Bishop's 1964 "Darwin letter" to Anne Stevenson in which Bishop refers to the unfinished draft.

visit to look at this material revealed that the archive contains 86 boxes including the letters that Spiegelman draws on in *Love, Amy* as well as further correspondence from writers and critics including Craig Raine, James Merrill and Helen Vendler. There are also a number of drafts of unpublished poems, and the drafts of an unpublished play that Clampitt wrote about the relationship between William and Dorothy Wordsworth titled *Mad with Joy*. I have incorporated some of my findings from the archive in the final chapter of this thesis, Chapter Five, although the archive contains much new material that I did not have the space to explore, and presents possibilities for further research. Chapter Five makes use of Clampitt's notes and writings surrounding her Keats poems in *Voyages*, as well as unpublished letters from the critic Helen Vendler, to demonstrate the centrality of Keats's connections to America via letters to his brother George in Clampitt's sequence of poems.

Therefore, while it has become commonplace to bemoan the death of the letter in the present age, this thesis tells a different story. I explore the work of three post-war American poets for whom the practice of letter writing was already a disappearing art. Writing before the onset of the digital age, these poets regretted the decline of a practice that they saw as central to both their lives and their art. In placing these poets and their letters side-by-side, this thesis confirms and extends the observations of previous epistolary critics who note the close relationship between letters and poems. Perhaps unexpectedly, this relationship seemed especially close for poets working in the post-war years, whose experiments with verse-letters and letter-like poems are testament to the longevity of the epistolary form. This thesis does not offer a general theory or exhaustive catalogue of the ways that post-war poets used



letters as a source for poetry. Instead, I demonstrate, through the examination of particular case studies, and detailed close readings, the ways that Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt used letters as inspiration for, and a springboard into, their poems. I argue that, for three poets who existed on the margins of various literary movements, as well as often being geographically isolated or, in Clampitt's case, separated from her 1980s poetic contemporaries by her age, letters were a vital source of friendship and companionship. This is not to say that letters were always perfect models of harmonious friendship and community. In fact, the sense of connection and community created via letters proved to be nearly always, and necessarily, virtual and delicate, and sometimes temporary or illusory. However, as I will now show, it was through the writing and reading of correspondence—their own, their peers' and their (predominantly nineteenth-century) predecessors'—that Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt sought to enrich and enlarge their poetry.

## Chapter One

### **(Mis)Reading H.D.: Robert Duncan's Letters and Poems to a Muse**

In July 1959 Robert Duncan began a correspondence with fellow poet H.D., which would continue for two years until H.D.'s death in 1961. At the time of writing Duncan was forty, and H.D. was about to turn seventy-three. The two had corresponded briefly ten years earlier, but it was not until Duncan's letter of 5<sup>th</sup> July 1959 which accompanied a copy of his book *Letters: Poems mcmliii-mcmlvi* (1958) as well as a typescript of the book he had just finished, published in 1960 as *The Opening of the Field*, that the two poets began to correspond in earnest. From July 1959 until September 1961, Duncan and H.D. regularly exchanged letters and manuscripts of their works in progress. Thirty-five of their letters to one another are collected in *A Great Admiration: H.D./Robert Duncan Correspondence 1950-1961* (1992). As the editor Robert J. Bertholf notes, several more were written but have been lost. However, the bulk of their correspondence survives, and tells the story of Duncan's adoption of H.D. as a poetic mentor at a crucial turning point in both their careers. Duncan was on the brink of poetic maturity, having just finished *The Opening of the Field*, which contained what would become some of his best known and most anthologised poems, including "Often I Am Permitted to Return to A Meadow," while H.D., who had come to prominence with her imagist poems before the First World War, was living as an expatriate in Switzerland and had largely been either forgotten or dismissed by those at the centre of the American mid-century poetry scene.

The reasons behind the ten-year hiatus in the two poets' correspondence are not entirely clear. It seems that the initial exchange of letters between the two poets came to a natural conclusion. The single letter that survives of the earlier correspondence shows that Duncan had sent H.D. a copy of his "Venice Poem," composed in 1948, and that she had sent a positive response praising the younger poet's work. Duncan had written to H.D. in January 1950 thanking her for an earlier response: "your letter was so generous [...]Your answer to the VENICE poem is like a real touch upon a string touchd usually by imaginary fingers" (*H.D.-RD Letters* 3).<sup>31</sup> H.D.'s response was particularly encouraging to Duncan, since "Venice Poem," was partly inspired by her poem "Tribute to the Angels," the second in her sequence of World War II poems, in which she made reference to the city of Venice and the bells of the campanili.<sup>32</sup> Duncan writes in his letter of "the beautiful ringing of bells in your poem," (4) which, in his own poem, he connects with the bell tower on the Berkeley campus, where he was studying while writing the poem. Like the bells of the campanili, H.D.'s influence rings through Duncan's own work, he suggests. In the same letter, Duncan also makes reference to the work of H.D.'s contemporaries, Edith Sitwell and Ezra Pound, the latter of which Duncan calls "a guiding spirit" (3). In writing to H.D. and signalling his debt to her and others like Pound in his work, Duncan was deliberately positioning himself as an heir to modernist poets, and separating himself from his contemporaries.

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<sup>31</sup> All quotations from *A Great Admirer: H.D./Robert Duncan Correspondence 1950-1961* (1992) reproduce the spelling and punctuation as it is in the original letters. Duncan frequently uses non-standard, abbreviated spellings, such as "touchd," which signal his immersion in the writings of nineteenth-century authors. These letters, for example, refer to Duncan's reading of George MacDonald and William Morris.

<sup>32</sup> H.D.'s sequence of World War Two poems includes "The Walls Do Not Fall" (1944), "Tribute to the Angels" (1945) and "The Flowering of the Rod" (1946). These three poems were later collected and published as *Trilogy* (1973).

## Letters to predecessors

In the intervening ten years Duncan had set about honing his practice and developing his technique. When he wrote to H.D. again in 1959 he was on the brink of a new phase in his poetry. Peter Quartermain, editor of Duncan's *Collected Early Poems and Plays* states that *Letters: Poems mcmliii-mcmlvi*, which Duncan sent along with his letter to H.D. in 1959, marked a decisive turning point: "In many respects *Letters* marks an important new departure for Duncan. As he put it in an interview in 1974, it 'addresses itself throughout to the idea of process'—obedience to what is happening by letting it happen" (xxxiv). This idea of poems as a "process" is linked to the idea of "open field" or "projective" verse which started to characterise Duncan's practice more strongly in *Letters*. "Open field" grew out of discussions among the group of poets associated with the Black Mountain College, including Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov.<sup>33</sup> Duncan taught only briefly at Black Mountain College, but was friends with, and corresponded with, many of its key members. These poets sought out a new mode of poetry in which the form of a poem evolved during the process of its writing, rather than being imposed prior to its composition. The poems in *Letters* are more obviously experimental than Duncan's earlier work, and seek to re-arrange and disturb both the metrical patterns and the appearance of poems on the page.

The title *Letters* points both to the book's experimentation with language and the alphabet, but also to the status of the poems as literal letters, and to

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<sup>33</sup> The ideas surrounding "open field" or "projective verse" stem from Charles Olson's manifesto on the subject "Projective Verse" (1950) in which he argues that poets should not compose poems based on traditional forms or stanza patterns, but that form should arise naturally and spontaneously from the content. He writes (capitalisation in original): "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (*Collected Prose* 240).

correspondences in poetry with Duncan's predecessors. The idea of correspondences—in an abstract and linguistic sense as well as a literal and a social sense—is at the heart of the book. Indeed, ten of the book's thirty poems are dedicated or addressed to fellow poets including Olson, Levertov and Creeley. Other poems make reference to, explicitly or implicitly, the earlier generation of poets including H.D., Pound, Stein and Moore. In the opening poem, "For a Muse Meant," which was addressed to Levertov, Duncan refers directly to his modernist predecessors.<sup>34</sup> Part of the poem is written in the form of a list of strange and seemingly disconnected images including "a dead camel," "a hot mouth (smoking)," "a copy of the original" and "a holey shawl" (*Early Collected* 641-642). He uses the metaphor of an old coffee pot to describe his desire to construct a new poetics which draws from this earlier tradition:

11. the addition of the un

planned for interruption:

a flavour stinking coffee

(how to brew another cup

in that Marianne Moore –

E.P. – Williams – H.D. – Stein –

Zukovsky – Stevens – Perse –

surrealist – dada – staid

pot)

by yrs R.D. (642)

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<sup>34</sup> For further discussion of this poem see Chapter Two on the correspondence between Duncan and Levertov.

Duncan draws a playful and evocative connection between the lingering taste of old, stewed coffee beans, and the impression of modernist poets that infuses his own work. In the rest of the poem Duncan makes use of puns and word association, deliberately invoking subversive elements in language. “A holey shawl” puns on holey and holy. “A copy of the original” invites the reader to see Duncan’s own poem as in some ways a copy of originals by Stein, Moore, H.D. and others.

It was this same desire to find correspondences between his own work and that of modernist forbears that led Duncan to write to H.D. again in 1959. Duncan wrote first to H.D.’s friend Norman Holmes Pearson, who was a Professor of American literature at Yale University and acted as H.D.’s archivist and unofficial literary agent, to ask permission to obtain H.D.’s address in order to correspond with her directly. H.D.’s response was again positive. She wrote in her letter to Duncan dated 21<sup>st</sup> August 1959 that she agreed with Pearson “that you have ‘the real drive of a poet,’” and she praised Duncan’s *Letters: Poems mcmliii-mcmlvi*, noting in particular the first poem “For A Muse Meant,” which contained her initials “H.D.” and singling out the lines “how to brew another cup” (*H.D.-RD Letters* 15). Robert Bertholf, the editor of the letters between H.D. and Duncan, notes that Duncan’s drive to trace lines of influence and correspondences in his poetry was, crucially, intertwined and contemporaneous with his literal correspondence with his poetic mentors: “From May 1960 until H.D.’s death, Duncan focused on her work to mark his link to a literary tradition at the same time that he was writing to her and sending her his new poems. He was living out the actual thread that linked his writing to a tradition” (viii). For Duncan, the process of drawing inspiration

from poets who inspired him necessarily also involved striking up a literal dialogue with them where possible. Duncan also wrote to Pound and visited him in St. Elizabeths Hospital in August 1947. In May 1960 Duncan visited H.D. in New York, which was the only occasion the two poets met.

It was therefore not uncommon for Duncan to write letters to his poetic mentors. The correspondence with H.D., however, was in many ways unique. For Duncan it formed the basis of a sustained engagement with H.D.'s poetry, which would shape and define some of his most important and influential work. Duncan's letters to H.D. sparked several H.D.-inspired poems, which were also in many ways addressed to her, and which he sent along with his letters. These include a sequence of poems written for H.D.'s 73rd birthday titled "A Sequence of Poems For H.D.'s Birthday, September 10, 1959," which was finished in late October and enclosed in a letter to H.D. on 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1959. Duncan also wrote his poem "After Reading H.D.'s *Hermetic Definitions*" following the receipt of H.D.'s last ever poem "Hermetic Definition," and as a response to it. Duncan's poem "Two Presentations" contains a reference to H.D., and links together the death of Duncan's adoptive mother and his correspondence with H.D..<sup>35</sup> Finally, Duncan wrote the poem "Doves" as an elegy for H.D. following her death.

### **Re-reading H.D.**

The dialogue between the two poets also formed the basis of Duncan's substantial prose work called *The H.D. Book*, a long, partly critical, partly

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<sup>35</sup> "Two Presentations" recounts a dream in which Duncan's adoptive mother, who died in December 1960 while Duncan was corresponding with H.D., returns to give him a message. The poem mentions H.D. in the lines "she brought, a message. / Was it H.D.'s frail script?" (*Collected Later* 162).

autobiographical account of Duncan's discovery of H.D.'s imagist poems at age 16, which had inspired him to become a poet and functioned as a touchstone in the development of his own distinctive style. The book is also a major critical intervention into the field of modern poetry, placing H.D. at the centre of the modernist poetic canon, thereby effectively re-writing the history of modernism, which had been seen as a tradition dominated by male writers like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams. Duncan started writing *The H.D. Book* in 1959 while corresponding with H.D.. The book sprang from a suggestion by Norman Pearson that Duncan write a short tribute to H.D. to present to her on her birthday in 1960. Duncan worked on it from 1959, sending early drafts of the opening chapters to H.D. with his letters. However, by the time of H.D.'s death in September 1961 the book had become a much larger project than Duncan had first anticipated, and it was still incomplete. Duncan never completed a final typescript, though he published sections of it in several little magazines over the course of nearly two decades between 1966 in 1985, as well as circulating manuscripts among friends.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, this made the parts of the book that Duncan did complete extremely difficult to get hold of. The published sections, along with Duncan's drafts and manuscripts, have recently been compiled together and edited to form as near to a complete text as is possible, published as *The H.D. Book* in 2011. Editors Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman explain in their introduction that the newly compiled book is "one of the great 'lost' texts in the history of American poetry" (1). Duncan had attempted to publish a complete version with Black Sparrow Press in 1971, but that failed after Duncan fell out with his publisher John Martin.

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<sup>36</sup> The appendix of *The H.D. Book* (2011) gives a detailed publication history (647-648).



*The H.D. Book* details Duncan's thoughts about H.D., and expands on a vast range of ideas and themes including the roots of modernism in romanticism, Freudian psychology, a hidden occult tradition under the surface of modern poetry, Duncan's autobiography and Cold War-era politics. Boughn and Coleman note that the work's genesis in letters to H.D. colour its style and status as a form of conversation: "A conversation is a particular kind of event. The central responsiveness—the back and forth—is also always, in a true conversation, a *further*, an opening beyond" (28). Thus what started as an exchange of letters and ideas between Duncan and H.D. grew into a much larger project and a "quest" for a poetics (Duncan, *H.D. Book* 17). *The H.D. Book* is perhaps in some ways a misleading title, since what started as simple homage to H.D. became a much more complicated process of self-definition, more about Duncan's own poetics than about H.D.'s, which led Duncan to question and depart from H.D.'s work although he had started the project as a way of explicating and affirming it.

The letters between the two poets were also a productive force in H.D.'s later poetry. For H.D., the correspondence with the admiring younger poet was heartening, and reassured her of the importance of her work. The letters from Duncan connected her to a younger generation of American poets, including those associated with the Black Mountain School and San Francisco, whose efforts in poetry to find new ways of challenging the conservatism of American culture resonated with H.D.'s own poetic project. It also had a recuperative effect for the aging poet, who had not published any new poems since the last of her World War Two trilogy in 1946. The correspondence with Duncan seems to have given rise to a new burst of creativity for H.D., and, as the letters between

the two poets reveal, led directly to the composition of her final collection *Hermetic Definition* (first published 1971). At the time Duncan wrote to H.D. she had largely been forgotten or dismissed by her contemporaries, partly as a result of the long silence following the publication of *Trilogy*, but also because of a handful of negative reviews, which resulted in the removal of her poems from Louis Untermeyer's influential *Modern American and Modern British Poetry* (Rev. ed. 1955), and her effective erasure from the history of modern American poetry. In one review, which Robert Duncan cites multiple times in *The H.D. Book*, the influential critic and poet Randall Jarrell called H.D.'s World War Two sequence *Trilogy* "silly," and dismissed it as an "anachronism" (qtd. in *H.D. Book* 577). Jarrell and others were reacting to H.D.'s attempts in *Trilogy* to connect the contemporary reality of London during the Blitz to an undercurrent of myth, which she saw as a form of collective Freudian unconscious. The *Trilogy* poems portray history as endlessly repeating itself in different guises, and place present day war and strife in a much larger cycle of conflict and human suffering. The famous opening of the first poem, "The Walls Do Not Fall", draws a parallel between the image of the rubble of bombed-out houses in London and the opening of an Egyptian tomb in Karnak.

### **Anxious letters**

Duncan's letters were therefore an attempt to strike up a dialogue with H.D., and express his admiration for her at a time when her work had been relegated from the ranks of canonical poetry. That Duncan chose an elder woman poet as his mentor is unusual and further evidence of his subversive conception of modernism as a tradition dominated by powerful women. As the editors of *The*

*H.D. Book* observe, at the time of writing in the early 1960s, modernism was still seen as the preserve of a select group of high modernist male writers, particularly Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot (11). Duncan writes in *The H.D. Book*:

Writing these opening pages of a book 'On H.D.' or 'For H.D.,' a tribute and a study, I came at this point to see this first part or movement of the book as relating how I had found my life in poetry through the agency of certain women and how I had then perhaps a special estimation not only of the masters of that art but of the mistresses, so that certain women writers came to be central in importance for me (69).

However, alongside this countercultural urge to re-write the history of modernism, Duncan's correspondence with H.D. was also motivated by the search for a mother figure. Duncan's mother died in childbirth and Duncan was adopted. His adoptive parents were practicing theosophists, and Duncan's interest in H.D. was linked to their shared interest in marginalised hermetic philosophy.

Several aspects of the letters between Duncan and H.D. are atypical, and do not follow expected patterns. Though it is clear from the correspondence that the two poets respected and admired each other's work, and that H.D. recognised an affinity with the younger poet, the correspondence is also a flawed exchange. As a conversation it is somewhat one-sided. While Duncan's missives typically extend to several pages detailing at some length his responses to H.D.'s poetry, and giving details of his domestic affairs, H.D.'s responses are often brief and reticent, and never longer than a single page.

As an exchange of ideas between two poets, the correspondence demonstrates the complexity of the influence relationship, and seems in some ways to overturn the idea put forward by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) that every new generation of poets is locked in a struggle first to deny, and then to overcome, the influence of their poetic forbears. Contrary to this, Duncan openly signals his debt to poetic predecessors, and frequently characterises himself as a “derivative” poet. In an interview with George Bowering and Robert Hoggin in 1969 Duncan declared, “I’m always derivative [...] I derive all my forms, and they come from adoration and falling in love with poets” (qtd. in *Reading Duncan Reading* xi). Similarly, Michael Davidson writes, “He liked to refer to himself as a ‘derivative poet’ who poached from anything he might be reading, whether it was an article in *Scientific American* or a linguistic textbook or the metaphysical poets” (*Ambassador from Venus* xiv). This technique of reading, re-framing and “poaching” from multiple different literary and other sources was not something that Duncan sought to “overcome” as in Bloom’s model, but was an integral facet of his mature poetics.

The critic Stephen Collis has argued that Duncan’s “derivative poetics” consistently prove that Bloom’s infamous theory of literary influence is deeply flawed. In his introduction to a recent collection of essays titled *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation* (2012), which explores some of the varied sources for Duncan’s poems, as well as assessing his “derivative” legacy in contemporary poets’ works including Susan Howe, Collis writes, “No other poet has made more out of poetry’s self-referentiality and intertextuality than Duncan. No other poet has so openly expressed his admiration for and gratitude toward his predecessors—to the point that Harold

Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' theory could not be more completely out of place" (xi-xii).

In an earlier essay titled "Formed by Homages: H.D., Robert Duncan, and the Poetics of the Gift," Collis looks specifically at the relationship between H.D. and Robert Duncan, and the mutual exchange of letters, poems and inspiration that took place prior to H.D.'s death in 1961, as well as following it, in Duncan's continued work on *The H.D. Book*. Collis argues that Bloom's anxiety theory is based on a fundamentally masculine, Oedipal and capitalist model of literary influence in which poets compete with their predecessors in an aggressive battle to lay claim to originality, which is figured as a scarce commodity. In the case of Duncan and H.D., however, the relationship seems not to have been a competitive but a mutually beneficial one. Both openly signalled their debt to other poets in their work, and frequently quoted and responded to others. Collis finds evidence in the two poets' writing to suggest that, far from prizing originality, both were suspicious of the concept. According to Collis, this invalidates Bloom's theory, and calls for a different model of literary influence. Collis draws instead from theories of gift exchange, with reference to the ideas of Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu and others, which look at exchanges between people that are not tied to financial reward. In Collis's argument, "financial reward" is seen as equivalent to Bloom's "originality":

In Bloom's model, intertextual relations are commodified as 'originality' becomes a 'property' exchanged in the creation of new poems out of old. Both H.D. and Duncan, on the other hand, seek access in their writings to a particular tradition which they see as 'heretical' and opposed to a

culture of militaristic aggression and capitalist exploitation: thus, they decry both 'originality' and 'property.' (218)

Collis points to H.D.'s and Duncan's desire in their work to access a "feminized occult current rippling just beneath the surface of modernism" (219) as evidence of this stance against originality. He also highlights the ways in which the two poets deliberately place themselves outside of the literary marketplace, often choosing not to publish their poems but instead to circulate them amongst coterie groups of friends, and publish work in little magazines or in limited runs with small presses.

Collis's argument is complex, and requires the reader to make a somewhat convoluted link between the abstract concept of the influence relationship, and the material, economic relationship between individuals. The observation that Duncan and H.D. saw "originality" and "tradition" as communal and shared is accurate, and there is ample evidence to support it. For example, Duncan writes in *The H.D. Book* that poetry is "a community of feelings" (40), and in a letter to H.D. that poetry is "a womb of souls, which we poets attend" (23). These comments articulate a model of literary influence based on a kind of maternal generosity, which sits in opposition to Bloom's ideas. However, I question Collis's statements that the relationship between H.D. and Duncan is almost entirely free from anxiety. Collis concludes that, "[w]hether self-deluded or not, these poets felt that they were serving a tradition, rather than their own careers, and thus experienced little or no anxiety regarding their 'indebtedness'" (222). I contend that Duncan's poems to/about H.D. are not entirely free from anxiety. Duncan may not be anxious to lay claim to

“originality” in the way that Bloom imagines, but his poems do not passively re-iterate H.D.’s work but instead seek to re-read, re-imagine and re-frame them. Duncan sees poetry as a kind of social space in which to enter into dialogue with other poets and their poems. He does not treat the work of his poetic masters as sacrosanct. His poems quote others’ work without their express permission. In the case of “After Reading H.D.’s *Hermetic Definitions*”, Duncan deliberately misquotes H.D.’s work, as well as subtly altering some of the poem’s central images.

Collis’s article also glosses over the poems themselves. A more thorough analysis of these poems complicates his argument about an anxiety-free influence relationship between the two poets. Moreover, it is odd given his focus on the ways in which the exchange between Duncan and H.D. exists in “some sort of alternative economic space” (211) that Collis does not comment on the controversy surrounding Duncan’s poem “After Reading H.D.’s *Hermetic Definitions*” and its relationship with H.D.’s “Hermetic Definition,” which was never published during H.D.’s lifetime, and which Duncan would not have had access to if H.D. had not enclosed it in her letter of March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1961. In his introduction to the letters between Duncan and H.D., editor Robert Bertholf notes that:

[Duncan’s] poem caused a little controversy [...] From the beginning Duncan spelled “Definitions” as plural and not as singular, as H.D. had written in her text. When Duncan published his poem [...] eager readers wanted access to H.D.’s unpublished poem. Copies circulated, but until Harvey Brown’s edition of *Hermetic Definitions* (West Newbury, MA:

Frontier Press, 1971) provoked the printing of an authorized text (New York: New Directions, 1972) the poem was not available to the reading public. (Bertholf ix)

Harvey Brown's 1971 edition of H.D.'s poem was produced without permission from H.D.'s literary estate, and was most likely derived from a bootleg copy of the manuscript of H.D.'s poem that she sent with her letter to Duncan. In her recent biography of Duncan, Lisa Jarnot clarifies the issue, stating that Duncan had donated his copy of the manuscript to the Beinecke Library, where the rest of H.D.'s archive is housed, and this copy was most likely the source of the bootleg edition, thus making Duncan partly responsible along with publisher, Harvey Brown. Jarnot writes, "the publication was distributed at no charge and came into existence out of Brown's fear that H.D.'s writings would remain buried in her literary estate" (*Ambassador from Venus* 299). With the New Directions edition of 1972, H.D.'s original title was restored.

### **The "poetry of misreadings"**

It is not clear whether Duncan's misreading of the title of H.D.'s poem was accidental or deliberate. However, given his interest in the writings of Freud, it seems likely that what may initially have been an innocent misreading of H.D.'s poem turned into a deliberate and in many ways subversive intervention into H.D.'s text. In the introduction to Duncan's *Collected Later Poems and Plays* (2014), Peter Quartermain highlights the strategic significance of error and misreading in Duncan's work, providing numerous examples from Duncan's notebooks where he "assiduously record[s] misreadings that (perhaps



following his extensive reading of Freud) he came to embrace" (xl).

Quartermain quotes lines from a notebook draft of Duncan's play *Faust Foutu*, composed in the mid-1960s, based on Goethe's play, which elaborate on this poetry of deliberate errors: "The poetry of misreadings (shakes the world). A grammar of misreadings to correct consciousness. Just beneath the surface of the sentence there are unseen words lingering. Counter currents disturb the paragraph. The lovers pursued their divided pleasures" (qtd. in *Later Poems* xl).

The "poetry of misreadings" informs Duncan's "After Reading H.D.'s *Hermetic Definitions*." Duncan's attempt in his poem to create an homage to H.D.'s text, and also simultaneously to depart from it, seems to tally with the first stage of Bloom's *Anxiety* model. Bloom summarises the stage as:

*Clinamen*, which is poetic misreading or misprision [...] A poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves. (14)

Duncan's poem "After Reading H.D.'s *Hermetic Definitions*," along with his response in a letter to H.D., enter into a dialogue with H.D.'s poem. H.D.'s "Hermetic Definition" is a sequence of poems with three sections. H.D. tells the story of her meeting with a young Haitian journalist called Lionel Durand, who was Chief of the Paris branch of the magazine *Newsweek*. Durand came to Switzerland, where H.D. was living at the time, to interview the aging poet. After their meeting H.D. became infatuated with the journalist, but was devastated

when, after a brief exchange of letters, he stopped writing to her, and in his review he described her work as “fascinating .../ if you can stand its preciousness” (*Hermetic Definition* 7).<sup>37</sup> H.D. felt rejected by Durand, and these feelings spurred her to write the poems. Part One is addressed to Durand and responds to his criticisms. Part Two is addressed to the French poet Saint-John Perse, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1960, and narrates a kind of parallel story to Part One in which H.D.’s admiration for the journalist Durand is transferred onto Perse. Rachel Blau DuPlessis has called this pattern in H.D.’s work “romantic thralldom,” arguing that many of H.D.’s poems and novels represent, and attempt to reinvent, conventional patterns of male-female relations (406).

After finishing this section, H.D. heard news of Lionel Durand’s sudden and unexpected death from a heart condition. This inevitably altered the poem’s course and led to the writing of the final section of the poem, Part Three, which offers a kind of overcoming and resolution of the first two sections. In an ingenious, and possibly troubling, poetic conceit, H.D. connects Durand’s death with the birth of her poem, using images of pregnancy to suggest a kind of giving birth to Durand and the poem at the same time. For example, in the lines: “separate us now eternally, / let severance be complete, / the cord is cut?”, no; / I have nine months to remember” (53) and “I wrote furiously, / I was in a fever, you were lost, / just as I had found you, / but I went on, I had to go on, / the writing was the un-born, / the conception” (54).

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<sup>37</sup> Ellipses in original. H.D. takes the words from Durand’s May 1960 *Newsweek* review of her *roman à clef*, *Bid Me To Live* (1960) and uses them in Part One of “Hermetic Definition.”

Duncan's poem functions both as a tribute and a critique and exploits some of the ambiguities and ambivalences of H.D.'s text. His poem self-consciously reflects on the difficulty of deciphering H.D.'s words and meanings. In many ways, this makes for a disjointed and provisional poem, which rather than developing images in a linear way, seems to unravel itself. The poem opens with confusion and uncertainty, with the speaker unable to remember what time of day or what day of the month it is:

What time of day is it?

What day of the month?

H.D. read *quatrième* for *quantième*

In Perse. Today

the sky is overcast—dove's

(that may be her *nun's*) grey—

the light diffuse.

The light's everywhere diffused,

yet

we must take our direction

from the sun's quarter, [...] (*Collected Later* 169)

Here he makes reference to Part Two of H.D.'s poem "Grove of Academe" in which H.D. addresses the French poet Saint-John Perse. H.D. finds Perse's lines

simultaneously engrossing and baffling. She writes, "I am swept away / in the orgy of your poetry" (33) and later "But here, I don't know what you mean, / does anyone?" (36). The specific point that Duncan picks up in his poem is H.D.'s reading *quatrième* (fourth) where Perse had in fact written *quantième* (the assigned day). This is not a major misunderstanding, but it subtly alters the meaning of the poem. Perse's original line reads "*Mais Dieu se tait dans le quantième*" (But God was in the assigned day) (Perse, "Chronique" 391). H.D. responds "what do you mean / what do you mean, *Seigneur?*" (*Hermetic Definition* 43). H.D.'s misreading of the word as "fourth" fits with her poem's attention to the passage of time and specific dates. It also fits with the poem's nine-month gestation period. Susan Stanford Friedman has perceptively drawn attention to the sources of the poem in H.D.'s biography, and the meaning she attaches to the timing of her meeting with Durand and the composition of the poem: "News of Durand's death just nine months after their meeting leads H.D. to regard that period as a 'pregnancy' that will result in the 'birth' of her completed poem and Durand's 'rebirth' as a resurrected being" (*Psyche Reborn* 150).

### **Hidden meanings**

However, in her letters to Duncan, H.D. does not reveal the poem's origins in the meeting with Durand. In her letter of March 14, 1961 she writes only "I am sending you my rough type-script of 'Hermetic Definition.' It is in 3 parts, part 2 is an effort toward balance, an *escape* from part 1. It is worked around certain phrases of Saint-John Perse, whom I met at the time of the Academy Award" (53). H.D. did not reveal to whom Part One was addressed, and Duncan was left

to guess at the sources of H.D.'s infatuation. It is difficult to tell from his comments in letters whether Duncan really liked H.D.'s poem. Certainly he found it intriguing, but views he expressed in a letter to Denise Levertov, suggest that he found the poem disturbing. In this letter to Levertov he writes:

The second new poem (writ yesterday) after reading a new sequence of H.D.'s—a troubling piece (poetically troubling then) where she disturbs the poem's (the poet's) voice with her own. But this *own* or *ownd* voice plays us false, or plays something false in us: uses a poem in its course to ask the reader to sympathize {.} Yet the sequence is called 'Hermetic Definitions' and the formal disturbance is around what is hidden and where it is defined. (*RD-DL Letters* 289)

Duncan's repeated use of brackets to qualify what he says to Levertov signals his uncertainty about H.D.'s poem and his own response. Duncan seems to be objecting to H.D.'s mixing of different personas and voices in the poem, one of which is her "own" voice and is somehow deceptive and asks the reader to sympathise in an underhand way. He also points out a tension in the poem between what is hidden and what is defined or revealed.

The title of the poem suggests this paradox. The word "hermetic" according to the OED means either "[r]elating to or dealing with occult science, esp. alchemy; magical; alchemical" or "unaffected by external influences, recondite" (*OED Online*). I think H.D.'s use of this title is deliberately ironic and invokes both definitions. The poem makes reference to hermetic philosophy and occult science, and it is also includes many intertextual references to

others' work including the poet Saint-John Perse, to whom the second section of the poem "Grove of Academe" is addressed, and also Ezra Pound, whose image of a rose slowly unfolding from *Cantos 102* H.D. re-uses. So, far from being unaffected by external influences, it is almost saturated in them. At the same time, the poem also includes images of retreat into a closed space. The final ambiguous lines feature the speaker alone in her room and drawing a kind of metaphorical cloak around her: "I only know, / this room contains me, / it is enough for me, / there is always an end; / now I draw my nun-grey about me [...]" (55). So the poem is paradoxically both open to multiple philosophies, other texts and other ways of thinking, but is also in some way closed and sealed off from external influence. To define something that is by its very nature mysterious, secret, hidden and occluded also suggests that the title is an oxymoron. Furthermore, as Friedman observes, the poem is a form of "self-definition," (*Psyche* 146) signalled by the acronym "HD" contained in the title.

In his letter to H.D. herself, Duncan seems to suggest that he is uncomfortable with the opening sections of the poem where H.D. writes about her love for the journalist Lionel Durand, foregrounding the illicit and taboo nature of her desire for a younger man, through an intrusive judgmental voice:

Why did you come

to trouble my decline?

I am old (I was old till you came);

The reddest rose unfolds,

(which is ridiculous

in this time, this place,

unseemly, impossible,  
 even slightly scandalous),  
 the reddest rose unfolds;

(nobody can stop that,  
 no immanent threat from the air,  
 not even the weather,

blighting our summer fruit),  
 the reddest rose unfolds,  
 (they've got to take that into account). (3)

The use of parentheses in this section signals the speaker's troubled, divided mind. The voice in the brackets seems to qualify, sometimes undermine and sometimes corroborate the main monologue. This parenthetical voice declares H.D.'s love "ridiculous" and "unseemly", but also suggests that there is something natural and inevitable about the unfolding of human desire and emotion despite its apparent unlikeliness in the lines "nobody can stop that [...]." The image of the "reddest rose" unfolding represents sexual desire. H.D.'s letters to Norman Holmes Pearson demonstrate that H.D. found this difficult to express and was embarrassed about the poem. She writes in a letter dated 17<sup>th</sup> February 1961: "I was a little disturbed by what I began writing, last August. Then when he went in Jan[uary], I found the 3<sup>rd</sup> section *Star of Day*. I feel a little

'shocked' by the intensity of the first part *Red Rose & a Beggar*" (*Letters of H.D. and Norman Holmes Pearson* 288). In many ways, the poem links together the taboo nature of desire and hermetic philosophy, drawing a parallel between these hidden, occluded elements that are somehow not "appropriate" subject matter for poetry.

### **Dawn goddess**

Duncan's letters demonstrate that he found the articulation of H.D.'s distress in the poem troubling. In his letter to H.D., he writes that he is "troubled" by the "decline" that seems to take place in the poem, and finds the "anguish" of unrequited love and old age in the poem difficult to bear (56-57). Duncan also notices a change that H.D. has made in the manuscript of the poem that she sends in her letter. He observes that at the close of the poem, H.D. altered the final line from "Night brings the Dawn" to "Night brings the Day" (*H.D. Papers* II. 34. 887). However, in successive drafts H.D. vacillated between the two endings, eventually changing "Dawn" back to "Day" in the final corrected draft (*H.D. Papers* II. 34. 898). The final lines of H.D.'s poem feature the speaker retreating into the safety of her room, and drawing a metaphorical cloak around her:

I only know,  
 this room contains me,  
 it is enough for me  
  
 there is always an end:  
 now I draw my nun-grey about me



and know adequately,

*the reddest rose,*

*the unalterable law...*

Night brings the Day. ("Hermetic Definition" 55)

In a poetic sense, this brings a neater ending to the poem, since "Day" rhymes with the earlier phrase "nun-grey." However, Duncan finds the original ending, and the use of the word "Dawn," a more satisfactory conclusion. In noting the change, he connects the figure of "Dawn" with femininity: "you had altered the male figure of day to feminine aurora of Dawn (where above 'the unalterable law.')" (*H.D.-R.D. Letters* 54). Later in the same letter he asks H.D.: "Had you, in altering Day to Dawn, tried to alter the poem's course?" (59). Given the associations of "Dawn" with the dawn goddess Aurora in Greek and Roman mythology, this would seem to be a more appropriate ending. The goddess Aurora or Eos was associated with female sexuality, and was known for her "constant love affairs with young mortals" (Graves 150), thus paralleling H.D.'s account of her desire for the young journalist Durand in the poem. However, the final version of H.D.'s poem seems to undermine its own stress on the feminine by reinstating at the close "the unalterable law" and the figure of "Day."

To support his alternative reading of H.D.'s poem, Duncan makes reference to H.D.'s earlier poem "Vale Ave," which she had sent to him in a letter of 9<sup>th</sup> August 1959, and which features the female character "Lilith," a shadowy figure from Jewish mythology often associated with images of night, who H.D. describes at the start of her poem as "Adam's first wife" (7). Duncan sees

elements of this character in “Hermetic Definition”: “Your ‘Hermetic Definitions’ give Lilith voice in your person (as ‘you’ in the poem is an invaded or adulterated, a mixed person)” (*H.D.-RD Letters* 58), but this character’s transgressive potential appears suppressed at the close of the final version of “Hermetic Definition.”

Donna Hollenberg suggests that Duncan takes issue with what he sees as “a disturbing return to conventionality at the end of the poem” (“Deeper Unsatisfied War” 74). Certainly, Duncan was uncomfortable with the image of the “nun-grey” cloak or “my old habit” as H.D. refers to it in Part Two. He writes to H.D. that that he finds these lines “left-handed, sinister, not to be trusted” (59). Hollenberg argues that the donning of the nun’s habit at the close of the poem, and its implied connections to virginity, seems to undermine the poem’s initial gesture towards transgressive sexual desire (75). Moreover, the structure of the poem overall, where complexity, obsession and death are resolved in a final image of re-birth, virginity and harmony, is problematic. Indeed, in her letter to Duncan describing the sequence of poems, H.D. describes Part Three as “the final solution” (53), either consciously or unconsciously invoking the Nazi connotations of the phrase. Hollenberg’s argument is that poems written later in Duncan’s career demonstrate his gradual turn away from H.D.’s work, and his questioning of her tendency to situate suffering and complexity in larger, overarching narratives drawn from Greek myth and the Bible, which can seem to gloss over historical and political specificity. Hollenberg points to Duncan’s later Vietnam War poems, in which, she argues, he engages with politics in his poetry in a way that is not didactic but reflects on the present moment.

However, Hollenberg does not make reference to the changes H.D. made to the ending of the poem in the original manuscripts, which suggest that Duncan's first reading of the poem was influenced by what he saw as the potential for the positive affirmation of female sexual desire at the poem's close. I want to argue that Duncan's response to H.D.'s poem in "After Reading H.D.'s *Hermetic Definition*" embraces this potential. In comparison to H.D.'s original, Duncan's poem is written in a self-consciously postmodern style. As Hollenberg observes, he finds H.D.'s misreading of Saint-John Perse's words "liberating" rather than disruptive (Hollenberg 75). In turn, his misreading and pluralisation of the title of her poem signals the possibility of multiple interpretations of a single work. Furthermore, Duncan alters some of the central images of H.D.'s poem in ways that make the tone of his and H.D.'s poems seem more open and positive. Both poems centre on imagery that refers to poetic inspiration and the poetic muse. H.D.'s invocation of the poetic muse is figured in peculiarly violent terms. In the poem she poses the rhetorical question "why must I write?" followed by the lines "you would not care for this, / but She draws the veil aside, / unbinds my eyes, / commands, / write, write or die" (*Hermetic Definition* 7). The capitalised "She" suggests poetic inspiration comes from some feminine source, but that the process is an aggressive one, as H.D. is held hostage by her muse and given an ultimatum to either "write" or "die". Duncan, on the other hand, uses the much more benign image of bumblebees to represent poetic inspiration and instinct in his poem. He writes, quoting H.D.'s lines:

the goddess or nurse commands

*"Write, write or die".*

We too write instinctively, like bees,  
serve the Life of the Hive [...] (*Collected Later* 171)

Duncan's is a much more social, inclusive vision of poetic composition, signalled by his use of the pronoun "we" rather than "I", and by his reference to the bees' selfless devotion to the "Life of the Hive," and an idea of community. The female muse is here either a "goddess" or "nurse," suggesting a more maternal, caring figure than H.D.'s faceless, unidentified "She." In Duncan's poem H.D.'s final "nun-grey" image becomes the much softer-sounding "dove-grey."

The phrase "dove-grey" is also a reference to Ezra Pound's comments in his Imagist manifesto, first published in *Poetry* in March 1913, "A Few Don'ts By An Imagiste." Pound writes:

Be influenced by as many great artists as you can, but have the decency either to acknowledge the debt outright, or to try to conceal it.

Don't allow 'influence' to mean merely that you mop up the particular decorative vocabulary of some one or two poets whom you happen to admire. A Turkish war correspondent was recently caught red-handed babbling in despatches of 'dove-grey' hills, or else it was 'pearl-pale,' I cannot remember. (qtd. in Jones, *Imagist Poetry* 131)

Duncan's performs both the "Dos" and the "Don'ts" of Pound's dictum. He has the "decency" to "acknowledge the debt [to H.D.] outright, but also deliberately makes use of the exact "decorative vocabulary" that Pound here admonishes.

There is a sense in Pound's imagist manifesto that he connects compound adjectives like "dove-grey" and "pearl-pale" with the feminine. He writes later on in the same manifesto "Don't be 'viewy'—leave that to the writers of pretty little philosophies" (132). The doctrine of Imagism was meant to expunge this Romantic tendency to "viewy" description. By bringing the image of "dove-grey" into his poem, Duncan is violating one of the "Don'ts" of Pound's manifesto by using Romantic vocabulary. At the same time, "dove-grey" is a variation, not an exact repetition of H.D.'s "nun-grey," so that in some ways Duncan is conforming to Pound's rule that poets should not blindly "mop up" phrases from poems they admire.

### **"Doves"**

The "dove-grey" image in "After Reading H.D.'s *Hermetic Definitions*" carries over to Duncan's elegy for H.D. in the poem titled "Doves" written following her death. In June 1961 H.D. had a stroke, which resulted in aphasia. She died a few months later in September. Following the stroke H.D. found it difficult to speak and was unable to write. In a prologue to his poem, "Doves," Duncan describes the frustration H.D. must have felt at not being able to find words, which he imagines must have been particularly painful for H.D., whose life as a poet had meant a complete immersion in language. In the prologue to the poem, Duncan quotes lines from a letter to him from Norman Holmes Pearson:

The part of the brain which controls speech has been injured, so that she cannot recall appropriate words at will. Yet she does have fiercely the desire to communicate, and strikes her breast in passionate frustration

when there is no word at her tongue's tip. Sometimes whole sentences will come; sometimes, everything but the key word. So it is 'I want...' but one can never tell what it is she wants. (qtd, in *Collected Later* 174)

Duncan's elegy is an effort to sympathise with H.D.'s aphasia. In it he also tries to imagine what it would be like to experience a reality that is not tied to words and language. He writes in a letter to Denise Levertov: "There must be some intense wordless reality that could be human, but it is hard to think of it. For, if those connections are lost between words and references—then the interior connections would be lost too—words in dreams are the same as words in actual life. . . ." (*RD-DL Letters* 310).<sup>38</sup> The poem itself tries to imagine this "intense wordless reality" which is like a dream world and hovers on the borders between speech and speechlessness. A world without words, Duncan seems to suggest, also brings us closer to a kind of animal experience, in which it is noises and sounds rather than words that are registered. The poem suggests that there are realms of experience that exceed and defy expression in language. The poem's status as an elegy points to its awareness of the failure of language to express feelings of grief and mourning. The attempt to express wordlessness in words hinges on a paradox, and gives the poem its elegiac tone of impossibility.

The opening lines of the poem describe a woman looking out of her bedroom window listening to the sound of doves in the garden. The woman and the scene she is looking at merge together, so that she (H.D.) is looking at the scene outside but is also a part of it:

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<sup>38</sup> Ellipses as in original.

Mother of mouthings,  
 the grey doves in your many branches  
 code and decode what warnings  
 we call recall of love's watery tones?

Hurrrrrr  
 harrrrrr  
 hurrr .

She raises the bedroom window  
 to let in the air and pearl-grey  
     light of morning  
 where the first world stript of its names extends,  
 where initial things go,  
 beckoning dove-sounds recur  
     taking what we know of them  
  
 from the soul leaps to the tongue's tip  
     as if to tell  
                     what secret  
 in the word for it.                      (*Collected Later 174*)<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> I have attempted to reproduce as closely as possible the poem's appearance on the page. The unusual lineation and punctuation contribute to the meaning of the poem, and its dreamy, surreal qualities.

The poem plays on the image of doves and their symbolism, but it also includes actual doves and the sounds that they make. So the doves of the poems' title function both as symbol and a reality. In this way, the poem recalls Marianne Moore's famous assertion in her poem "Poetry" that poets must write about "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" (Schulman 135), by which she meant that poets should write about things as objects in themselves, rather than turning everything into a symbol. Nevertheless, I think the symbolism of "doves" is also invoked in this poem. The dove is famously a symbol of peace, which given that Duncan was a pacifist, and that the poem was written in late 1961, the year that President John K Kennedy was inaugurated and the threat of nuclear war was building, must have some political resonance.

More importantly, in the context of H.D.'s death, doves are also linked to Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, and to the goddess Sophia, a female Holy Spirit. In the poem, Duncan addresses H.D. as well as an unnamed, essential female presence in a form of poetic apostrophe; for example, at the start of the poem when he addresses the "Mother of mouthings," (174) and later describes "the lady in the shade of the boughs" and "the Queen of the Tree's talking" (175). This stress on the maternal chimes with Duncan's emphasis on the centrality of women writers to modernism, and the idea that the poetic muse, the source of all creativity, is female. In *The H.D. Book*, Duncan writes: "Poetry is the Mother of those who have created their own mothers" (70).

Donna Hollenberg suggests that the poem represents Duncan's "passionate desire for connection with the primordial source that lies behind the poetry of both of them" (76). Hollenberg connects this to Julia Kristeva's ideas about the existence of a semiotic dimension in poetic language. In



*Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) Kristeva argues that there is a separation between what she terms the “semiotic” and the “symbolic” dimensions in language (24). Poetic language and the semiotic provide access to what Kristeva terms the “chora”—a pre-Oedipal state of protolinguistic bliss (25). The chora involves union with the mother, and a feeling of wholeness unmediated by time, space, language, discourse or any kind of social structure or means of categorizing and ordering the world. While Kristeva’s ideas hinge on the reader’s acceptance that such a stage outside of language can exist, which is questionable, they provide a useful means of analysing Duncan’s poem. “Doves” gestures at a kind of unnamed feminine dimension that exists before or beyond everyday reality. The phrase “love’s watery tones” sounds womb-like. The doves’ “hurrrrrr” also sounds like “her.” The portrayal of the garden as “the first world stripped of its names” seems to match Kristeva’s description of a pre-symbolic, wordless reality not defined by language.

The poem plays on the possibilities of meaning embedded in language, in a way that seems to anticipate Derridean, post-structuralist ideas about the indeterminacy of meaning. Words and images in the poem pivot on their various associations. The second section turns on a metaphorical association between the sound of birds in the trees and an orchestra:

The bird claws scraping the ledges.

I hear the rustling of wings. Is it evening?

The woodwinds chortling or piping,

sounds settling down in the dark pit where the orchestra lights glow

as the curtain rises, and in the living room,

at another stage,  
lamps are lit. (174-175)<sup>40</sup>

The “woodwinds chortling” represent both birds and musical instruments. The “stage” is both a stage in time, and the stage above an orchestra pit. Later in the poem, Duncan puns on “after words” and “afterwards”: “Before words, after words . hands / lifted as a bowl for water, alms or prayer“ (175).<sup>41</sup> Here, Duncan is also pointing out the power of gesture over words, and the different meanings attached to the gesture of raised hands, which could signify hands cupped and lifted in order to receive “water,” “alms” or Holy Communion.

The poem as a whole meditates on Duncan’s failure to attain a connection with this unnamed “primordial source” (Hollenberg 76) as well as reflecting on the literal failures of his correspondence with H.D. In a letter to Norman Pearson in which Duncan encloses his elegy for H.D., he describes starting to write *The H.D. Book* during his correspondence with H.D., and the difficulty of knowing what she thought of it. He writes: “She might have liked parts of it. There have been times when things emerged that I thought would most please her. Yet I felt throught too how reticent she was about what touched upon her spirit—Would the book be disturbing?” (*H.D.-RD Letters* 63). Much of the imagery in “Doves” relates to thwarted attempts to communicate, which I

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<sup>40</sup> Duncan’s association of birds with an orchestra is strongly reminiscent of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet LXXIII,” which includes a similar metaphorical connection between birds and a choir: “Upon those boughs which shake against the cold, / Bare ruin’d choirs, where late the sweet birds sang” (*Complete Works* 2448). Both are twilight poems that reflect on the end of life and impending death. Both also feature fires that are either soon to be or have been extinguished. It is very likely that Duncan’s “Doves” also derives, in part, from Shakespeare’s sonnet.

<sup>41</sup> Punctuation and spacing as in original.

think are attempts to empathise with H.D.'s aphasia, and are also reflections on Duncan's own difficulties in expressing his thoughts about H.D. and her poetry.

### **Muse and "countermuse"**

Significantly, Duncan never finished *The H.D. Book*. Anne Dewey has speculated that this was due to Duncan's differences with H.D. after her death, and his increasing discomfort with her attempts in poetry to transcend and neutralise fragmentation and war:

[In *The H.D. Book*] Duncan gradually distances himself from what he comes to see as H.D.'s tempting but untenable escape into the false security of the past and a poetic language remote from history. His inability to complete *The H.D. Book* may derive from this tension between poetry and history. Despite the fact that Levertov shared Duncan's admiration for and commitment to preserving the legacy of H.D., the increasing presence of Levertov in Duncan's poetry as he struggled with *The H.D. Book* suggests Levertov's role as a crucial countermuse, a real historical agent and more invasive presence of otherness than the poetic precursor. ("Gendered Muses" 316)

In my view, Levertov's role as a "countermuse" does not necessarily mean that Duncan went on to shed all traces of H.D.'s influence. While it is true that Levertov's overtly political, anti-Vietnam War poems of the 1970s prompted changes in Duncan's poems, Duncan's correspondence with Levertov demonstrates his development of a later poetics that still incorporated the

influence of H.D.. Duncan's poems and letters to Levertov advocate a distance from contemporary politics that recalls H.D.'s retreat into poetic language, mythology and astrological charts in "Hermetic Definition." For example, Duncan's Vietnam War-era poem "Santa Cruz Propositions" echoes H.D.'s close attention to dates and the unfolding of a poem in time. The stages of the "Santa Cruz Propositions" are marked, as in H.D.'s "Hermetic Definition," by dates of composition.<sup>42</sup> Duncan's poem also features a female muse, recalling his poems for H.D., and references to water in "Doves." For example, a section from "Santa Cruz Propositions" reads: "The Muse consumes utterly, Woman of Water" (*Collected Later* 471). The characterisation of the muse as a demanding female presence links back to H.D.'s "She" who commands "write or die" in "Hermetic Definition" (7).

However, Duncan's later poems do mark a departure from the arch, self-conscious homages to predecessors that characterise the poems of his earlier years. These later poems make frequent reference to contemporary political events rather than looking to the past and predecessors as Duncan does in so many of his early poems. That Duncan was unable to complete *The H.D. Book* may be due, in part, to the rapidly changing political and social landscape following H.D.'s death in 1961, and his increasing preoccupation with questions of whether or how to represent the Vietnam War in poetry. These new questions dominate his later work, and the correspondence he establishes with Levertov in both letters and poems. Thus, Levertov's presence as a

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<sup>42</sup> Each of the three main sections of H.D.'s "Hermetic Definition" begins with the dates of its composition in brackets. Part One, "Red Rose and a Beggar" begins "(August 17 – September 24, 1960)" (3). Similarly, sections of Duncan's "Santa Cruz Propositions" begin with dates of composition in brackets: "[10PM-1AM, 13-14, October 1968]" (470).

“countermuse” goes some way to explaining Duncan’s inability to complete *The H.D. Book*.

Yet, as the final section of the poem “Doves” demonstrates, H.D.’s death brought the end of his literal dialogue with the poet in letters, which had acted as crucial motivating factor in the development of the poems for H.D. as well as *The H.D. Book*. The final section of “Doves” hints at the difficulties Duncan later encountered in trying to express his admiration for H.D. following her death. The final image in the poem of an old man unable to make a speech in front of his audience encapsulates this difficulty in finding the right words, and represents the loss of H.D. herself as Duncan’s interlocutor and audience for poems. There is also the sense in the poem that words can sometimes conceal or obscure meaning:

I wanted to say something,  
 that my heart had such a burden,  
 or needed a burden in order to say something.

Take what mask to find words  
 as an old man came forward  
 into a speech he had long waited for,  
  
 had on the tip of his tongue,  
 from which now . O fateful thread!  
 Sentence that thru my song most moved!

Now from your courses the flame has fled  
 making but words of what I loved. (176)

“Take what mask to find words” suggests that words are a kind of cover concealing true meaning. Throughout the poem, Duncan uses blank space and staggered punctuation to suggest silence and verbal impasse. “O fateful thread” implies that the “thread” of his thoughts has eluded him. The final lines “Now from your courses the flame has fled / making but words of what I loved” also reduces the status of words to empty signifiers. Here Duncan is lamenting a failure to express in words his grief for H.D., and mourning the loss of the “flame” of her inspiration, which now that she is gone somehow dims the words of her poetry on the page.

Rather than placing H.D. on a remote pedestal as a speechless muse figure, Duncan establishes a dialogue with her in letters and poems. In this respect, Harold Bloom’s infamous anxiety theory seems to fall flat. Rather than displaying an anxiousness to deny the influence of others, Duncan is at pains to affirm it, deliberately signalling the sources from which his work is derived. However, as I have shown, Duncan’s correspondence with H.D. is not anxiety-free. In fact, it is in moments of deliberate misreading or departure from H.D.’s original texts that Duncan is able to craft his own distinctive poetics. In *The H.D. Book*, Duncan articulates the importance of correspondence, dialogue, and most importantly, disagreement, with predecessors and peers in the crafting of poems:

H.D. did not stand alone, but her work, like that of Pound and Williams, belonged to a nucleus of the poetics in which I had my own beginnings; as also I saw [D.H.] Lawrence and H.D. forming another nucleus. In the inheritance of the art, each poet released complex chromosomes, forces that entered into new syntheses of poetic individuality. There were agreements, reinforcements of one poet's imagination in another's. But also, I found their disagreements were crises in the formation as I worked, contending with Pound and Williams where they took issue with her or with each other, searching out the issue to be my own. (436)

Duncan here sees poetry as the passing on of certain traits through a kind of genetics that links poets together in pursuit of shared objectives, but also highlights their differences from one another. Duncan makes reference to disagreements between Pound, Williams and H.D., which were productive "crises" that led to important developments in their work, particularly in relation to H.D.'s abandonment of the doctrines of imagism later in her poetic career in favour of a longer and more expansive form. Although Duncan does not mention his own agreements and disagreements with H.D. here, these play a crucial role in the development of his own "poetic individuality."

Duncan's poems for H.D. display a paradoxically subversive reverence for the works from which they take their inspiration. In his poetic responses to (and for) H.D., Duncan quotes and misquotes her work without permission, adjusts and critiques her imagery, and embraces his own misreading of her poetry as positive and liberating. If the study of literature is a form of "hero-worship" as Pound famously put it (qtd. in *The H.D. Book* 72), then Duncan's is a

hero-worship that also leaves space for a degree of iconoclasm. In his attention to the indeterminacy of language, slipperiness of meaning and difficulties of communication, Duncan also anticipates many key aspects of post-structuralist theory that would come to prominence later in the twentieth century. The poem “Doves” reflects on what is in some ways a flawed correspondence with H.D., and asks broader questions about the limits of language and its failure in the face of grief.

A close reading of the letters of H.D. and Duncan therefore demonstrates the inseparability of their poems from the correspondences that surrounded and inspired them. On a practical level, the letters between the two poets offer vital clues to key details in poems which might otherwise appear abstract and hermetically sealed to readers. These poems were originally aimed at a small readership and written for the poets’ epistolary correspondents. H.D.’s last poem “Hermetic Definition” was not published during her lifetime, and was initially sent only to Pearson and Duncan. Duncan’s poems grew out of his letters to H.D, and his prologue to the poem “Doves” demonstrates the intimate frame of correspondence that informs the poems. The original manuscripts of the letters show more clearly than the print edition the way that the poems are integrated into his letters to H.D. and are intimately connected to the prose.<sup>43</sup> Early drafts of H.D.’s “Hermetic Definition” reveal the change that she made to the ending of the poem in the original manuscripts, altering the final word from “Day” to “Dawn.” It was this earlier draft that she sent to Duncan in her letter, and thus his poetic response in “After Reading H.D.’s *Hermetic Definitions*”

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<sup>43</sup> The letter, dated April 7<sup>th</sup> 1961, in which Duncan responds to H.D.’s “Hermetic Definition” includes Duncan’s poem “After Reading H.D.’s *Hermetic Definitions*” handwritten at the close of the letter. Duncan does not introduce the poem, instead it flows on from the main text of his letter suggesting that he composed it within the letter (*H.D. Papers* I.9.320).



explores what Duncan saw as the poem's attempt at a more daring final affirmation of female sexual desire.

Duncan's letters and poems for H.D. are evidence that Duncan saw poems as fundamentally shared, social texts that enter into dialogue with the work of others. The letters to H.D. are also evidence of the "disagreements" that Duncan saw as crucial to the development of an individual poetic voice, as well as introducing an important element of disharmony into the serene "womb of souls" that characterises Duncan's view of poetry. Elements of H.D.'s late poems that Duncan found troubling, such as the return to an image of nun-like virginity at the end of "Hermetic Definition," coloured his reading of her late work. However, contrary to what Hollenberg and Dewey suggest, Duncan did not wholly reject H.D.'s influence in his later poems that deal with the Vietnam War. Nor was Levertov's role as a "countermuse" figure for Duncan uncomplicated. As I will show in the following chapter, Levertov both inspired and frustrated Duncan's vision of poetry and/as correspondence.

## Chapter Two

### Imaginary Letters and Real Correspondences: Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov and the Failure of “Friendship”

Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov began corresponding in 1953 and continued exchanging letters until Duncan’s death in 1988. The poets lived on opposite sides of the US, with Levertov in the North East and Duncan in California. Despite, or more probably because, they could not maintain their friendship in person, they formed a very close personal and poetic bond almost entirely through letters. Their correspondence is collected in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov* (2004), which contains all 474 of the surviving letters. It covers a turbulent period of US history, which saw the rise of countercultural movements including the Beats, US involvement in the Vietnam War, and growing political consciousness among anti-war poets.

In the late 1960s and early ‘70s Levertov became very involved in anti-war groups, attending rallies and composing protest poetry. This led to a heated debate between the two poets (in letters) beginning in the late ‘60s from which their friendship never fully recovered. Their major point of disagreement centred on the role of the poet in relation to war and contemporary politics, and the nature of what Duncan termed “a community in poetry” (*RD-DL Letters* 707).<sup>44</sup> Duncan’s objections to Levertov’s protest poetry centred on its explicitly ideological, one-sided nature, which he saw as veering towards agitprop and constraining meaning and interpretation rather than enlarging it. For Duncan, as he wrote to Levertov, “the poet’s role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it”

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<sup>44</sup> All quotations from letters between Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov are taken from *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov* (2004). Hereafter referred to as *RD-DL Letters*.

(669). Duncan saw Levertov's war poetry as moralising and didactic, dangerously (in his view) combining personal politics with poetry, and straightforwardly opposing "evil" in ways that were facile and disingenuous.

In this chapter I argue that, in the correspondence with Levertov, Duncan moulded himself on a model of the Romantic, solitary, letter writing poet. This model involved maintaining an "esthetic distance" (*RD-DL Letters* 643) from contemporary politics, writing poems that refracted present events through history and myth, and, at the same time, keeping in contact with friends through the paradoxically both distant and intimate means of the letter. Duncan took this model primarily from his reading of British and American Romantic writers, chiefly, I argue, the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose essay "Friendship" (1841) I use as a framework for understanding the vicissitudes of the complex epistolary friendship between Duncan and Levertov.<sup>45</sup> Either consciously or unconsciously, or most likely a mixture of the two, Duncan and Levertov re-enacted key elements of Emersonian friendship in their correspondence and poems. Through the act of writing letters to one another, the two poets cemented a sense of their own diverging poetic projects. Duncan's poetry of the 1960s and 1970s harked back to ideas of a collective unconscious and a shared mythopoetic substratum that allowed him to

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<sup>45</sup> Andrew Epstein's illuminating and comprehensive study of friendship and community among the New York School poets, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (2006) also has at the centre of its argument Emerson's "oxymoronic" (3) characterisation of friendship in the essay "Friendship." However, Epstein's study is focused primarily on the New York School poets Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery and Amiri Baraka and the communities that surrounded them. While Epstein's study does touch on Robert Duncan, acknowledging Duncan's explicit interest in Emerson (63), Duncan is referred to mainly in relation to his friendship with Baraka. Epstein does not explore the applicability of Emerson's essay to the friendship with Levertov, nor does Epstein focus on the importance of letter writing and epistolary friendship in Emerson's essay, which I argue should be central to a reading of Duncan and Levertov's correspondence. While Epstein makes extensive use of letters, his study does not explore questions related to epistolarity and the formal qualities of letters.

transcend the immediate present. In opposition to this, Levertov came to see the poet as a public figure responding to and directly representing immediate political struggles. Both viewed letter writing as fertile ground for the discussion and development of poems, and also as material to be incorporated into the poems themselves. Yet the disagreement between the two poets also revealed key differences in the way they viewed both their relationship to each other, and the relationship between poetry and letters. For Duncan letter writing was part of his conception of poets and poetry as belonging to a small, largely private, network, into which he increasingly retreated when faced with representing the realities of the Vietnam War, a war that both poets were strongly opposed to. Levertov's war poems, on the other hand, show her breaking away from the intimacy and dependency of her epistolary relationship with Duncan, and writing poems that incorporate diaries and letters in a documentary mode that looks beyond this small private network to a wider reading public.

### **(Failed) utopian spaces**

At the start of their correspondence, Levertov and Duncan were at the beginning of their careers. Levertov had published one book of poems, *The Double Image* (1946), and, after moving to New York in 1948, had begun in the early 1950s to experiment with a different style of poetry inspired by her reading of William Carlos Williams and his ideas surrounding a modern poetry that embraced the "American idiom." Robert Duncan had published two books of poetry and had recently moved to San Francisco, which was becoming a

centre for writers and artists.<sup>46</sup> The two poets were linked by their shared sense of themselves as outsider figures. In a notebook entry from 1950, Levertov describes her sense of “rootlessness” as an English-born expatriate with Welsh and Russian-Jewish heritage (qtd. in MacGowan iv). Similarly, Duncan’s status as adopted meant that he wrestled with questions of identity and belonging in his work.<sup>47</sup>

Duncan and Levertov were associated with the Black Mountain School, a group of avant-garde, post-modern poets and visual artists spearheaded by Charles Olson, whose concept of “projective verse” or “open form” poetry was an influential model for both Duncan and Levertov. Essentially, Olson’s idea was that poetic form and content are inextricably linked, and that the form of a poem emerges from the content in an organic way rather than being imposed onto it (“Projective Verse” 240). Given the close relationship between form and content proposed by members of the Black Mountain School, including Duncan and Levertov, it is surprising that the formal role played by correspondence, which is so closely related to, and often overlaps with the poems that Levertov and Duncan send to one another, has hitherto been almost entirely neglected by critics.

Although they were associated with Black Mountain School as a movement, the pair in fact had a tenuous connection to the place itself. The School was a small, alternative liberal arts college established in 1933 in rural North Carolina. Duncan taught there only very briefly in 1956, and Levertov

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<sup>46</sup> Duncan’s biographer, Lisa Jarnot, notes that in mid-1950s “the San Francisco community was in the midst of transformation” with an “influx” of writers and artists arriving in the city (*Ambassador from Venus* 160).

<sup>47</sup> Peter Quartermain writes: “The circumstances of his birth and adoption appear more than once in his writing, and questions of identity, self, and the person permeate his notebooks, his reading, and his work” (*Collected Early* xix).

never visited the college although she published her poetry in the *Black Mountain Review*. Black Mountain College itself, as a kind of utopian space, is significant. It was governed democratically, gave a central role to the arts in education, and was modelled on communal living. Students participated in communal “farm work, construction projects and kitchen duty” (BMC Museum website). However, due to financial difficulties and a drop in enrolment, the college did not survive and closed in 1957.

Accounts from the time suggest that although it was founded on utopian principles of community, the reality, particularly in its final years, was somewhat different. The poet Hilda Morley recalls the experience of living at BMC: “it was good, at Black Mountain, to wake up to the quiet, the space, the sound of birds, though at times these might be interrupted by the noise of beer bottles rolling on the floor above us, or the scream of a new mother in the throes of a nervous breakdown” (qtd. in Porco, “Which is the Black Mountain?” n.pag.). Black Mountain College represented a failed utopian space, which I think sheds light on some of the poetic and political ideas of the college and the poets associated with it. It also mirrors the model of ideal correspondence and/as community that Duncan takes from his reading of Emerson’s essay “Friendship.”

At the start of their letters to one another, Duncan and Levertov idealised their correspondence, seeing it as a performative space to imagine themselves in particular roles. The correspondence was a platonic rather than a romantic one. Duncan was in a homosexual relationship with the artist Jess Collins and Levertov was married to writer Mitch Goodman. However, the letters sometimes read like an epistolary novel. Robert Bertholf and Albert

Gelphi describe the letters as “a personal and poetic dialogue so urgent and intense that it reads like love letters whose bonded commitment was to the power of language and to the imagination’s unflagging search for expressive form” (*Poetry of Politics* viii). Duncan and Levertov often playfully imagine themselves as lovers in an epistolary romance. For example, early on in their correspondence in March 1955 Levertov writes to Duncan, “If I were to *really* write to you it wd. be a real crazy letter—something like a loveletter, tho’ not that—dominated by some image of the moon, a full moon, for some reason” (7). The correspondence is in many ways not a traditional exchange, and often challenges dominant ways of thinking and subverts gender norms. Yet it is significant that, in its early stages at least, Levertov and Duncan revert to traditionally gendered roles of master/student, poet/muse and male/female. Levertov’s invocation of the traditionally feminine image of the moon here reflects this.

### **Letters as letters**

Much has been written about Duncan and Levertov’s disagreement, but the central and shaping significance of the epistolary form in relation to their argument, and its historical underpinnings in both American and British Romanticism, has so far been neglected. Critics have tended to focus on what the letters reveal about the wider contexts of postwar American poetry, rather than the letters as letters. In his introduction, Albert Gelphi frames the correspondence as a key debate surrounding “aesthetic ethics,” which helps “to map the contested terrain of American poetry since mid-century” (ix), encompassing and enacting the concerns of the wider literary sphere. For

Gelphi, these concerns centred on crafting a poetics based “open form” verse, and negotiating the balance between poetry as a vehicle for personal and/or public concerns. Similarly, in “A Cold War Correspondence: The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov,” Michael Davidson argues that the letters reflect, in microcosmic form, many key Cold War era anxieties. He argues that Cold War and gender politics became enmeshed in this period, with the “Manichean” dualism of the West and capitalism vs. the Soviet Union and communism paralleling shifts in gender roles. Davidson remarks:

[T]he correspondence [between Duncan and Levertov] is a chronicle of gender politics in the second half of the twentieth century. Both poets began by adopting a familiar master/adept role, coded masculine/feminine, that changed during the crucible of the Vietnam War and the rise of the women’s movement in the late 1960s. (540)

In “Poetry, Politics, and the ‘Other Conscience,’” Marjorie Perloff also hones in on the context of the Vietnam War. She probes what the letters reveal about the central question of “how poetry positions itself vis-à-vis politics,” arguing that Duncan’s forensic critique of Levertov’s poems reveals their moralism and didacticism. In Perloff’s view, Levertov’s poems are so fixated on her own ideology that they leave the reader with “no freedom to interpret” the poems for themselves (34; 35).

A handful of critics touch on the significance of the letters as letters, but do not adequately theorise and contextualise questions related to the epistolary genre. Michael Davidson makes several suggestive points in relation to the



materiality of the correspondence. He writes, “Because e-mail has collapsed the temporality of writing, these leisurely, desultory missives—often written over a period of weeks and with lengthy addenda—seem documents from a different era. Their materiality testifies to a completely different mode of communication from our current virtual reality” (“Cold War Correspondence” 541). Yet even though their own letters now seem outmoded, I argue that Duncan and Levertov were also themselves engaged in a process of looking back to an earlier generation when letters were even more tightly woven into the social fabric. As Davidson later observes, Duncan and Levertov’s early letters to one another invite “parallels [with] Whitman’s and Dickinson’s inaugural letters to Emerson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson” (542). Davidson leaves these parallels unexplored, whereas this chapter seeks to address them, particularly in relation to Emerson’s correspondence.

Other critics make the point that letters were an important means of constructing a community. Peter O’Leary sees the correspondence as part of an “epistolary proto-internet, a network of exchange by which poets would keep in touch, circulating their work to those who matter” (237-238), and regrets that such a network can no longer exist in the same way in the age of the internet: “I don’t mean to be nostalgic here, but these letters signify to me that poets lived for a time in a community of letters, in what we might call the Age of Correspondences. Out of these letters their art arose” (238). I agree that the letters were a key part of community-building among the Black Mountain poets, and that, particularly in the case of Levertov and Duncan, they are a vital part of the business of crafting poems. However, O’Leary and others who romanticise letter relationships are in danger of lapsing into an uncritical nostalgia that

erases many of the real complexities and ambivalences of this “community of letters.” As this chapter will show, letters act as both a bridge and a barrier between Levertov and Duncan, and are as much an agent of misunderstanding and disconnection as they are mutual understanding and connection.<sup>48</sup>

In their preface to the essays collected in *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry* (2006), Albert Gelphi and Robert Bertholf also touch on the centrality of letter writing as a means for the geographically dispersed members of the Black Mountain poets to stay in touch and forge a sense of community: “The letter was the medium of communication. The criss-cross of letters and poems knit the group together and created a sense of shared venture” (viii). While they highlight the centrality of letters as a means for these poets to build a community, Gelphi and Bertholf do not probe further the significance of the epistolary genre and its links to a previous generation of American and British Romanticists. Duncan and Levertov were not writing letters in a vacuum. Both were conscious of their correspondence as situated in the context of, and building on, a generation of nineteenth-century poets and letter writers, including Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and particularly Emerson, for whom letter writing was intrinsic to friendship and creativity.

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<sup>48</sup> In conceiving of letters as alternately both a bridge and a barrier between correspondents I am indebted to Janet Altman’s ideas expressed in *Epistolarity*. Altman writes that letters act as “Bridge/barrier (distance breaker/distance maker). The letter’s mediatory property makes it an instrument that both connects and interferes” (186). However, Altman’s study is limited to epistolary novels, and does not explore how this concept functions in relation to real correspondence.

### **Emersonian influences**

Both poets, but particularly Duncan, used letter writing as a means of creating an idealised community, which reflected their understanding of nineteenth-century transatlantic Romantic traditions. The affinity between Duncan and Levertov was based on their sense of a shared poetic lineage and their regard for the visionary imagination. This derived in large part from their readings of nineteenth-century writers, particularly Emerson, but also British Romantic poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Levertov quotes Emerson and Coleridge to support her ideas about poetic form in her essay “Notes on Organic Form” (1965). She cites Frank Lloyd Wright alongside Emerson’s edict “Ask the fact for the form” and Coleridge’s saying “Such is the life, such is the form,” thus finding a lineage between Romanticism and modernism (qtd. in Levertov *New and Selected Essays* 71). Similarly, Duncan cites Emerson as a key influence on his own (post)modernist poetics in his essay “The Self in Postmodern Poetry” (1983): “Am I ‘modern’? Am I ‘postmodern’? I am, in any event, Emersonian” (*Collected Essays* 402).

However, as Albert Gelphi writes, their readings of these same writers differed, particularly in regard to Emerson: “Duncan’s and Levertov’s different inflections of Romanticism pointed them in opposite directions, and their readings of Emerson, the arch American Romanticist, epitomize the divergence” (Gelphi xxii). Levertov read Emerson as “an exemplar of Romantic synthesis,” in which “‘man’s creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories”” (*Essays* 68), thus finding an historical parallel for the idea of “open form” that poet Charles Olson put forward in his seminal 1950 essay “Projective Verse,” and which Levertov adapts and modifies to suit her own poetics in her essay

“Notes on Organic Form.”<sup>49</sup> Duncan, on the other hand, sees Emerson as anticipating elements of modernism and postmodernism: “Duncan’s 1983 essay ‘The Self in Postmodernist Poetry’ makes a point of saying that ‘I read my Emerson dark’—less as the exemplar of Romantic synthesis than as the unwitting exemplar of the Romantic dissolution that opened the way to modern dissonance” (Gelphi xxii).

I argue Duncan and Levertov’s idealised community of correspondence both contained and became one of these “dark” Emersonian elements. If Duncan and Levertov’s linked but different visions of the poet hinged on their readings of Emerson, then their sense of letter writing and correspondence as a related branch of the poetic project, similarly, diverged. Both Duncan and Levertov were prolific letter writers, writing to each other and contemporaries like Robert Creeley and Charles Olson. Their own voluminous three decades-long correspondence is evidence of this. However, their conceptions of the nature of “a community in poetry” (*RD-DL Letters* 707) differed, along with their attitudes to the role that correspondence played in building this community, and the necessary distance and solitude that the epistolary genre demands. As others have observed, the fundamental differences in their thinking are present from the start of their long correspondence, although it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that these developed into a tense disagreement and an ever-

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<sup>49</sup> As the *New Princeton Encyclopedia* states, Charles Olson’s idea of “open form” takes inspiration from transatlantic Romantic traditions: “Projective Verse belongs in a tradition of organic form that can be traced back to Coleridge’s notion of ‘form as proceeding’ (as opposed to ‘form as superinduced’). In the American line, it has its roots in the poetics of Emerson and Whitman” (976).

widening schism. The same is true in relation to the way that they conceive of letter writing in relation to poetry.<sup>50</sup>

Duncan's vision of the poet's role is tied to a nineteenth-century-derived ideal of community and letter writing. This is evident from the very start of the letters. Writing to Levertov in April 1955, while Duncan and Jess were living on the island of Majorca, Duncan reflects on the correspondence (newly struck up at this point), remarking on how glad he is to have found a poet whose work corresponds to his own, and who he can also literally correspond with. He refers back one hundred years previously to a lost nineteenth-century culture of epistolary intimacy and sentimentality:

I, among with other what stars, have passd a place of arrival and will always write letters back. In earlier days something wld. have seemed lost to me, regret for what one has passd have colourd the sentences. But now, it is like a happy fate; a natural wonder one acknowledges. And lays claim to. If this were 1855, we cld write without chagrin of kindred souls. But rightly we want not the sentiments of it, but its powers. And I keep for 1955—the kin; as a communal recognition secret to us even as we recognize it—and so “a cloud!” Surrounded by its own intense blue which you, I, we know rightly is (as in *The Cantos*) “of Heaven.” (9)<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Davidson writes that, although the disagreement between the two poets came to a head in the early 1970s, “this volume shows the extent to which seeds of dissension had been planted much earlier” (“Cold War Correspondence” 546). Similarly, Gelphi notes that the early letters contain “a foreshadowing of future trouble” (Introduction xiv).

<sup>51</sup> Spelling and abbreviations as in original.

Ironically, given this is not 1855, Duncan's syntax, spelling and prose style here still hark back to the nineteenth century, so that his letter performs the very thing that Duncan claims is no longer possible, and his sentences appear "coloured" by the past. The references to "stars," "fate," "natural wonder," "kindred souls" and "Heaven" are all evidence of Duncan's background in Gnosticism and the Occult, as well as registering the influence of the vocabulary of transcendentalists like Emerson. The year 1855 is particularly significant since it is the year Walt Whitman published *Leaves of Grass* and sent a copy to Emerson, who praised the volume in a letter in response. Whitman later printed a quotation from this letter in gold leaf on the cover of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*: "I Greet You at the Beginning of a Great Career." Emerson was offended that Whitman made his letter public without his permission, and used it as a means of marketing the book.<sup>52</sup> It is very likely Duncan knew about this exchange between Whitman and Emerson given that he held both in high esteem.

Duncan refers frequently to Whitman in letters to Levertov, and cites Whitman as one of his "primaries" in "The Self in Postmodern Poetry" along with Emerson (399). The eventual falling out between Whitman and Emerson foreshadows the disagreement that later occurred between Duncan and Levertov, when Duncan objected to Levertov's public voice in her anti-war poems, which also make use of previously private correspondence with Duncan. Thus, Duncan's reference to 1855 here establishes a positive link to the intimacy and communality between nineteenth-century letter writers, which

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<sup>52</sup> David S. Reynolds writes in *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (1995): "According to Moncure Conway, 'Emerson said that if he had known his letter would be published he might have qualified his praise'" (343).

connected “kindred souls” like Emerson and Whitman. It also introduces a darker note of ambivalence, since it is connected to the souring of the friendship between Whitman and Emerson. The mention of Pound’s *Cantos* is also a nod to the fact that Duncan and Levertov’s poetics rests on a version of Romanticism viewed through the prism of modernism.

Compared to Levertov, Duncan’s letter writing practice was especially retrospective. He labelled himself a “coterie poet” (qtd. in *Collected Early* xxvi), and wrote in a letter to Levertov that he preferred to circulate his poems as “gifts” rather than publish them (*RD-DL Letters* 54).<sup>53</sup> In referring back to an idealised 1855 epistolary community of “kindred souls” in his April 1955 letter, Duncan was almost certainly thinking of Emerson’s influential essay “Friendship” (1841), which prominently features letter writing as a means and symbol of friendship. In his essay “The Self in Postmodern Poetry,” Duncan writes that Emerson’s essays were a key early influence for him: “In 1946 or 1947 I came to read Emerson’s essays and then his work at large” (*Collected Essays* 400); therefore he must have read “Friendship” at this time.

### **“Friendship” and/as letter writing**

Like Emerson, Duncan’s ideal friendship took place via letters, and was paradoxically related to solitude. In a letter to Levertov, Duncan wrote “Writing to you is always so vivid for me, a solitude in which you are” (99). Emerson’s

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<sup>53</sup> Although Duncan did circulate many of his poems in letters to friends as “gifts,” his attitudes to coterie circulation and, or as opposed to, publication were complex and often inconsistent. After the publication of his collection *Bending the Bow* (1968), Duncan vowed that he would not publish a new collection of poems for 15 years because he was unhappy with the publishers’ inability to set his poems on the page exactly in accordance with his wishes. During this publication hiatus, however, Duncan did publish several new collections of his earlier work. For details of these publications see Bertholf, Introduction, *Collected Later* (xxx).

“Friendship” refers to letter writing at several key points. At the start of the essay Emerson observes that writing a letter to a friend stimulates a person’s thoughts:

Our intellectual and active powers increase with our affection. The scholar sits down to write, and all his years of meditation do not furnish him with one good thought or happy expression; but it is necessary to write a letter to a friend,—and, forthwith, troops of gentle thoughts invest themselves, on every hand with chosen words. (*Essays* 194)

Emerson suggests that letter writing comes more easily than scholarly writing. Letter writing and friendship are prompts for other kinds of writing. In Duncan and Levertov’s cases, letters are a prompt for writing poetry.

At the centre of the essay, Emerson also includes an imaginary letter to a friend:

DEAR FRIEND,

If I was sure of thee, sure of thy capacity, sure to match my mood with thine, I should never think again of trifles, in relation to thy comings and goings. I am not very wise ; my moods are quite attainable : and I respect thy genius : it is to me as yet unfathomed ; yet dare I not presume in thee a perfect intelligence of me, and so thou art to me a delicious torment.      Thine ever, or never. (200)<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Capitalisation, punctuation and spacing as in the original essay.



Thomas Constantinesco argues that the imaginary letter is at the centre of “Friendship,” and that other references to letter writing throughout the essay are evidence that Emerson’s theory of friendship is inextricably bound up with letter writing: “In giving a letter pride of place in ‘Friendship,’ Emerson, a prolific letter writer throughout his life, signals that his theory of friendship is personal, that it is shaped by actual correspondence” (219). Although the letter quoted above is imaginary, Constantinesco demonstrates that it is an archetypal letter stitched together from elements of Emerson’s real correspondences:

The numerous letters that [Emerson] exchanged over the years with his brothers, William and Charles, and with such friends as Margaret Fuller, Caroline Sturgis, Samuel Ward, Henry David Thoreau, and Thomas Carlyle provided him not only with a forum for discussing ideal friendship but also with specific models of friendship that he then used to craft the figure of the ideal friend. (219)

Letter writing is therefore a vital part of both Emerson’s real friendships and the idealised version he sets forth in “Friendship.”

However, as the imaginary letter at the centre of “Friendship” demonstrates, Emerson’s vision of ideal friendship is highly ambivalent. A “dark reading” (to use Duncan’s phrase) of Emerson’s “Friendship” reveals notes of the “modern dissonance” that Gelphi argues Duncan reads in Emerson.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Andrew Epstein also observes the deeply paradoxical nature of Emersonian friendship: “Emerson’s treatment of friendship and the influence of other people, as expressed in such

Constantinesco elucidates many of what he terms the “discordant” elements of Emerson’s theory of friendship, and the way that letter writing is tied to the ambivalence of the essay as a whole. He observes that Emerson’s imaginary letter “widens the gap between [the correspondents] that it was supposed to bridge” (223). For example, the imagined letter begins with a “hypothetical clause,” which “infuses an air of suspicion into the relationship” (223). Although the middle section of the letter “reduces the distance that separates the two friends by establishing mutual trust [...] by the end of the sentence spiritual concord has given way to epistolary discord” (223). Emerson closes his letter with a double barb, calling his correspondent a “delicious torment” and signing off with the equally paradoxical statement “Thine ever, or never.”

Constantinesco concludes, on the basis of this, that letter writing as a genre is the perfect medium to embrace the innately ambivalent, highly discordant nature of friendship:

For [Emerson], friendship is an ideal though precarious relation, oscillating between proximity and aloofness, intimacy and solitude, harmony and disharmony, identity and otherness, and the letter provides a privileged medium in which these contradictory impulses may be contained and explored. Friendship *as* correspondence necessarily entails friendship *by* correspondence. (224)

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major essays as ‘Circles,’ ‘Experience,’ and ‘Friendship,’ is always filled with paradox and subtlety, heady exuberance and wary scepticism, pleasure and loss” (70).

The letter as a genre itself oscillates between these paired states thus making it both synonymous with the “precarious” nature of friendship, and also a fitting medium in which to conduct friendships. As Janet Altman writes in *Epistolarity*, the letter is defined by its paradoxical nature: “The letter is unique precisely because it does tend to define itself in terms of polarities such as portrait/mask, presence/absence, bridge/barrier” (186). Friendship and letter writing therefore correspond in their shared status as inherently oscillating between seemingly opposed states.

Emerson’s essay both outlines the key attributes of ideal friendship as/by correspondence at the same time as stressing the impossibility of attaining these. Every positive aspect of friendship and correspondence that Emerson introduces is almost immediately cancelled out by its opposite. At the beginning of the essay, Emerson tells the story of the arrival of a “stranger” to his house with whom he had previously only corresponded by letter. The arrival of the stranger brings about a flurry of housework of both a literal and metaphorical kind. Emerson puts on his best coat and tries to be his best self:

The house is dusted, all things fly into their places, the old coat is exchanged for the new, and they must get up a dinner if they can. Of a commended stranger, only the good report is told by others, only the good and new is heard by us. He stands to us for humanity. He is what we wish. Having imagined and invested him, we ask how we should stand related in conversation and action with such a man, and are uneasy with fear. The same idea exalts conversation with him. We talk

better than we are wont. We have the nimblest fancy, a richer memory, and our dumb devil has taken leave for the time. (195)

Emerson finds himself enriched and improved through direct communication with the stranger. But the stranger is a cipher, and a projection screen for Emerson's lofty ideals—"He stands to us for humanity. He is what we wish"—and during the conversation, the stranger's prejudices and personal foibles become apparent, and infect the idealised image that Emerson has crafted:

But as soon as the stranger begins to intrude his partialities, his definitions, his defects, into the conversation, it is all over. He has heard the first, the last and the best he will ever hear from us. He is no stranger now. Vulgarity, ignorance, misapprehension are old acquaintances. Now, when he comes, he may get the order, the dress, and the dinner,—but the throbbing of the heart, and the communications of the soul, no more.

(195)

In the space of a single paragraph, Emerson makes an abrupt switch from rapturous description of the joys of conversation with the stranger to advocating no conversation at all. The terminology shifts from friends and kindred souls to "old acquaintances." Now, if the stranger visits again he will be greeted with all the trappings and performance of friendliness, but without true connection.

The performativity of letter writing plays a key role here. It is significant that this anecdote begins with Emerson sitting down "to write a letter to a

friend,” and ends with an image of failed “communications.” Letter writing allows the addresser to fashion an image of their ideal self, and in turn to idealise the recipient. Emerson’s imagined visit creates a tension between epistolary communication and real meetings, as well as ideal friendship and real-life relations. Emerson suggests that letter writing is a means of maintaining the cipher-like status of the stranger, whereas a meeting in person, though initially profitable and energising, ultimately serves to corrupt and nullify the image of the ideal friend. This account has its roots in the real-life epistolary friendship between Emerson and Carlyle, although Emerson does not name Carlyle or any of his other friends in the essay. Instead, specific instances taken from Emerson’s correspondence are depersonalised and generalised.

Constantinesco suggests that the vignette about the “stranger” is a re-imagining of Emerson’s first meeting with Carlyle, when “Emerson knocked on Carlyle’s door at Craigenputtock, unknown and unannounced, in the middle of the day, 26 August 1833” (230). The two men then began a lifelong friendship in letters. The eventual unravelling of the intense bond with the “stranger” mirrors the cooling off of relations between Emerson and Carlyle following their second in-person meeting: “Carlyle ended up complaining about Emerson’s desire for perpetual conversation, whereas Emerson bemoaned Carlyle’s habit of bringing every discussion back to politics and launching into fiery vituperations” (Constantinesco 231). Substitute Levertov for Carlyle, and Duncan for Emerson, and this would be a very fitting description of the two twentieth-century poets’ own friendship. Emerson and Carlyle’s friendship, like Duncan and Levertov’s, paradoxically thrived on distance: “As long as the two

men exchanged letters and were separated by an ocean, their relationship remained cordial” (Constantinesco 231).

The account of the “stranger” characterises the paradox at the centre of his essay. The key elements of ideal friendship are inherently contradictory. Emerson writes, “Friendship, like the immortality of the soul, is too good to be believed. The lover, beholding his maiden, half knows that she is not verily that which he worships; and in the golden hour of friendship, we are surprised with shades of suspicion” (198). Ideal friendship, Emerson suggests, like love, is based partly on false pretences. The ideal friend is a kind of mirage, who exists more in the mind than in reality. Moreover, even in the “golden hour of friendship,” “shades of suspicion” creep in so as to complicate the romanticised figure of the ideal friend. Many of the images and metaphors Emerson uses to describe friendship are similarly ambivalent. Following the deeply contradictory imaginary letter to a friend at the centre of the essay, Emerson uses the metaphor of weaving a cobweb to describe the simultaneously strong but fragile nature of friendship: “Yet these uneasy pleasures and fine pains are for curiosity, and not for life. They are not to be indulged. This is to weave cobweb, and not cloth. Our friendships hurry to short and poor conclusions, because we have made them a texture of wine and dreams, instead of the tough fibre of the human heart” (201).

Instances of paradox and oxymoron abound in the essay. Emerson writes, “A friend is, therefore, a sort of paradox in nature” (206). Emerson’s phrase “beautiful enemy” typifies the oxymoronic character of friendship:

Let him be to thee forever a sort of beautiful enemy, untameable, devoutly revered, and not a trivial conveniency, to be soon outgrown and cast aside. The hues of the opal, the light of the diamond, are not to be seen, if the eye is too near. To my friend I write a letter, and from him I receive a letter. That seems to you a little. Me it suffices." (213)

This last quotation ties together the central themes of solitude and letter writing in "Friendship." For an essay supposedly about friendship, Emerson ultimately talks as much, if not more, about the state of solitude. The essay gradually shifts from celebrating the benefits of friendship, to contemplating an ideal state of friendship that paradoxically embraces solitude. Constaninesco writes that "Emersonian friendship takes the form of a discordant correspondence whose perfection lies in its experiential impossibility, a characterization of friendship that necessarily isolates, but also elevates the writing subject" (219). Writing letters is linked to this desire to keep friends at a distance. As Emerson says, proximity makes it impossible to appreciate fully "the hues of the opal, the light of the diamond." In contrast, distance provides a better vantage point from which to view the friend. Likewise, letter writing allows Emerson to keep friends at a distance, and maintain a sense of solitude. In the final sections of the essay, Emerson compares friends to books: "I do with my friends as I do with my books. I would have them where I can find them, but I seldom use them" (217). Although the metaphor has shifted from letter writing to reading books, friendship is again conducted through textual rather than actual means, and friends are kept at arm's length to be open and shut at will.

The close of the essay finds Emerson alone, “fantasizing a friendship without friends” (Constantinesco 219). The idea of “correspondence” occurs again, although now Emerson rejects a two-way dialogue in favour of an elevated form of solitude. Correspondences, he observes, are often unequal: “It has seemed to me lately more possible than I knew, to carry a friendship greatly, on one side, without due correspondence on the other. Why should I cumber myself with the poor fact that the receiver is not capacious?” (218). The close of the essay sees Emerson shedding unequal correspondences and embracing solitude and unrequited friendship. He uses the metaphor of unmasking: “True love transcends instantly the unworthy object, and dwells and broods on the eternal; and when the poor, interposed mask crumbles, it is not sad, but feels rid of so much earth, and feels its independency the surer” (219).

There is another buried epistolary metaphor here. Masks are linked to the performative nature of letter writing. Altman observes that a letter can act as a “portrait/mask” (186). Similarly, writing about Bishop’s letters, Tom Paulin observes that “the self wears the mask of the performing self” (“Writing to the Moment” 222). Although Emerson has previously spent the essay praising the usefulness of distance between friends and epistolary barriers, here the mask “crumbles.” Emerson’s use of the word “interposed” signals that the barrier between friends created by letter writing also disappears. Emerson’s euphoric ending imagines a utopia of friendship without the need for friends. As soon as you rid yourself of the need for friends the obstacles to true friendship disappear, Emerson suggests. In turn, true friendship paradoxically makes one’s “independency” stronger. Many of these ideas are played out in the Duncan-



Levertov correspondence, particularly in relation to the eventual rejection of the model of ideal friendship in favour of “independency,” as I will now demonstrate.

### **Public and private letters**

I want to use Emerson’s essay “Friendship” as a framework for analysing the similarly discordant epistolary relationship between Duncan and Levertov and their eventual falling out. I will draw on Constantinesco’s reading of “Friendship,” which demonstrates the central role played by letter writing in the essay. I argue that Duncan used letters as a means of fashioning an idealised friendship with Levertov, and that, as in Emerson’s case, letter writing allowed him to maintain a degree of distance and solitude. This connects to Duncan’s nineteenth-century vision of the poet as a solitary figure using letters to form imaginary communities, and whose poems are aimed not at a large reading public but a smaller private coterie of friends and correspondents. Levertov too was influenced by Emerson, but she selects different elements of his writings to incorporate in her work, particularly in relation to the eventual rejection of her mentor, Duncan, and the medium of their friendship, letter writing.

While the Duncan and Levertov letters re-enact, in many respects, aspects of Emerson’s (flawed) nineteenth-century model of friendship and correspondence, the letters also reflect contemporary anxieties about the blurring of boundaries between public and private in the Cold War era. In fact, the medium of letter, which frequently oscillates between public and private, reflects and encapsulates many of these tensions. The Duncan-Levertov letters rehearse key debates regarding the public/private role of the poet. As Hugh

Stevens observes, the Cold War blurring of boundaries between public and private had a significant impact on the poetry of the postwar decades: “throughout the 1950s and 1960s American poetry began more and more to represent private domestic space as highly inflected with public and political anxieties” (164).

Likewise, a major theme in epistolary criticism is the status of letters as curiously both private and public documents. Letters are part of the “private domestic space” that Stevens alludes to in relation to lyric poetry. Yet, as James How observes, the private, domestic sphere that letters supposedly represent and exist in often overlaps with public spaces:

In sum, epistolary spaces are ‘public’ spaces within which supposedly ‘private’ writings travel—at once imaginary and real; imaginary, because you can’t really inhabit them as you can other social spaces—all meetings and incidents there are only metaphorical; real, because they were policed by a government ever more keen to monitor the letters that passed along the national postal routes.” (5)

How’s study looks primarily at the epistolary novel in the context of the development of the postal service in the eighteenth century. However, concerns relating to the fear that private letters may be intercepted map onto a Cold War context in which concerns about government surveillance were heightened.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> On the related subject of Cold War Beat poets’ letter writing and fear of interception see Harris “Cold War Correspondents: Ginsberg, Kerouac, Cassady, and the Political Economy of Beat Letters” (2000).

This fear of private letters becoming public undercuts the idea of letters as a separate, imaginary, utopian space in which social and gender norms can be challenged or reversed. As William Decker observes, “the claiming of confidential, intimate, utopian spaces figures among the letter’s genre-specific themes” (177).

Yet, turning what was originally intended to be private correspondence into a public exchange can also have positive effects. In her study of the epistolary nature of Woolf’s non-fiction essay *Three Guineas* (1938), Anne Bower looks at Woolf’s “desire to combine the personal and the public” in framing her essay as a series of letters in response to “‘an educated man’ who has enquired about her ideas for ways to avoid war” (158). Bower argues that Woolf’s deliberate framing of the debate as correspondence, which by virtue of its being a dialogue, is “in a way, an antiwar strategy” that recognises the subjectivity and views of the other correspondent:

Positioning herself as a letter writer, Woolf frequently comes back to picturing the actual person to whom she is writing. Such a focus on personal response becomes, in a way, an anti-war strategy: to treat the ‘other’ not as an abstract force, but as a situated, flesh-and-blood human; to picture ‘the face on the other side of the page—the face that a letter writer always sees.’ (Bower 158).

In the case of the letters of Duncan and Levertov the idea that debating the war via correspondence, and letters as in some way an “anti-war strategy” is apt. Duncan and Levertov (while they do not seem particularly anxious about their

letters being intercepted) were highly conscious of the public/private nature of both their poetry and their letter writing. This is also evident in the way that their letters and poems themselves became blurred, with instances of private correspondence leaking out into published poetry. The two poets often exchanged poetry in letters, and letters were apt to transform into poetry and vice-versa. Yet Duncan and Levertov's letters also complicate Woolf's assertion that the letter writer can always picture "the face on the other side of the page." Letters were, for them, both a substitute for the physical presence of the other, and a reminder of their physical absence. Letters simulate "face to face" contact without wholly being able to replace it. Moreover, as in the case of Emerson's imaginary letter to a friend, letters can be vehicles for misapprehension and misunderstanding that finally underscore the correspondents' differences and essential solitude.

### **Imaginary letters and real correspondences**

Duncan and Levertov sought to create an idealised imaginary community of letters in place of their real physical presence. Yet, as in the case of the failed utopia of Black Mountain College, this epistolary community sometimes fell short of the high expectations placed upon it. The very first letter that Duncan sent to Levertov in June 1953 demonstrates the gap between the idealised relationship between the poets that Duncan had concocted in his imagination, and the more complicated reality of their actual exchange. This early exchange revolves around a poem-letter that Duncan sent to Levertov titled "Letters for

Denise Levertov: An A Muse Ment” in June 1953.<sup>57</sup> Duncan sent the poem-letter to Levertov as a form of tribute and in recognition of his admiration for her poems.

The two poets were not friends at this stage, and had never met in person. Duncan did not preface the poem-letter with any introduction, and signed the poem-letter only with his initials “R.D.” Not having any context in which to place the poem, Levertov (mis)read it as an attack on her work. Her reply to Duncan’s letter has been lost, although it is possible to read Levertov’s reaction to the poem at one remove in the following letter from Duncan, which begins “No no no—not at all ‘adversely.’ The abyss, that everything about your poems (the possibilities arising to mind) that excited my more than admiration about then my own aesthetic is I see *not yours*” (5).<sup>58</sup> Duncan explains, in his characteristically complex prose style, that the poem-letter was not meant “adversely” (a deliberate pun on the poem’s status as verse) but was instead written in “admiration” of Levertov’s poems. Moreover, the poem is not meant to be a reflection of Levertov’s own aesthetic; instead, it is Duncan’s aesthetic prompted and inspired by reading Levertov’s poems: “And then, from there the ‘Letters’ are *for* you not about you. They are reflections upon and from *my* aesthetics (which is proper to a degree) and it is not at all necessary to presume they are reflections upon or from *yours*” (5).

It is significant that Duncan refers to an “abyss” in his reply (27 June 1953) to Levertov in the context of the epistolary misunderstanding between the two poets. Letters can be a means of reaching out across an abyss or chasm

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<sup>57</sup> The poem later appeared in somewhat altered form as “i: For a Muse Meant” in Duncan’s collection of poems *Letters: Poems mcmliii-mcmlvi* (1958).

<sup>58</sup> Italics and sentence structure as in original. The unusual syntax may in this case be an effort to mimic the sound of speech.

in order to connect with another person. On this occasion Duncan's attempt to reach out to Levertov failed. His poem-letter and the resulting misunderstanding serve to emphasise what Duncan later called the "gap" between the two correspondents rather than to bridge it: "Written in part because I felt that—my rapport with these [Levertov's] latest poems (and, for instance, also with Olson's) was such—there might be (another possibility) of an understanding of what I am after. And there is the abyss-mal, the gap" (5). It is also significant that he talks about reading Levertov's poems in the context of establishing a "rapport," thus connecting the act of reading poems to conversation and friendship.

For Duncan, poetry and conversation are very closely linked. Many of his poems indicate their status as conversations with other poets and writers. Duncan's 1964 collection *Writing, Writing*, for example, which is dedicated to Gertrude Stein and imitates her style, includes a cluster of prose-poems that all contain the words "Imaginary Letter" in their titles.<sup>59</sup> These imaginary letters recall Emerson's inclusion of a fictitious letter in "Friendship." Duncan's imaginary letters were written around the same time that Duncan began corresponding with Levertov. Duncan composed the one-line poem "Motto" in Spring 1953 shortly before he sent Levertov the poem-letter "An A Muse Ment."<sup>60</sup> It reads: "A correspondence is a poetry enlarged" (*Early Collected* 457). Duncan's "Motto" can be applied not only to his deliberately imitative and intertextual relationship to Gertrude Stein, but also to his actual correspondence with Levertov. Duncan's brilliantly elliptical short poem

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<sup>59</sup> "An Imaginary Letter / *Dear Saint Heart*," "Imaginary Letter / *Dearest Paul*" and "Imaginary Letter. / *His Intention*" (*Collected Early* 455-456).

<sup>60</sup> See the editors' notes on p793 of *Collected Early Poems and Plays* for the dating of "Motto."

contains a number of different possible meanings. “A correspondence” could mean literal letters and/or an affinity with another poet’s work. The poem also gestures at the poetic qualities of letters, and the letter-like qualities of poems. In Duncan’s subsequent collection *Letters: Poems mcmliii-mcmlvi*, poetry is clearly a form of correspondence. The poem-letter to Levertov is the first poem in this volume.<sup>61</sup>

Duncan’s real letters also contained “imaginary” elements. Duncan assumes that his poem-letter “An A Muse Ment” will speak to Levertov, and that she will respond to its aesthetic, recognising it as a tribute to her own. Yet Duncan’s assumptions are based on an imaginary relationship (not unlike his “imaginary letter” poems) between the two poets that pre-dates their actual correspondence and which Levertov’s real-life response challenges. The primary subject of the poem is the realm of the imaginary, and images conjured by poetry and words. A section from the middle of the poem reads:

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<sup>61</sup> In the accompanying notes to *Letters: Poems mcmliii-mcmlvi*, Peter Quatermain explains that Duncan was at pains to point out that the title did not refer solely to letters as correspondence, and was also inspired by Duncan’s reading of the Zohar: “These LETTERS are the ones between Alpha and Omega who attend our works, the ones from A to Z, our building blocks.” (qtd. in *Collected Early Works* 806). Duncan also wrote in a memo to the printer of the book in 1957: “there has been considerable misunderstanding of LETTERS as the title of a book and not as descriptive of the content.” Quatermain notes, however, that here Duncan “was a shade misleading” since Duncan sent the first “letter” to Levertov actually as a letter (806).

Lists of imaginary sounds, I mean sound signs I mean things designed  
 in themselves I mean boundary marks I mean  
 abounding memorizations I mean memorial rising,  
 I mean a conglomeration without rising.

- |                            |                                  |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. a dead camel            | 8. a fake cigar                  |
| 2. a nude tree             | 9. papers                        |
| 3. a hot mouth (smoking)   | 10. a holey shawl                |
| 4. an old saw (rusty edge) | 11. the addition of              |
| 5. a copy of the original  | the unplanned for                |
| 6. an animal-face          | interruptions: a                 |
| 7. a broken streetcar      | flavor stinking coffee           |
|                            | pot (how to brew                 |
|                            | another cup in                   |
|                            | that Marianne Moore, Pound,      |
|                            | Williams, H.D., Stein, Zukofsky, |
|                            | Bunting, S.J. Perse, surrealist  |
|                            | Dada staid pot)                  |
|                            | 12. A table set for break-       |
|                            | fast. ( <i>RD-DL Letters 4</i> ) |



Duncan's poem is highly experimental, and a continuation of the style of the Stein imitations in *Writing Writing*. It is possible to see the influence of surrealism, Dada and cubism, as it is in the Stein imitations.<sup>62</sup> None of the "imaginary sounds" in the above list is actually a sound. However, the words themselves are "sound signs" that stand in for the things they describe. They are words that conjure particular images, stimulating the imagination and referring to different senses (sight, smell, touch). In number 11 "the addition of / the unplanned for / interruption: a / flavor stinking coffee / pot," Duncan attaches his own and Levertov's work to a community of experimental modernist poets, which is an inheritance that Duncan suggests both he and Levertov share. The "flavour stinking coffee pot" recalls Charles Olson's words in "Projective Verse" when he writes: "It is time we picked the fruits of the experiments of Cummings, Pound, Williams, each of whom has, after his way, already used the machine as a scoring to his composing, as a script to its vocalization" (245). However, where Olson uses the metaphor of a musical score, Duncan chooses the earthier metaphor of the "flavor stinking coffee / pot" in which the residue of old coffee beans is used to brew a second, stronger cup of coffee/poetry. Moreover, where Olson cites only the male modernists E.E. Cummings, Pound and William Carlos Williams, Duncan mixes in female modernists, Marianne Moore, H.D. and Stein.

The "coffee / pot" metaphor might seem an appropriate and appealing one to Levertov, whose poetry was also heavily influenced and inspired by the previous modernist generation. Levertov had struck up a correspondence with Williams, who acted as a mentor figure. Levertov also admired H.D. However,

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<sup>62</sup> The mention of surrealism and Dada, coupled with the unusual appearance of this poem on the page, invites parallels with visual art. Indeed, Duncan prompts the reader to see his poems as a form of visual art.

Levertov misread the playful tone of Duncan's poem as an attack on her work as derivative, when in fact Duncan had intended to celebrate derivation. He writes in his reply to Levertov of 27<sup>th</sup> June 1953:

What I mean is that *I* (and I hoped you—not because it wld mean you were a better poet for it, but because it wld. mean you might understand what I am searching out). But I didn't didn't didn't mean either

a) that not being original or being derivative was *your* quality. But I did write eagerly of *my* beloved coffee pot that you might share the dismay/delight of origins—what most excites me, the predicament of poetry. My titles now for volumes of poetry are: IMITATIONS, and DERIVATIONS. “originality” is *NOT* either interesting or available to me.

b) that “stinking” meant *bad*. I took delight in “stinking”—again the predicament of flavour. (5-6)

Here Duncan again employs a list form, which echoes the list of “imaginary sounds” in the poem. The effect is an ironic climb-down from the intoxicated mood of the original poem. Duncan elaborates on the gap between the intended meaning of the poem, and how Levertov interpreted it.

Levertov picks up on the irony that each point in the poem might readily be interpreted as insult rather than compliment if viewed at what she calls the “wrong angle” (6). In her reply to Duncan, Levertov calls the misunderstanding over the poem “a spectacle of crosspurposes” (6) and asks “Can you see, given my original wrong angle, how yr. Letters fitted together almost point by point as

a deploring?" (6). In Levertov's negative reading, Duncan's poem falls victim to its own successful destabilising of the fixed meanings of words. In his reply, Duncan explains that "what one is after is the tensions in meaning" (5). His poem deliberately and mischievously takes apart language to show how the meanings of words slip and slide into one another in a Derridean fashion.<sup>63</sup> The opening section links similar sounding words that roll into one another. For example, "inspire" and "aspire, "vowels" and "bowels":

- in  
     spired/the aspirate  
     the aspirant almost  
     without breath  
     it is a breath out  
     breathed spiraling—      An aspiration  
     pictured as the familiar spirit  
     hoverer  
     above  
     each loved each

---

<sup>63</sup> Duncan's interest in words as "sound signs," and the overlap between words and their meanings, such as puns, seems to relate very well to Derrida's theory of *différance* outlined in *Writing and Difference* (1967) and *Of Grammatology* (1967). However, Duncan composed the poem-letter "An A Muse Ment" to Levertov in 1953, which rules out the possibility of Duncan having been inspired by Derrida's thinking. However, Duncan's biographer Lisa Jarnot writes that in the early 1950s, after reading Olson's essay "Projective Verse," Duncan "continued to experiment with the possibilities of the line and the use of the page as a field for the free movement of language," and in Spring 1950 took a course at Berkley called "Symbolism: A Study of the Expressive Function of Signs" (*The Ambassador from Venus* 117). Duncan's experimentation with language in this and the Stein imitations seems to anticipate a number of Derrida's later ideas. A section of "An A Muse Ment" even refers presciently to "a deconstruction / for the reading of words" (4). Moreover, Derrida makes a connection between the unstable nature of communication and letter writing in his satire of an epistolary novel, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud* (first published 1980). As in the case of Duncan's *Letters*, Derrida's text delights in the inherent potential for misunderstandings and miscommunications in language that letter writing makes even more apparent.

a word giving up its ghost  
 memorized as the flavour  
     from the vowels/the bowels  
 of meaning (3)<sup>64</sup>

Here, what Duncan had meant as a positive acknowledgement of the etymology of words and the fluidity of language, Levertov sees as an offensive indictment of her poetry. Duncan's linking of the words "inspired," "aspirate," "breath" and "spiraling" [sic] is a play on the links between "to inspire" and "to aspire," the latter of which is etymologically linked to breathing. The *OED* gives one meaning of "to aspire" as "To breath (breath or spiritual influence) *to* or *into*; to inspire" (*OED Online*).

Although we do not have access to Levertov's entire response to the poem, it is possible to see what she might have found offensive in these lines. To be an "aspirant" might suggest a striving after poetic greatness, which the addressee of the poem has not yet reached. The poem seems obsessed with language that provokes a visceral response, and with smells particularly: the "flavor / from the vowels/the bowels/" anticipates the "flavor stinking coffee / pot," which emits creativity-inspiring coffee fumes. As Duncan says in his letter, "I took delight in 'stinking.'" (6). Duncan is making a broader point about etymology, and about words giving up their "ghosts" of meanings, which he connects to the internal functions or "bowels" of language. The punning title

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<sup>64</sup> I have attempted to reproduce, as closely as possible, the original appearance and punctuation of the original poem included in the letter to Levertov.

itself could be read from at least two different angles. The poem is both an homage, “An A Muse Ment,” and also a joke, an amusement.

Thus, what Duncan had meant as tribute and a means of connection between the two poets and their (in his view) corresponding poetic projects ends in a “spectacle of cross-purposes” and misapprehension. As in the case of Emerson’s imaginary letter at the centre of “Friendship,” these early letters between Duncan and Levertov, initially at least, serve to widen the gap that they were supposed to bridge. Some of the key terms of their misunderstanding over “An A Muse Ment” echo those that Emerson uses in his tale of the “stranger” at the beginning of “Friendship.” Emerson also narrates a friendship that starts off on the wrong foot, referring to the rift that starts to develop between himself and the stranger: “Vulgarity, ignorance, misapprehension, are old acquaintances” (195). Duncan echoes these words, and also the ambivalence of Emerson’s tone in “Friendship” at the close of his 27 June 1953 response to Levertov: “Can misapprehensions be greater. My praise is your abuse—all regards, Duncan” (6). Both Emerson’s “stranger” anecdote and the exchange over “An A Muse Ment” hinge on misapprehension. Moreover, Duncan’s “My praise is your abuse” is a re-working of the oxymoronic close of Emerson’s imaginary letter in which he signs off “Thine ever, or never.”

However, this early exchange between Duncan and Levertov, although initially a serious misunderstanding, in fact acts as the catalyst for the poets’ long epistolary friendship. Immediately following the misunderstanding with the “stranger,” Emerson shifts back to contemplation of the positive aspects of friendship between two people: “Pleasant are these jets of affection, which resume a young world for me again. Delicious is a just and firm encounter of

two in a thought, in a feeling" (195). Friendship, Emerson suggests, is profoundly ambiguous and changeable, but this is what makes it genuine and exhilarating. Similarly, the initial "spectacle of crosspurposes" leads to a deepening of the relationship between Duncan and Levertov as opposed to a cooling off of relations. In their next exchange of letters, which followed the two poets meeting in person in New York in 1955, Duncan and Levertov adopt a more intimate epistolary tone, both signing off with "love" rather than "regards."

"An A Muse Ment" acts as crucial paradigm in the Duncan-Levertov correspondence because it laid the groundwork and planted the seeds for their future major disagreement over Levertov's Vietnam War poems in *To Stay Alive* (1971) almost two decades later. This disagreement also in large part stemmed from Duncan's heightened sense of the "ghosts" of meaning embedded in (poetic) language. Many of the key images and concepts in Duncan's poem, and also elements of Levertov's response reoccur in subsequent exchanges.

### **Letters, physical proximity and touch**

Letters, both in the sense of correspondence and the literal letters that make up words, stand in for physical presence. In "An A Muse Ment" Duncan is interested in the ways in which words function as signs or markers that register an absence. Words are ghostly presences: "a word giving up its ghost," "imaginary sounds" or "boundary marks." Similarly, correspondence itself stands in for physical presence. Thus, in some senses all letters are "imaginary" since they simulate a meeting of persons that cannot take place in reality, and words are "imaginary sounds" in that they function in lieu of the thing that they represent.

To return to James How's concept of epistolary space: "[letters are] imaginary, because you can't really inhabit them as you can other social spaces—all meetings and incidents there are only metaphorical" (5).

Duncan and Levertov frequently regret the impossibility of meeting in person, and the necessary physical absence that letters represent. In a letter to Duncan written in April 1956, Levertov laments at the close that "I *wish* I could see you—letters are fine but I'd like to listen to you" (37). Similarly, in a letter to Levertov written at the close of that same year on December 31, 1956, Duncan writes half-jokingly: "This is one of those impulsive mornings—and this poor little yellow sheet must be scrawld over because it is I myself who would like to be stepping out of an envelope to say hello—to be there; or, for I am tenaciously at home, to be here. Return postage guaranteed then" (53). Duncan's letter creates a humorous imaginary space in which he might "step out of the envelope." However, he acknowledges that the letter also acts in lieu of physical presence, and that "this poor little yellow sheet" is a poor substitute for himself.

If Duncan and Levertov's letters stand in for physical presence, even the letters that they do write sometimes stand in for the ideal letters that they seem only able to write in their imaginations. Levertov talks often of not being able to write "real letters." This is partly due to not having enough time, and the demands placed on her by work and family. However, Levertov's conception of what constitutes a "real letter" is also connected to a dividing line that she sees between letters and poems. In her second ever letter to Duncan she writes, "I just realized that what I've been wanting to write wasn't a letter at all but a poem" (7). She often uses the phrase "real letter" in the correspondence with Duncan, usually to denote imaginary ideal letters that she intends to but never

seems to get around to writing.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in letter 360 written in late October 1965, Levertov articulates a fear that writing a “real letter” to Duncan might somehow replace or detract from the writing of a poem:

Although it's so long since I've written to you I feel very close to you, both because of your letters and because I've been—as I always do, but more—rereading your poems.

Reasons for not writing are of the usual kind—the transition from Temple to N.Y.; adjustment to new jobs [...] I have *not* been writing, at all, since August—until a few days ago—and that, in some obscure way, made me reluctant to write to you. I don't know whether out of a sort of shame, or because I felt obscurely I might let something that might have gone towards a poem go into a 'real' letter, or what. None of the reasons I can think of really rings a bell. (513)

The first part of Levertov's letter, in which she writes that she feels “very close to you” reiterates this sense that letters stand in for physical presence and proximity. Here she also raises the idea that a letter might sometimes also stand in for a poem, and that she is reluctant to waste too much of her creative energy on letter writing. The idea that she “might let something [...] go” if she writes what she terms a “real” letter suggests that the spheres of letter writing and poetry, though they are apt to bleed into one another, should remain separate.

For Duncan, on the other hand, this dividing line between “real letters” and poems is much more flexible, as in the case of his letter-poem to Levertov,

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<sup>65</sup> See, for example, letters 51 (p67), 123 (p174) and 294 (p 410).



“Bending the Bow.” Duncan presents the poem as if it has occurred to him spontaneously in the midst of his January 1964 letter to Levertov. The poem itself self-consciously reflects on writing to Levertov. The middle section reads:

I'd  
 been in the course of a letter, I am  
 in the course of a letter to a friend  
 who comes close in my thought so that  
 the day is hers, my hand writing  
 in thought shakes in the currents, of air?  
 of an inner anticipation of? ghostly  
     exhilarations in the thought of her  
 at the extremity of this  
     design (*RD-DL Letters* 449)

The poem is meta-poetical and plays with genre and time. The presence of the poem in the middle of the letter collapses the boundaries between letter and poem. However, the transition from continuous prose to verse also marks a separation between the two. Duncan moves from addressing Levertov directly to referring to her in the third person as “a friend” in the poem. The poem also features shifts in time. The lines “I'd / been in the course of a letter, I am / in the course of the letter” shift from past to present. The poem as a whole is like a letter in that it tries to conjure a sense of presence, and to recreate physical proximity and touch.

However, it is also about the failure to touch in reality, and the way that letters represent presence and absence, togetherness and separation. In the preceding letters to Levertov, Duncan keeps coming back to the idea of touch. The poem also responds to a poem by Levertov, "Face to Face" (published in *The Sorrow Dance* 1966), which also deals with a longing for physical connection and face to face contact. Levertov's poem features two ghostly figures gazing at each other across a river. Levertov sent the poem in a letter to Duncan and the two discussed it in letters immediately preceding Duncan's "Bending the Bow." Duncan calls "Face to Face" Levertov's "Grief poem" (440). Commenting on the poem, Duncan writes: "And, just beyond, not clarified in the poem, that the longing embrace, for each other is also a longing to smash thru a window. (To let in air, to break thru the even transparent obstruction?) To be in touch, not only to see" (441). Here, Duncan articulates the same "longing" that informs the poem "Bending the Bow," and which is central to epistolary communication.

The poems "Face to Face" (Levertov) and "Bending the Bow" (Duncan) are alike in their attempts to "break thru the even transparent obstruction." In Levertov's poem, this obstruction is death; in Duncan's, it is the letter. Following "Bending the Bow," Duncan writes by way of a kind of postscript: "The poem doesn't say 'touch' but it has toucht me" (450). Similarly, the letter itself is an attempt to reach out and "touch" Levertov, and to conjure her presence. In the final version of the poem included in Duncan's 1968 collection *Bending the Bow*, Duncan inserts the crucial words "reaching to touch" into the poem. The second stanza now reads:

in the course of a letter—I am still  
 in the course of a letter—to a friend,  
 who comes close in my thought so that  
 the day is hers. My hand writing here  
 there shakes in the currents of . . . of air?  
 of an inner anticipation of . . . ?      reaching to touch  
 ghostly exhilarations in the thought of her. (*Collected Later* 304)

The second, published version of the poem places a much stronger emphasis on the space and separation between the two correspondents. The added spaced out ellipses and long lines represent visually the sense of “reaching” but not quite managing “to touch” Levertov. These lines also restate the bow and arrow metaphor of the title. Reaching to touch the imagined correspondent flexes and extends the poetic line as if bending the bow back.

Duncan’s poem draws on Greek myth, Romantic poetry and Jungian psychology. These mythic, poetic and psychoanalytic parallels underscore the abiding sense of reaching and failing to touch the imagined correspondent. In the final two stanzas of the poem Duncan casts himself and Levertov in the roles of Orpheus and Eurydice:

You stand behind the where-I-am.  
 The deep tones and shadows I will call woman.  
 The quick high notes . . . You are a girl there too.  
                   having something of a sister and of wife.  
                                   inconsolate.

and I would play Orpheus for you again,

recall the arrow or song

to the trembling daylight

from which it sprang. (*Collected Later* 305)

It is when Orpheus turns back at the final moment to look at Eurydice that he loses her forever and she returns to the underworld. The Orpheus myth is another way of framing the epistolary discord and simultaneous presence and absence that letters represent for Duncan, and also for Emerson. A phrase that Constantinesco uses in relation to the distance between correspondents in Emerson's "Friendship" is also an apt description of the Orpheus myth: "in the exchange of letters, friends are called out and conjured away at the same time. Their presence in writing is inseparable from their bodily absence" (229). Orpheus's turning back calls back Eurydice and conjures her away at the same time.<sup>66</sup>

Duncan must have been struck by the connection between Orpheus who "turned to see" (Graves 112) Eurydice, and the turning back of the bow to make a lyre in Heraclitus. Duncan connects himself with Levertov, who he views as his opposite. He is also connecting war and song. Duncan views their relationship in terms of Jungian psychology. This poem introduces a Jungian concept of personality as encompassing a subconscious female anima, which

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<sup>66</sup> The Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously connected the bow and the lyre in *Fragment 51*, which Duncan is clearly making reference to: "there is a harmony in the bending back as in the case of the bow and the lyre" (qtd. in Wheelwright 102). Some versions of the text translate "bending back" to "back-turning" (Snyder 91; Robinson 37), which, for Duncan, recalls Orpheus turning back to look at Eurydice.

will later become a bone of contention between the two poets for its problematic (and possibly sexist) casting of Levertov as the feminine element of Duncan's persona.

The themes of hands reaching to touch and face-to-face contact in Levertov's and Duncan's poems resonate with preoccupations in the writings of the American and British Romantics who inspired them. For Emerson, letters were a curious way of estranging friends, and underscoring the impossibility of physical contact. Yet Emerson also longed for the "face to face" contact and bodily presence that letters can never fully recreate. In a letter to Carlyle in 1837 he writes: "I wish I could talk with you face to face for one day & know what your uttermost frankness would say" (*Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle* 168). Similarly, Carlyle despairs in a letter about recent troubles: "I must not speak of these things. How can I speak of them on a miserable scrap of paper? Looking into your kind eyes with my eyes, I could speak: not here" (172). This wish is not unlike Duncan's lament to Levertov quoted earlier when he regrets that it is "this poor little yellow sheet must be scrawld over because it is I myself who would like to be stepping out of an envelope to say hello" (*RD-DL Letters* 53). Thus letters function as a bridge and a barrier, inscribing the bodily presence of the correspondent at the same time as they act as a reminder of their physical absence.

In Duncan's "Bending the Bow" hands can only reach to touch "ghostly exhilarations." William Decker speculates that Emerson's steadfast handwriting acted as an alternative visage: "Handwriting images actual bodily presence" (40). Duncan's poem plays with the associations between hands, handwriting and bodily presence: "My hand writing here / there shakes in the currents of . . .

of air? [...] reaching to touch / ghostly exhilarations in the thought of her" (304). Here Duncan is playing with physical imprints and projected images. Levertov is like a hologram, and the "hand writing" takes on a kind of ghostly life of its own as it reaches out beyond the page into an almost supernatural space of possible communion. This section of the poem has echoes of Emerson and Carlyle's attempts to overcome the vast space of the Atlantic ocean that separated them, and also of Keats's macabre obsession with hands and handwriting in his final letters from Italy. Jonathan Ellis writes of Keats's aversion to seeing the handwriting of those closest to him, particularly Fanny Brawne, because, to him, handwriting is too real and searing a reminder of a person's presence. Ellis quotes a letter from Keats to Charles Brown in which he writes that "he could not bear 'the sight of any hand writing of a friend I love'" (qtd. in Ellis, "Last Letters" 234). Ellis observes:

It is significant that Keats separates the words 'hand' and 'writing.' In reading a letter he sees two things simultaneously, a person's handwriting on the page and, through this sight, a literal hand, writing. Keats cannot touch Fanny when he reads her letters or sees her name, but he is merely an imaginative leap from doing so. The ink becomes not just a courier of language, a marker of words, but something live that bridges the distance between two people." ("Last Letters" 235)

Duncan replicates Keats's separation of "hand" from "writing" in his poem, which tries to represent this "imaginative leap" with the ellipses and extended

poetic lines, and also mirrors the strangely disembodied way in which the hand writing takes on a life of its own.

“Bending the Bow” is a crucial poem when considering the Duncan-Levertov letters because it reflects on the way that letters paradoxically recreate, and fail to recreate, physical touch. It is also central to Duncan’s engagement with a lost epistolary culture, and his use of nineteenth-century letter writers as a frame. The correspondence between Emerson and Carlyle, who both celebrated and regretted letters’ (in)ability to resemble “face to face” contact, as well as Keats and his obsession with “hand writing” and the painful (im)possibility of touching Fanny through reading her letters, are both present as resonances in Duncan’s poem. Emerson, Carlyle and Keats can be felt as “ghostly exhilarations” in the poem, simultaneously present and absent. Duncan also reaches further back to the classical sources that inspired and informed his nineteenth-century predecessors. Duncan recalls the ghostly images of Orpheus and Eurydice, re-framing the story in epistolary terms, and demonstrating that letters, in the very act of reaching, ultimately fail to touch the imagined correspondent.

### **The failure of “Friendship”**

In the early 1970s at the height of Levertov’s involvement in anti-war movements and Vietnam protest the two poets fell out over the question of whether and how to represent the Vietnam War in poetry. As Michael Davidson observes, Duncan’s casting of the pair in the roles of Orpheus and Eurydice came back to haunt him: “Levertov would ultimately express animus at being fixed into roles—adept, disciple, Eurydice,—and would seek a divorce from the

Jungian dryad" ("Cold War" 539). The source of their disagreement revolved around public/private themes, and specifically Levertov's taking on a more public role, speaking at televised rallies, and writing politically motivated protest poetry. The argument erupted in 1971, and Duncan wrote a series of long letters, which outlined his, often very difficult, obscure and obsessive critique of the poems in Levertov's collection *To Stay Alive* (1971). In the most important of these long letters he declares, "The poet's role is not to oppose evil but to imagine it" (669). Duncan argues that where Levertov's protest poems go wrong is in their replication of a rigid opposition between good and evil, and in their refusal to "imagine evil," instead denouncing it in what he sees as a facile and sanctimonious manner.

Much has been written about the letters that span the gradual disintegration of Duncan and Levertov's friendship. I do not want to rehearse the arguments that have already been made about this falling out, particularly the complex issues surrounding the ethics and aesthetics of war poetry, but instead point out the ways in which these letters re-enact the failure of the Emersonian ideal of friendship and/as letter writing.<sup>67</sup> Critics are in agreement that the argument between Duncan and Levertov centred on their different conceptions of the public vs. the private role of the poet, and the poet's relationship to community. Eavan Boland describes the shift that starts to occur in Levertov's poetry in the early 1960s from a predominantly private to a public

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<sup>67</sup> There is a body of criticism that comprehensively analyses the political dimensions of the falling out between Levertov and Duncan. See, for example, Perloff, "Poetry, Politics and the 'Other Conscience'" (1996); Davidson "A Cold War Correspondence" (2004); Gelphi and Bertholf, eds. *The Poetry of Politics, The Politics of Poetry* (2006); Wheatley, "'Dichtung and Wahrheit': Contemporary War and the Non-combatant Poet." *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*. Ed. Tim Kendall (2007) and Voyce, *Poetic Community: Avant-Garde Activism and Cold War Culture* (2013).



aesthetic: “In it [the poem ‘September 1961’], she writes of herself and others inheriting their responsibilities from an older poetic generation. The poem is sombre, thoughtful. It is also different. This is no longer a private voice” (xi). This newly politicised, less intimately lyrical, voice came to fruition in Levertov’s poetry collections published at the height of the Cold War between 1968 and 1982:

They track a life becoming complicated and enriched by ideas and sorrows: the death of a sister, the pressures of both marriage and parenthood, the growth of political activism. Above all, they show a poet less and less convinced that poetic responsibility can be discharged through private vision. (Boland xii).

Individual private concerns are still present in Levertov’s Vietnam-era poetry, but they are newly framed, and Boland argues enriched by, the political context. Both Levertov and Duncan are highly conscious of their “responsibilities from an older poetic generation,” in the form of both their immediate modernist predecessors, and the British and American Romantic movements further back, but from the late 1960s onwards it becomes increasingly clear that they view those responsibilities differently.

Marjorie Perloff argues that Duncan’s vision of the role of the poet rests on a complex interpretation of Romanticism:

Poetry, he suggests again and again, is always already political in that it presents us with the motives and results of the political process. Great

political poetry, moreover, is apocalyptic in the Blakean sense, visionary in presenting the events in question as part of larger and more universal paradigms (“Other Conscience” 34).

This has implications for his conception of community. Perloff observes that “Duncan discriminates between the use of community as poetic subject (Levertov’s mode in *To Stay Alive*) and a communal vision” (35). For Duncan, poetry transcends the immediate political moment. The poet speaks with a voice that is neither wholly private nor public, but which addresses a “communal vision” and a collective unconscious that exists at the back of contemporary political struggles.

What critics have so far neglected is the intrinsic connection between the differing public vs. private reach of Duncan and Levertov’s poems during this period, and their increasingly differing conceptions of the role of letter writing. Personal correspondence is shaped by an awareness of a small, intimate audience. In her essay on Walpole’s letters, Virginia Woolf calls letter writing “the humane art which owes its origins to the love of friends” (*Death of the Moth* 54). She declares that the true letter writer speaks not to a large, imagined future public in the form of posterity, but to a private audience of one: “The letter writer is no surreptitious historian. He is a man of short range sensibility; he speaks not to the public at large but to the individual in private. All good letter writers feel the drag of the face on the other side of the page and obey it —they take as much as they give” (54). Like Emerson and Carlyle, Woolf uses the metaphor of face-to-face contact to describe the friendly intimacy of letter writing. She also places letter writing in opposition to mass

communication with a “great gluttonous public” (56). Instead, Walpole in his letters speaks to a small coterie of friends: “Above all he was blessed in his little public—a circle that surrounded him with that warm climate in which he could live the life of incessant changes which is the breath of a letter writer’s existence” (56-57).

Duncan’s idea of letters as conversation with friends chimes with Woolf’s and Emerson’s ideas about letters as a humane art dedicated to friendship, which sits in opposition to the marketplace and forms of mass communication. In a letter to Levertov written in January 1964, Duncan explains one of the aims of his poetry:

Could I render *communication* free from its bourgeoisie uses, as if it were an affair of the market place, and bring it back into its company with *commune, communion, to commune with, communicant, community* (and the hidden, unnamed term then ‘communism,’ etc. it’s true sense of the common good).” (439)

This is a very Emersonian idea, and reiterates elements of Emerson’s ideal friendship. In “Friendship,” Emerson denounces impure friendships that model themselves on the exchange of commodities: “We chide the citizen because he makes love a commodity. It is an exchange of gifts, of useful loans; it is good neighbourhood; it watches with the sick; it holds the pall at the funeral; and quite loses sight of the delicacies and nobility of the relation” (207). Friendship and communication (which Duncan sees as continuous with poetry) should be

dedicated not to personal profit, but to the pursuit of what Duncan describes as the “common good” (439).

Duncan’s vision of poetry and communication as linked to transcendental ideas of the “commune” make him sceptical about poetry that aims itself beyond the small, private circle of the coterie, to a larger mass audience. In the letters to Levertov, Duncan repeatedly professes scepticism in relation to Allen Ginsberg’s public poetry. After hearing Ginsberg read “Howl” in public, Duncan writes:

“Howl” is designed in order to wind up an hysterical pitch (at the close of the poem he was shouting like Hitler or an evangelist, so that the audience having risen with him on a wave of momentous lines ROARD). [...] But no wonder it is impossible to attack his work as bad writing—it is almost exactly calculated to be an agency for such a frenzy. And what we see (hear) when it is not used to arrive at the seizure, is like the funny expressions of a face separated from the terrifying fit it is going thru.

I dislike *using* a poem, and that’s the crux of the matter. (172)

Similarly, later in the correspondence Duncan again criticises Ginsberg and others’ marketing their own private experience and turning poems into commodities. He chastises the publishing industry, where he says “the commodity, mass-produced and consumed, has so won over the work” and links this to Ginsberg: “Part of what the ‘public’ poetry of Corso or Ferlinghetti, of Whalen and Ginsberg is that it is not produced, not made: it must have currency” (245).

Duncan's criticism of Ginsberg "using" "Howl" to whip up a "frenzy" in the crowd anticipates the criticisms he makes of Levertov's Vietnam war poetry. One of the disagreements between the two poets centres on Levertov's appearance during a televised anti-Vietnam War rally. Duncan saw Levertov's appearance as encapsulating resistance as a form of violence. As Albert Gelphi puts it: "In Duncan's eyes, an image of her, filmed as a speaker at an anti-war rally and shown on the television news, exposed the capitulation to violence masking as resistance" ("Introduction" xxi). As is typical for Duncan he reached for mythological parallels in order to characterise this new side of Levertov seen at the rally. In his long poem, "Santa Cruz Propositions" (composed around 1970; published 1984) he included a section depicting Levertov as the Hindu goddess of war, Kali. Duncan's poem incorporates elements of the correspondence with Levertov, as well as using sections of her long poem "Staying Alive." Immediately preceding the image of Levertov as Kali dancing, Duncan quotes a section from letter 443 from Levertov written in June 1970 (in italics). The letter refers to a break in the correspondence between Duncan and Levertov in early 1970 after Duncan published a piece in *Stony Brook* called "A Critical Difference of View" in which he strongly criticised the poems of Levertov's friend Hayden Carruth.

[7:30AM, 28 October]

But it is Denise I am thinking of—

*I feel terribly out of touch with you and fear*

*you may be hurt at my silence but I just can't*

*help it.'*

In the depths of the woman  
 in love,        into friendship,        the old injuries  
                   out of Love,  
 out of the depths of the Woman's love,

*SHE* appears, Kālī dancing, whirling her necklace of skulls,  
 trampling the despoiling armies and the exploiters of natural resources  
 under her feet. Revolution or death! (*Collected Later* 480)<sup>68</sup>

The last line of the above section is also taken from Part I of Levertov's "Staying Alive" which reads:

Revolution or death. Revolution or death.

Wheels would sing it

                  but railroads are obsolete,

we are among the clouds, gliding, the roar

a toneless constant.

*Which side are you on?*

Revolution, of course. Death is Mayor Daley. [...] (*Collected Poems* 352)

The two poems, Duncan's written not long after Levertov's, are in dialogue with one another. However, Duncan's poem confuses Levertov's fixed opposition between "revolution" or "death" and dismantles the binary of good and evil.

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<sup>68</sup> Spacing as in original.

For Duncan, Levertov's use of the word "revolution" feeds back into the language of war and violence. In his letters he seeks to complicate the term "revolution" and calls into question whether poetry can ever be successful if it is written in the service of revolutionary causes. The question of a poet "*using*" poetry, as in Ginsberg's case, is very relevant here. For Duncan, using poetry to support a particular revolutionary cause neglects the complexities and ambiguities of language. He writes, "The question is the poetry and not the revolution—the book clearly isn't 'revolutionary' in the sense of the poem—and the theme may be *anguish*. I feel that revolution, politics, making history, is one of the great falsehoods" (660). If poetry is written in the service of revolutionary causes, paradoxically it loses its ability to be formally revolutionary. As Duncan writes later in the same letter, "Revolutions have all been profoundly opposed to the artist, for revolutions have had their power only by the rule that power not be *defined*. As workers in words, it is our business to keep alive in the language definitions as well as forces, to create crises in meaning" (661). As Duncan goes on to point out, Levertov's anti-war poems, because they staunchly take the revolutionary side, neglect the "crises in meaning" present in words that reveal the impossibility of separating out good and evil.

What is important in terms of my argument is the way that these letters spill over into Duncan and Levertov's poems, and also the way they each view their relationship to the audience of their poetry. The arguments that Duncan raises in his letters to Levertov carry over into his poems, as in the case of the image of the goddess Kali that Duncan uses to depict Levertov in his "Santa Cruz Propositions." Duncan mythologizing Levertov as Kali recalls the objections he

made to Ginsberg's furious persona in "Howl" and the way Ginsberg is "using" poetry to influence a crowd. For Duncan, Levertov's appearance at a televised rally fundamentally disrupts the ideal of poetry as form of communication with a circle of intimates, and warps its complex message in favour of political immediacies. In his criticisms of Levertov's appearance at the rally, Duncan focuses on the nature of Levertov's communication to a "mass" audience, and the technological reproduction of her image: "seeing again the moment photographed and sound-trackt when you were exhorting the assemblage of a women's march for Peace in Washington, D.C., when you were possessed by the demonic spirit of the mass, seeking to awaken that power in the assemblage, to awaken them as a *people* or mass power" (663). In her response, however, Levertov explains that she spoke at the rally "not as a 'famous poet' but as a private citizen" and that her fundamental message was "to incite people to (nonviolent) war against the state." She argues that Duncan's characterisation of her is therefore false and inaccurate: "It wd fit in with your general argument better if I had 'used' poetry and my position as a poet, on that occasion, in ways that you felt were unbecoming (and one shouldn't USE poetry, anyway, I couldn't agree more)—but in fact I was not doing that" (677-678). Levertov includes a further response to Duncan's characterisation of her as Kali in Part IV of her poem "Staying Alive:" "(And meanwhile Robert / sees me as Kali! No, / I am not Kali, I can't sustain for a day / that anger" (*Collected Poems* 394).

Part of what fuels Duncan's criticisms of Levertov's poems stems from the similarities he sees with his own anti-Vietnam War poetry. Duncan's poetry is in fact more ambiguously angled between public and private than he lets on.



For example, regarding the case of the “Passages” series of poems, Duncan writes to Levertov that whereas some of the poems are aimed at a small coterie, others are better suited to a larger public audience: “Jess [Duncan’s partner] registers that reading in the context of a group of friends in a room does more justice to ‘Passages.’ Well. . . I think this may be true in relation to ‘Fire’ [...] but for ‘The Torso,’ for instance, the impersonality of a public reading seemd to me to give just the distance to register shifts of tone exactly” (507). Thus, Duncan suggests his poetry treads a delicate line between closeness and distance in its relationship to audience in a way that is very similar to the paradoxically close/distant form of letter writing.

The two poets use a number of similar techniques in their war poems. They both use excerpts of real letters (from their own and others’ correspondence), diaries and prose sections. However, Duncan frequently retreats into literary or mythological parallels, whereas Levertov in her poetry chooses a documentary mode and incorporates quotidian detail including letters, diaries and pamphlets connected to the resistance movement. For example, Duncan’s “Santa Cruz Propositions” juxtaposes dated diary-like entries that appear to be written in real-time with sections from James Joyce, Plato and Charles Dickens. Duncan described the effect as similar to that of a “Cubist portrait” (qtd. in *Unruly Garden* 217). Levertov’s war poetry uses the same collage method but juxtaposes very different elements. Levertov’s poems blend personal experience with historical evidence rather than mythical parallels. Levertov writes in the preface to *To Stay Alive* that her diary-like poems are intended to be “a document of some historical value, a record of one person’s inner/outer experience in America during the ’60’s and the beginning

of the '70's" (*RD-DL Letters* 743). For example, in Part II Levertov relates the events of the 1969 People's Park demonstrations that took place at Berkeley. Like Duncan's "Santa Cruz Propositions" the poem also functions like a diary or scrapbook, juxtaposing Levertov's personal account with a reproduction of a flier distributed to protesters at the time titled "WHAT PEOPLE CAN DO" (*Collected Poems* 365). Levertov's poems are an extension of the call to action of the resistance movement, whereas Duncan's poems prompt readers to retreat into contemplation of the collective cultural unconscious. As he writes in an unpublished fragment of verse about the war in a letter to Levertov in late 1969: "And from the coercion of a generation, [...] / from the immediate contempt for the people daily / I take my esthetic distance" (643).

This same regard for "esthetic distance" is what also drew Duncan to the practice of letter writing in the spirit of Emerson. It is significant that as Levertov and her poetry became more immersed in the activities and practicalities of anti-Vietnam War protest, her correspondence with Duncan began to wane. For Levertov, such "esthetic" and epistolary distance was not possible in the context of her direct involvement in anti-Vietnam War protest. In several letters towards the end of the correspondence, Levertov laments that she has little time for letter writing, and connects this to the failure of the friendship with Duncan. In August 1972 she writes: "I wish I enjoyed writing letters instead of finding it a chore: then you wd not have such a painful sense of my having just *dropped* our old and intense friendship," and later says that "neither letters nor the artificiality of meeting while 'on tour' are a good medium of communication for me" (706). Duncan's ideal of correspondence also buckled under the weight of their disagreement. As in the case of

Emerson's discordant "Friendship," Duncan's letters to Levertov become increasingly like monologues. Levertov comments:

Your letters when controversial demand lengthy replies it tires me out to write in the midst of my very full-of-incident style of daily life. And in those artificial circumstances of meeting [at poetry events], you, I know from other occasions, are apt to get caught in one of your talking jags when you dont [sic] listen to anyone else and it becomes exhausting to listen to you. (706)

Duncan's relentless "talking jags," both real and epistolary, are a theme of the correspondence as a whole. In this regard, both Levertov and Duncan himself drew comparisons between Duncan and Coleridge (*RD-DL Letters* 14, 46, 514), who was known for his verbosity. There are also distinct parallels with Emerson and his tendency toward epistolary monologue. Towards the end of "Friendship" Emerson writes, "It has seemed to me lately more possible than I knew, to carry a friendship greatly, on one side, without due correspondence on the other" (218). These words sound uncannily like they could be Duncan's own, written towards the end of his and Levertov's friendship.

### **"The Torn Cloth"**

Yet, as in the case of Emerson's essay, the failure of "Friendship" between Duncan and Levertov is not wholly negative. For Emerson, this failure is finally both positive and necessary. Emerson writes:

Better be a nettle in the side of your friend than his echo. The condition which high friendship demands is, ability to do without it. To be capable of that high office requires great and sublime parts. There must be very two, before there can be very one. Let it be an alliance of two large formidable natures, mutually beheld, mutually feared, before yet they recognise the deep identity which beneath these disparities unites them. (211)

Duncan and Levertov's last letters and poems to one another reiterate that the failure of friendship consolidates a sense of the productive differences between friends, and also paves the way for a new kind of friendship founded on the "deep identity which beneath these disparities unites them." Levertov writes to Duncan, echoing the above quotation from Emerson:

This seems to me a time, not only in my life but in many others, when reassessments of many relationships have become (more than usually, for reasons I cant [sic] wholly grasp) necessary and unavoidable and the way through into new ones (between the same people who previously were differently related to each other, I mean) lies only through those often painful reassessments. (706)

Duncan and Levertov's friendship and correspondence never fully recovered after the falling out. Their letters became much less frequent after their disagreement in the early 1970s. Duncan fell ill in 1984, and died from complications related to heart and kidney failure in 1988. However, though the

letters trailed off, what Levertov calls in one letter their “co-correspondence” (712) continued, entering a new phase of friendship similar to that which Emerson proposes in his essay. Duncan’s poem “The Torn Cloth” makes reference to several key elements of Emerson’s essay “Friendship,” and sounds a note of remorse at his wounding critique of Levertov’s war poems. Duncan draws on Emerson’s metaphor of friendship as a form of weaving cloth. Emerson uses the cloth metaphor twice in his essay saying that “we weave social threads of our own, a new web of relations” (196), and again immediately following the deeply ambivalent imaginary letter, saying that when friendships teeter towards enmity (as they are often apt to do): “This is to weave cobweb, and not cloth. Our friendships hurry to short and poor conclusions, because we have made them a texture of wine and dreams, instead of the tough fibre of the human heart” (201).

It is the propensity for the cloth of friendship to turn into the more dangerous and fragile cobweb that Duncan’s poem “The Torn Cloth” meditates on. The poem addresses Levertov, as well as appearing to refer to Emerson’s essay directly:

from the Snarl

the frayed edges of the inner Reft,

the torn heart of our

“Friendship,” in the rift

to work now to draw

the threads everywhere tried,

they are like the blistered  
 all but severed root-nerve  
 of my sciatic trunk-line.

In pain where I workt pain

now I must spin (*Collected Later* 583)<sup>69</sup>

Here Duncan connects the damage done to the cloth of his and Levertov's friendship with his own failing health and bodily pain. The "Snarl" seems to hint at Emerson's spider's web, and the "dark Emersonian" elements that were always present at the centre of Emerson's ideal of friendship. Though directed at Levertov, the poem seems as much to address himself, again reaffirming the sense that even as he tries to connect, Duncan's poems and letters ultimately reinforce a sense that he is alone and talking to himself. A number of lines begin with or include "I" as Duncan instructs himself in ways to "re-weave" the torn friendship: "In pain where I workt pain / now I must spin;" "for this consent that this wedding-cloth / of friendship / I had ript apart in what I thought / righteous;" "I must weave / the reaving / into the heart my / wedding clothes" (583-584). Invoking marriage, Duncan cannot help but fall back on traditional gender roles in his characterisation of his relationship to Levertov, therefore repeating the characterisation of Levertov as Eurydice, Kali and others that so infuriated her.

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<sup>69</sup> I have reproduced as closely as possible the original appearance of the poem on the page.

Levertov's response to the poem was lukewarm. In February 1979 she wrote a long letter to Duncan that she never sent in which she states in frank terms the irrevocable damage done to their friendship. Levertov rejects Duncan's casting of her in various female roles: "I suppose one has to learn that one's friends are not Penelopes and that even very authentic emotions are subject to a statute of limitation. Any kind of relationship can die of undernourishing and abuse. Enough" (716). In the final version of this long letter that she did send (also her final letter to Duncan before his death), she writes: "Who knows, perhaps a meeting some day, or some exchange, whether of letters or poems, will awaken a new warmth in me towards you" (717). The reconciliatory meeting that Levertov imagines here never took place in reality. However, in a letter to Duncan's partner Jess in 1988 following Duncan's death Levertov recounts a dream in which she and Duncan were reconciled: "The dream was intensely vivid & *really felt* like a reconciliation" (719).

Levertov describes the dream in a poem accompanying the letter, posthumously addressed to Duncan and titled "To R.D., March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1988." It is finally Levertov who, in this poem, embraces the (altered) ideal of Emersonian friendship. At the close of "Friendship" Emerson describes a dream-like state in which the need for friends disappears, and it is paradoxically the shedding of friends and embracing of "independency" that paves the way for self-fulfilment. In lines that seem also to resonate with Duncan's "Motto" that "A correspondence is a poetry enlarged," Emerson writes that "Let your greatness educate the crude and cold companion. If he is unequal, he will presently pass away; but thou art enlarged by thy own shining" (219). As Duncan and Levertov's letters prove, a failed correspondence is also a poetry enlarged, since

both poets take from their fractured exchange a deeper sense of their individual poetic projects.

Though the friendship maps onto Emerson's "Friendship" very closely, as I have shown, the close of the long correspondence demonstrates, departing from Emerson, that the two poets were in fact no longer "unequal" to each other. That they were jointly awarded the Shelley prize in 1984 (despite their on going rift) is testament to this, as is the fact that both poets are now considered major figures of post-war American poetry. Levertov's final poem to Duncan is both a tribute to her friend, and an acknowledgment, in Emersonian terms, of her independence from her erstwhile "mentor": "You were my mentor. Without knowing it, / I outgrew the need for a mentor" (*Collected Poems* 783). Levertov's poem incorporates elements of Duncan's influence. She compares the friendship to "a folded cloth / put away in a drawer" (784), in reference to Duncan's "The Torn Cloth," and in a nod to Duncan's casting of the pair in the roles of Orpheus and Eurydice, instead casts them as siblings: "I was once more, / your chosen sister, and you / my chosen brother" (784). Thus Levertov posthumously continues the dialogue with Duncan in this poem, choosing not to imitate his poems in straightforward ways, but to respond with her own alterations to the shared "cloth" of their friendship.

The epistolary form of Duncan and Levertov's debate relates to and overlaps with the content and history of their letters in revealing and productive ways. Duncan's insistence that the poet should maintain a critical/creative distance from politics, and represent present day events such as war through mythic parallels or allegory is, I think, closely linked to his preference for letter writing as a means of communication and debate with



fellow poets. Duncan was a self-described “coterie” poet, preferring to cultivate a small audience of readers, often publishing his poems in small private presses and circulating poetry and thoughts through letters to friends. For Duncan, letter writing is part of an idealised vision of the poet that he derives from the Romantics. He views the poet as a solitary figure existing in a kind of rarefied space, somewhat separated from present-day politics, and using letters as means of keeping in touch (while also maintaining a degree of distance from) the outside world. An early letter to Levertov I think perfectly captures this solitary poet/letter writer and its origins in Romanticism:

My notebooks are becoming deformed by the ‘ideas’ which ordinarily I throw away into talk, invaluable talk for a head like mine that no wastebasket could keep clear for a poem. I can more than understand dear old Coleridge who grew up to be a boring machine of talk; I can fear for my own poor soul. And, isolated from the city of idle chatter, here, my head fills up, painfully, with insistent IMPORTANT things-to-say. I toss at night, spring out of bed to sit for hours, crouched over a candle, writing out—ideas, ideas, ideas. Solutions to the universe, or metaphysics of poetry, or poetics of living. (14)

For Levertov, this Romantic-inspired image of the solitary letter-writing poet did not allow for the practical and political demands placed on a socially-conscious poet, and it was a “poetics of living” that she (at least initially) rejected along with Duncan’s intense, and at times overbearing, epistolary friendship.

### Chapter Three

#### **“a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque”: Letters, Birds and Cages in Elizabeth Bishop’s “Questions of Travel”**

In 1952, a year before Levertov and Duncan started corresponding, Elizabeth Bishop moved into a house in the mountains near Rio de Janeiro where she lived with her Brazilian partner, Lota de Macedo Soares. Bishop had intended a brief visit with friends in Brazil on a stopover before travelling around the world by boat. However, after suffering a severe allergic reaction to the fruit of a cashew tree in 1952, Bishop prolonged her stay, and went on to live in Brazil for 15 years. Like her contemporaries Levertov and Duncan, Bishop incorporated elements from letters and diaries into her poetry of the 1950s and 60s. Her poems often grew out of correspondences with friends and other poets. Bishop also incorporated elements from the work of nineteenth-century poets or letter writers, particularly Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson and Charles Darwin, as this chapter demonstrates. Living in Brazil, letters were a means for Bishop to keep in touch with friends and poets in North America. As in the case of Levertov and Duncan, letters were a performative space for Bishop, and a source of vital, but necessarily also virtual, friendship and companionship.

Bishop’s letters are an important dimension of her oeuvre and a rich source for understanding her poetic process. In his essay on *One Art: The Selected Letters* (1994), “Writing to the Moment,” Tom Paulin celebrated the poetic qualities of Bishop’s letters, and compared Bishop’s epistolary style to the ideas put forward in an essay by Morris Croll titled “The Baroque Style in Prose” (originally published in 1929). Croll had argued that seventeenth-

century baroque prose writers (including scientists and philosophers such as Thomas Browne and Blaise Pascal) sought to portray “not a thought, but a mind thinking” (430).<sup>70</sup> Bishop read the essay as an undergraduate at Vassar and quoted from it extensively in an early letter to poet-friend Donald Stanford in 1933. The Croll essay also formed the bedrock of Bishop’s undergraduate essay “Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry” (first published in the *Vassar Review* in 1934). In this essay, Bishop remarks that Croll’s ideas about baroque style, though primarily focused on prose, happen to apply exactly to what she sees as the unique manner of timing that Hopkins espouses in his poetry. For Paulin, Bishop’s early discovery of the Croll essay remained central and talismanic throughout her life, and works well applied to both her poems and letters. Paulin writes:

Disdaining revision, these writers depend upon ‘casual and emergent devices of construction,’ broken symmetry, a progression that adapts itself to the movement of the mind ‘discovering truth as it goes.’ As a description of the epistolary form this is accidentally quite just and accurate, and Croll’s essay stayed with Bishop as a talismanic value all her life.” (221)

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<sup>70</sup> This chapter uses the term “baroque style” in the same way as it is used in Croll’s essay (1929). Croll uses “baroque” to denote a style of prose writing in which writers sought to express themselves in a manner that was loose, free, provisional and immediate. Although there is some overlap between baroque prose style and forms of baroque art and architecture, especially in the way that all these art forms seek to represent “motion” (Croll 428), baroque prose style does not necessarily include the same impression of crowded excess and abundant detail as its visual counterparts. Instead, baroque prose style is an effort to appear “natural” (Croll 448).

In Paulin's view, the hallmarks of a baroque style apply most perfectly to Bishop's letters, which he praises for their vitality and "impromptu spoken texture, so that she is imaginatively inside, enwrapped by, what she is saying, rather like an action painter working furiously within, not outwith a canvas" (221).

This chapter takes as its starting point Croll's original essay, and Paulin's application of the baroque style to Bishop's letters. I explore more fully the implications of Paulin's suggestive reading of Bishop's letters, arguing that this sense of the writer as "imaginatively inside, enwrapped by, what she is saying" amounts to a deliberate method: an imaginative caging of experience within a letter or a poem. As evidence of being "imaginatively inside" a letter, Paulin cites a missive that Bishop wrote a few months after her arrival in Brazil in 1952, in which she imagines her correspondents, Kit and Ilse Barker, sitting down to tea with her. Bishop writes: "I only wish I could send you coffee, orchids, birds, and monkeys. And I wish you could send me tea—in fact I wish we could sit down to some right this minute because as you see I have a sort of talking jag on" (*OA* 250).<sup>71</sup> For Paulin, "This is the most succinct image for her letters, because rather like one of her drinking-bouts these talking jags express and enact her addictive communicativeness, her aim to achieve an illusion of complete immediacy" (221). Like Robert Duncan, Bishop saw letters as a partly imaginary world where absent friends could be made present.<sup>72</sup> There is a

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<sup>71</sup> Bishop's account of her "talking jag" is reminiscent of Levertov's description of Duncan's tendency to write lengthy missives, and occasionally lapse into monologue which she also calls his "talking jags" (*RD-DL Letters* 706).

<sup>72</sup> Bishop's attempts to create an epistolary space in which correspondents can meet and be together also recalls John Keats's comment in a letter to his brother and sister in law, George and Georgiana, in America. Keats says he does not feel far away from his sister-in-law because he "remembers your Ways and Manners" and says that "every Sunday at ten o Clock" he will

connection in this letter between Bishop's listing of the presents that she would like to send to her correspondents and the creation of a sense of physical presence. The list gets more fantastical as it goes along, but Bishop's verbal invention is a reminder that the physical letter itself acts as a parcel, a substitute for the presence of the addresser herself.

However, as Paulin recognises, the letter's presence/presents are part of an "illusion of complete immediacy" (221). Bishop can no more send (live) "birds" or "monkeys" than she can sit down to tea "right this minute" with her friends. Paulin compares Bishop's letters to the novelist Samuel Richardson's idea of letter writing as a form of "writing to the moment," which gives the appearance of energetic, in-the-moment spontaneity while actually being a form of calculated performance: "In letters—and Richardson understood this with a guilty, fascinated anxiety—the self wears the mask of the performing self, making an artful naturalness seem artless, as though self and mask are the same" (Paulin 222).

In this chapter, I focus on the connections between the letters that Bishop wrote in the first few years of her residence in Brazil in the 1950s and her Brazil poems, particularly the long poem "Questions of Travel," the title poem of her collection *Questions of Travel* (1965). I argue, building on previous analyses of Bishop's letters, that Bishop borrows from her Brazil letters a sense of immediacy that she then seeks to recreate in her poems. This is what gives Bishop's Brazil poems, like her letters, their sense of in-the-moment spontaneity and vitality, as if the reader is watching "a mind thinking" (Croll

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read a passage of Shakespeare and she should do the same "and we shall be near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room" (*Letters* II, 5).

430) and making observations in real time. My analysis of Bishop's creative method is based on Bishop's own early fascination with "the baroque style," which she explored in relation to Gerard Manley Hopkins's poems in her 1934 essay. I argue that Bishop's fascination with the baroque style did not end with this early essay. Instead, Bishop's thinking about the subject continued to develop throughout her career, particularly in her Brazil poems, where attempts to "catch and preserve the movement of an idea" (Bishop, *Pr* 473) in a letter or a poem take on a new significance. In Brazil, where the baroque is associated with the colonisation of Brazil by Portuguese settlers, and is visible in church architecture, Bishop becomes increasingly aware of troubling associations between attempts to capture and control ideas, people and animals.

While Bishop did embark on travels within Brazil during the time she spent living there, to Ouro Preto, and on a trip down the Amazon in 1961, much of the knowledge she acquired came from her extensive and eclectic reading about the country. Her letters to friends describe the letters, journals and travelogues that she read, including nineteenth-century accounts by Richard Burton in his *Explorations of the Highlands of Brazil* (first published 1869) and Charles Darwin in *Diary of the Voyage of H.M.S Beagle* (1933). Bishop was also re-reading Emily Dickinson's letters and poems in Brazil. Although Dickinson rarely travelled beyond the confines of her father's house, and certainly never to South America, Dickinson's imaginative travels, and particularly her letter-poem, "A Route of Evanescence," inform Bishop's writing. I look at the ways that Bishop reuses and reframes elements of the baroque style. She lends her poem "Questions of Travel" a unique sense of time and immediacy by incorporating

images and phrases from her own letters, a fleeting and enigmatic allusion to Emily Dickinson's migratory hummingbird letter-poem in "Questions of Travel," and sections from Charles Darwin's *Diary of the Voyage of the Beagle*.

Ultimately, however, Bishop calls into question baroque art forms and sees them as closed imaginary worlds that seek to cage and control.

### **(Caged) birds and poems**

At the centre of my argument is Bishop's fascination with birds in Brazil, particularly caged birds, which is evident from her many descriptions of birds in both letters and poems from the period. I want to argue that there is an analogy between the figurative, creative act of catching a thought while it is still alive in the mind and attempting to pin it and preserve it in either a letter or a poem, and the literal act and of catching and caging a wild bird.

Bishop's 1934 essay on Hopkins and the baroque style, "Notes on Timing," subtly makes this analogy between the poetic act and catching a bird. In this essay, Bishop suggests that writing poetry is an attempt to catch hold of a thought or experience while it is still alive in the mind. She observes:

The poem, unique and perfect, seems to be separate from the conscious mind, deliberately avoiding it, while the conscious mind takes difficult steps towards it. The process resembles somewhat the more familiar one of puzzling over a momentarily forgotten name or word which seems to be taking on an elusive brain-life of its own as we try to grasp it. (*Pr* 472)

Bishop's description of attempts to grasp the elusive poem resembles an attempt to capture a rare wild animal, which constantly eludes the poet's "grasp." Bishop also uses the avian metaphor of a man standing "in a shooting gallery with a gun at his shoulder aiming at a clay pigeon" (*Pr* 472) to describe the mechanics of Hopkins' poetic method, and the complex and precise nature of timing in his poetry. In order to shoot the clay pigeon, the man must "shoot not at it directly but a certain distance in front of it" (*Pr* 472). This metaphor applies to the complex timing involved in setting a poem down to paper while the idea is still "a moving, changing idea or series of ideas" (*Pr* 472). Bishop admires Hopkins' poems because he achieves this. She writes: "Hopkins, I believe, has chosen to stop his poems, set them to paper, at the point in their development where they are still incomplete, still close to the first kernel of truth or apprehension which gave rise to them" (*Pr* 472). The metaphor of a clay pigeon shoot brings together Hopkins' fascination with birds, and the idea that poems themselves are flying birds that must be caught alive in order to be committed to paper.

Bishop's essay as a whole is full of bird imagery. She uses Hopkins' poem "The Windhover" as an example of his ingenious and energetic use of sprung-rhythm, describing the uneven rhythms of the poem as contributing to an overall verbal texture that is "hesitant, lightened, slurred, weighed or feathered" like the kestrel in the poem itself. Capturing the energy of a thought so it can become a poem is akin to the catching and preserving of wild specimens. Here, Bishop's language is reminiscent of that of a Victorian naturalist or taxidermist: "The manner of timing so as to catch and preserve the movement of an idea, the point being to crystallize it early enough so that it is still has movement—it is



essentially the baroque manner of approach" (*Pr* 473). Hopkins' baroque poetry is thus an effort to contain and control the energy of a poem's "conception in the mind" (Croll 430), and to simulate a sense of life and movement, giving an impression of immediacy that is, at least partly, calculated, staged, preserved and crystallized.

Bishop's essay, though focused on Hopkins, is also an accurate description of the effects that Bishop sought to achieve in her own poetry. She describes the applicability of the baroque style to Hopkins's verse, and also to her own poetic method, in a 1933 letter to Donald Stanford written at the same time she was drafting her essay:

But the best part, which perfectly describes the sort of poetic convention I should like to make for myself (and which explains, I think, something of Hopkins), is this "Their purpose (the writers of Baroque prose) was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking . . . They knew that an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the idea that was experienced. The ardor of its conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth." (*OA* 12)

Bishop's own poems seek to express a sense of energy, immediacy, looseness and incompleteness. The idea that a poem should represent "not a thought, but a mind thinking," and preserve a feeling of movement is central to Bishop's poetic method. As she goes on to say in the letter to Stanford: "for me there are two kinds of poetry, that (I think yours is of this sort) *at rest*, and that which is in action, within itself" (*OA* 11).

One of the ways that Bishop gives her poems a “feeling of action” (*OA* 11) is through representations of birds; another way is through the incorporation of material from her letters. Often these two elements—birds and letters—appear to overlap. For example, “Paris, 7 A.M.” connects birds carrying messages with cyclical, non-linear time: “This sky is no carrier-warrior-pigeon / escaping endless intersecting circles” (*P* 28). “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” features flying birds like correspondents greeting each other (*P* 80). The previously unpublished letter-poems, “Letter to Two Friends,” “New Year’s Letter as Auden Says—” and “Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle,” all link birds and letters (*EAP* 113-114; 115-116; 180).<sup>73</sup> Birds are everywhere in Bishop’s prose and poetry, and the richness of their symbolism is a whole topic in itself. However, my focus here is on images of birds in letters that Bishop writes and reads in Brazil, which reappear in Bishop’s poem “Questions of Travel.” These images of birds and birdcages offer a key to understanding the poem’s complex attempts to preserve a sense of movement and energy.

The inclusion of details from Bishop’s letters in her poems also highlights the close connection between poetry and prose in Bishop’s work. In “Notes on Timing,” Bishop sees poetry and prose as fundamentally interlinked forms. She writes that while “It is a common statement that [Hopkins] derives a great deal from the seventeenth century ‘Metaphysical’ poets [...] I think he has also a very close bond with the prose of the same period” (*Pr* 472-473). In the same way that Bishop links prose and poetry in her essay on Hopkins, so in this chapter do I treat Bishop’s letters and poetry as interlinked creative projects

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<sup>73</sup> Siobhan Phillips has analysed the symbolism of the pub named “The Swan With Two Necks” in “Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle,” arguing that the two-headed bird is “a symbol of the Carlyles’ relationship—and the epistolary dynamics of that relationship in particular” (“Ethics” 343).

that seek to represent, in their different ways, “not a thought, but a mind thinking.”

### **Poetry, prose and prose-like poetry**

Where Hopkins uses sprung-rhythm to create this sense that his poems are “alive,” Bishop often incorporates sections of prose and letter-like elements in her poems to lend them a vivid sense of immediacy. Recent analysis of Bishop’s letters has found close and complex connections between Bishop’s poetry and letters. Jonathan Ellis and Joelle Biele have shown that Bishop uses her letters as an animated, and partly self-sufficient, form of draft material for her poetry. Ellis writes: “letters are not so much the rooted floor on which Bishop’s published work rests, as the imaginative balloon of images and words itching to be released” (*Art and Memory* 175). In her article on Bishop’s Brazil letters and poems, Joelle Biele argues that Bishop viewed her letters as “sentient rough drafts” (“Like Working” 96) that allowed her to try out her writing voice, and to furnish many of the details of her poems. Letters were a kind of safe space to test her ideas: “She no longer faced a blank page when she drafted a poem; she had a pool of images she had already articulated in the comfortable and reflective space of the letter” (91). Biele cites connections between passages in Bishop’s letters and “The Armadillo,” which was originally titled “From A Letter” (95). What I think these critics have in common is a desire to see Bishop’s letters as continuous with, rather than inferior to, her poetry. They also share a sense that Bishop borrows from her letters, and seeks to recreate in poems the sense of energy, intimacy, collaborative exchange and provisionality that are so amply evident in the letters.

More recently, Heather Treseler and Siobhan Phillips have drawn on archival material to re-frame the significance of Bishop's letters in relation to psychoanalytic and ethical or intersubjective models respectively. Heather Treseler uncovers several previously unpublished "notebook letter-poems" from a Key West notebook Bishop kept in the 1940s, including drafts of a poem, "Dear Dr." addressed to Bishop's psychoanalyst Ruth Foster. Treseler argues that Bishop adopts "letter-like" qualities in these early poems, such as the "the conceit of privacy," and qualities of "absent presence" and "reciprocity," as a means of exploring the psychological trauma of the early loss of her mother ("Dreaming in Color" 93, 88, 102). Siobhan Phillips makes the related point that rather than drawing on the content of her letters in the poems of her mature years, Bishop borrows their interpersonal tone and collaborative structure: "Bishop took epistolarity as a stylistic model rather than an experiential fund" ("Bishop's Correspondence" 164). In Phillips's view there are fundamental differences between letters and poems that make it difficult or impossible to translate the one into the other: "comparison of poetry and correspondence can only go so far, given that Bishop's poem will not retain its immediacy—or its particular address, or its expectation of response—beyond her epistolary enclosure" (165). Whereas Bishop's letters were written in the "context of two-party exchange" and with the expectation of a response, her poems were written with a larger, unknown audience in mind. Phillips cites the unpublished drafts of epistolary poems that Bishop abandoned as evidence of an "unbridgeable distance between epistolary and poetic forms" (165) including the early poem "Dear Dr." and the later "Letter To Two Friends," addressed to Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell and written in Brazil. Phillips quotes Bishop

saying that she would have preferred to live in a time of coterie circulation when “poems just got handed around among friends” (qtd. in “Bishop’s Correspondence” 165) as evidence of Bishop’s preference for private, friendly networks over and above publication and the impersonal mass market audience. The epistolary poems “Dear Dr.” and “Letter to Two Friends” with their explicitly intimate address and recognisable personal detail appear to belong to this private network, and thus remained unfinished and uncomfortably suspended between the genres of personal letter and published poem.

However, I argue that while Bishop’s published poems often lack some of the intimacy and interpersonal detail of their epistolary sources, they still retain a number of letter-like elements. While I agree with Phillips’ assessment that Bishop had difficulty writing explicitly epistolary poems, and saw a separation between the two forms, in this chapter I show that certain images and phrases do survive the journey from letter to poem, albeit adapted and transformed.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, Bishop borrowed details from both her own and others’ letters and diaries. I argue that Bishop used her Brazil letters as *both* a “stylistic model” *and* an “experiential fund,” deliberately borrowing an ad-hoc conversational or diaristic tone along with specific images from letters in many of the poems in *Questions of Travel*.

In some cases, borrowing from letters involves lifting ideas or images to use in poems. In other cases, while Bishop may not transfer specific phrases, her poems use prose-rhythms and a conversational style in order to re-create in

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<sup>74</sup> Bishop published very few epistolary poems. “Letter to N.Y.” and “Invitation to Marianne Moore” from *A Cold Spring* (1955) are the only examples of poems framed explicitly as letters in Bishop’s published oeuvre.

verse the sense of “writing to the moment” or “a mind thinking” that characterise her letters. Hugh Haughton writes that Bishop was deftly able to “mimic” her epistolary voice in her poems: “it is one of her great gifts as a poet to be able to mimic within her poetry the intimate, joking, conversational tone of her letters” (“Just Letters” 60). Penelope Laurans argues that Bishop does this primarily by adopting prose rhythms in her poetry to make them seem more natural, and more conversational.<sup>75</sup> In this sense, Bishop appears to display her debt to the Romantic poets, who, in Wordsworth’s words, saw poetry as a “spontaneous overflow of power feelings: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility” (*Lyrical Ballads* 756). Yet Laurans makes the case that Bishop uses prose rhythms in her poetry to limit their lyric intensity and stop poems from reaching heights of emotion that are excessive. Muffled intensity actually has the effect, Laurans argues, of increasing the poems’ emotional resonance. She uses the example of Bishop’s poem “The End of March,” in which Bishop describes a walk on a beach during which she fantasises about owning a dilapidated house next to the sea. Laurans shows how elements of the poem that deal with dream and fantasy are written in prose-like verse, and the end of the poem (when the dream is dismantled) is written in a lyrical style, so that “while the words say one thing, the metrical impulse of the poem communicates precisely the opposite to the reader” (91). Although Laurans does not refer directly to the “baroque style,” the shift that she describes in the poem from a

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<sup>75</sup> Building on Laurans’ arguments, Vidyan Ravinthiran has recently explored Bishop’s use of prose rhythms in her verse (*Bishop’s Prosaic* 2015). Ravinthiran’s account recasts the term “prosaic” as a positive dimension of Bishop’s verse (xiii). Ravinthiran’s study incorporates analyses of prose effects in Bishop’s letters, nuancing previous critical views by noting that the letters paradoxically draw their energy from long stretches of “inertia” that Bishop experienced (111). Although Ravinthiran focuses primarily on a close reading of the letters themselves, rather than a reading of the transfer of images from letters to poems, his observations surrounding the differences between Bishop’s energetic Brazil letters and her “more prosaic” poems tally with some of my own findings (114).

concrete to an abstract register, and the deliberately broken symmetry between the first and second halves of the poem are key baroque characteristics.

Similarly, Langdon Hammer discusses “The End of March,” specifically connecting it to Bishop’s letters. He highlights the connection between the fantasy “proto-dream house” in the poem, which he calls “an enclosure,” and the imaginary space Bishop’s letters create between correspondents (“Useless Concentration” 177). Thus, Bishop borrows from her letters in her poems in complex ways that both give a sense of movement and energy, and also contain and cage strong emotion.

However, “The End of March” also demonstrates a hesitancy on Bishop’s part surrounding imaginary spaces, and forms of artistic enclosure. The “proto-dream-house” is described towards the end of the poem as “perfect! But—impossible” (*P* 199), and the idea of escaping reality is abandoned in the poem. As Hammer recognises, letter writing was often a crucial part of Bishop’s fantasies of escape from reality, because it provided Bishop with a means of linking addresser and addressee in the partly imaginary space of correspondence. This distant form of intimacy between addressor and addressee was one that Bishop sought to re-create in her poems. In Brazil, Bishop became increasingly aware of the connections between poems, letters, intricate baroque art forms, fantasies of escape from reality, and forms of enclosure and control.

## Migrating Letters

Images and phrases that occur in Bishop's letters written in Brazil and sent to friends in North America, particularly those to Marianne Moore and the Barkers, reoccur and seem to carry over to the early Brazil poems. One of the key figures that makes the journey from letter to poem, and also offers a way of conceptualizing the physical movement of letters, both between spaces and between genres, is that of the bird. I will look at two birds in particular that Bishop mentions in letters: her beloved toucan Uncle Sam and the hummingbird in "Questions of Travel". I argue that, although he is not named in the poem, Sammy the toucan is present in "Questions of Travel." The other bird in the poem, which flies in at the end of stanza two, is "the tiniest green hummingbird in the world," which I want to suggest acts as a double for the physical (and psychological) path that Bishop herself, and her letters, take from South to North.

Bishop's Brazil letters demonstrate the way that she collected observations, experiences and images that she later re-used in her poetry. Bishop writes to the Barkers in 1953: "I've been thinking so much about writing you that I've collected a lot of related themes and odds & ends" (OA 258). In a letter to fellow poet James Merrill Bishop recognises more explicitly that these "odds & ends" are "valuable" material not only for letters but for poetry. Describing Merrill's short stories, Bishop writes: "In fact I find lots of lovely and valuable lines 'to take home,' and I have the impression that is exactly what you have done on your travels" (OA 303). Bishop's early Brazil letters are full of "lots of lovely and valuable lines 'to take home,'" which Bishop gives as gifts to her



correspondents and stores up as material for her poems.<sup>76</sup> The letters emphasise the strangeness of her new surroundings. Bishop arrived in November 1951 and by February 1952 she was living with Lota at Samambaia. The house was still being built, and Bishop's letters from the time are full of news of this project as well as observations and anecdotes regarding her surreal new life living on the edge of a cliff in a half-built house in a strange new country. The poems "Arrival at Santos" and "Questions of Travel" take from her letters a particular tone, which sits, or perhaps, like the unbuilt house, seems to teeter somewhere on the edge of the genres of letter and travelogue.

Descriptions of Bishop's pet toucan, Sammy, in letters from this period, particularly one to Moore written on 14 February 1952 find their way into "Questions of Travel," although specificities are erased and replaced with a more general, philosophical tone. Sammy the toucan is not present in "Questions of Travel," but elements of Bishop's descriptions of him are. In her letter to Moore Bishop writes:

The zoo man—I can't believe this yet myself, and we have no common language even—gave me a TOUCAN for my birthday, the other day. He, or she (the toucan), is very tame and mischievous—throws coins around the room—flies off with the toast from my breakfast tray. He is black, to

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<sup>76</sup> For example, Bishop's witty description of "a 6ft. ex-policewoman" on the boat to Rio de Janeiro appears as "Miss Breen" in "Arrival At Santos" (*OA* 225; *P* 87). The "snails as big as bread & butter plates" that Bishop describes in her letter to Merrill appear again in both "Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics" and the previously unpublished "Letter to Two Friends" (*OA* 303; *P* 164; *EAP* 114). The same letter to Merrill contains a description of the "mournful purple" Lent trees, which Bishop uses again in "Electrical Storm" (*OA* 303; *P* 98). Joelle Biele has analysed the recurrence of images of the Lent trees in Bishop's letters and poems "Like Working" 93). Biele also notes that Bishop wrote long journal-letters to Lota with the intention of using them later as a source for poems (96). Since Bishop did not keep copies of all her outgoing letters, however, they function primarily as drafts that Bishop stores in her memory.

begin with, but with electric-blue eyes, a blue-and-yellow marked beak, blue feet, and red feathers here & there—a bunch under his tail like a sunset when he goes to sleep . . . Anyway, I've never had a nicer present and his name is Uncle Sam. (OA 236)<sup>77</sup>

The descriptions of Sammy the toucan that Bishop provides here are like small sketches made in preparation for a larger painting, or in this case, poem.

Although, in the journey from letter to poem, Sammy the toucan disappears, he leaves a trail of feathers behind. I think he is at least in part the inspiration for the final image in stanza two, in which Bishop asks, “Oh, must we dream our dreams / and have them, too? / And have we room / for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?” (P 91). Sammy is also present in the sense that comes across in this line, which seems like a twist on the familiar concept of having one's cake and eating it too, that there is something sinful and excessive about dreams that become a reality. In a letter to the Barkers, Bishop describes the gift of the bird as fulfilling “my lifelong dream” (OA 234). And in another letter to Dr. Anny Baumann, she cautions that wish-fulfilment seems so quick and easy in Brazil that it is almost dangerous to make them:

There are so many mice that I said I wanted to get a cat and the animal dealer who gave me a toucan immediately said, “Oh—would you like a pair of Siamese? I'm importing 200.” So I guess I shall have them soon—

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<sup>77</sup> Ellipses as in original. All ellipses, unless indicated by the use of square brackets, are in Bishop's original letters in *One Art: Selected Letters*. It should be noted, however, that there is some confusion surrounding ellipses in this edition because the editor, Robert Giroux, does not indicate where ellipses are Bishop's own or where they indicate that portions of a letter have been abridged.

wishes seem to come true here at such a rate one is almost afraid to make them any more. (OA 243-244)

The recurrent images of dreams, and references to “exaggerated” landscapes in both letters and “Questions of Travel,” paint Brazil as a kind of dream space. Real and imagined geographies overlap in the poem where shape-shifting clouds appear to “spill over the sides” of mountains turning first into “mile-long-shiny-tearstains,” and eventually “waterfalls” (91). Bishop’s confusion over the inverted seasons of Brazil, and her sense of its dream-like, upside-down qualities are reflected in the “mountains” of stanza one that appear as the upside down “hulls of capsized ships.” In this section I want to suggest that the overlap between real and imagined geographies in the poem, and connections to the physical passages of, and passages from, Bishop’s letters, are partly represented by the figure of the hummingbird which appears in stanza two:

What childishness is it that while there’s a breath of life  
 in our bodies, we are determined to rush  
 to see the sun the other way around?  
 The tiniest green hummingbird in the world? (91)

Although there are many hummingbirds that are native to Brazil, I think Bishop may be thinking here of the migratory ruby-throated hummingbird, which like Bishop herself, and like the letters she writes to friends in North America, makes a journey from North to South and back again. The ruby-throated

hummingbird is tiny and green, with a flash of red on its neck visible in certain lights, and it makes a thousand mile yearly migration from as far north as Nova Scotia over the Gulf of Mexico as far south as Panama. It is a hummingbird Bishop would probably have seen while growing up in Canada, and which (almost) connects her two “homes” of Nova Scotia and Brazil. Since Bishop was also writing her autobiographical short story “In the Village” at this time, the connection is perhaps not just a flight of fancy.<sup>78</sup> She remarks in a letter to the Barkers in October 1952 that it is amazing how travelling to Brazil has prompted her to write the story “In the Village” inspired by what she calls “total recall about Nova Scotia—geography must be more mysterious than we realise even” (*OA* 249). I think these comments inform the lines in “Questions of Travel” in which the speaker wonders about the “childishness” of rushing “to see the sun the other way around?” They also confuse our sense of the geography of the next line “The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?” for it could be located in either Brazil or Nova Scotia. If this hummingbird is a migratory ruby-throat it adds to the irony in the poem of rushing “to see the sun the other way around,” only to see where you originally came from more clearly.

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<sup>78</sup> The story “In the Village” is set in a Nova Scotia in the early 1910s, and tells the story of a little girl (Bishop) who lived with her two aunts and grandmother. In the story Bishop’s mother returns from Boston and then mysteriously goes away again to live in a sanatorium. The story is based on Bishop’s childhood memories.

### **“A Route of Evanescence”**

The hummingbird in “Questions of Travel” also echoes Emily Dickinson, whose poems and letters Bishop was re-reading during her early years in Brazil.

Bishop’s hummingbird recalls Dickinson’s hummingbird-poem, “A Route of Evanescence,” and Dickinson’s own deliberately confused geography, since ruby-throated hummingbirds do not migrate quite as far south as Brazil, nor do they migrate to North Africa as Dickinson has it:

A Route of Evanescence  
 With a revolving Wheel  
 A Resonance of Emerald  
 A Rush of Cochineal  
 And every Blossom on the Bush  
 Adjusts it’s tumbled Head —  
 The Mail from Tunis, probably,  
 An easy Morning’s Ride. (Johnson, II 640)<sup>79</sup>

The hummingbird is here a postal metaphor for the way that letters travel and connect recipients. The poem was originally sent in/as a letter to Dickinson’s friend Helen Hunt Jackson in 1879. As Hugh Haughton observes, the poem mingles genres so much that it becomes difficult to see where one begins and the other ends: “This is an example of a letter that becomes a poem, or a poem sent in and as part of a letter. Which is it? The poem is a riddle, but its status is

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<sup>79</sup> Spelling and punctuation in the original poem-letter.

riddling too. As the inscription records, the tiny missive is a portrait not of a multi-coloured wheeled vehicle but of a tiny mobile bird" ("Just Letters" 58).

The poem's riddling status does not end there. As Bonnie Costello remarks, Dickinson's poem contains a further puzzle relating to the bird's species and the poem's geography. The glittering green and flash of red point to the hummingbird's status as a ruby-throat, and given this, "[t]he mail in this case could not possibly be from Tunis. The hummer is a New World bird and, as the ruby-throat is Amherst's only visitor, her mail must be from Mexico or Cuba" (Costello, "A Hummingbird Fable" n. pag.). In the context of nineteenth-century representations of the hummingbird, Dickinson's fusion of the real and the make-believe is not unique. Costello traces representations of hummingbirds in the work of famous nineteenth-century naturalists including John James Audubon, John Gould and Martin Johnson Heade. The nineteenth century saw a growing fascination with these jewel-like birds, and a desire to collect them: "At the heyday of New World export 3,000 skins of one species were shipped at a Brazilian port in one month; in 1888, 400,000 skins were auctioned" (Costello). This was matched by a demand for paintings and lithograph prints of tropical birds, which tended to tread a line between fantasy and reality. Despite never having visited South America, John Gould produced "a five-volume lithograph set of hummingbird images," issued between 1849-1861 of which he sold thousands (Costello).<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Costello suggestively points towards Bishop in her article, but does not make an explicit connection between Dickinson's hummingbird poem and the hummingbird in "Questions of Travel." Costello does observe the awareness in Bishop's poem of the absurdity (and impossibility) present in the desire for possession of things that were previously "free." However, she does not identify Bishop's bird as a ruby-throat whose miraculous ability to travel thousands of miles, and whose passage from North to South provides a literal parallel to the imaginative overlap of spaces of North and South in the whole of *Questions of Travel*.

Dickinson's poem appears to comment on this traffic in avian goods at the same time as engaging in its own forms of exchange. "A Route of Evanescence" is part of an exchange of gifts. Dickinson first sends it as a gift to Helen Jackson in 1879. It was also sent as a form of return payment for her correspondent Mabel Todd's portrait of Indian Pipes (Todd 367). The poem appears and re-appears several times in her correspondence thus mirroring the startling, evanescent qualities of the bird itself. The poem's reappearance in letters as a gift to be enjoyed and circulated among Dickinson's correspondents is also a form of epistolary pollination. As Logan Esdale succinctly puts it: "Dickinson copied this poem again and again, sending it to people (Jackson, Todd, Niles) she knew wished that her work would reach a wider audience. Her re-sipients are thus figured as hummingbirds too, passing on the poems to others" (162).

The language of the poem draws attention to its status as a representation of a hummingbird, rather than a real bird. The phrases "Resonance of Emerald" and the "Rush of Cochineal" reach for parallels found in the natural world to describe the qualities of the bird in the same way that artists like Gould sought innovative methods of recreating the movement and appearance of hummingbirds on a flat sheet of paper. Gould, for example, used gold and silver leaf to capture the iridescence of the birds' feathers. Comparing hummingbirds to emerald and ruby gemstones was common practice during the Romantic period and after. Judith Pascoe cites a phrase from William Bullock's London Museum catalogue: "The precious stones polished by art, cannot be compared to this jewel of nature [...] The emerald, the ruby, and the

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topaz, sparkle in its plumage, which is never soiled by the dust of the ground” (qtd. in Pascoe 33).<sup>81</sup> Dickinson’s poem seems to echo this vocabulary in its representation of a jewel-like bird. It is a verbal counterpart to the hummingbird lithographs and stuffed specimens that were hugely popular at the time she was writing. The poem replicates and adapts the language of nineteenth-century naturalists and collectors like Gould and Bullock.

Bishop’s early residence in Brazil coincided with a developing interest in, and appreciation for, Dickinson’s poems and letters. This was sparked by the publication of several new editions of Dickinson’s work in the 1950s, particularly Thomas H. Johnson’s 1955 edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, which for the first time made available a complete collection of her poems that replicated her manuscripts as closely as possible. Bishop was re-reading Dickinson’s poems at the same time as she was drafting or re-drafting “Questions of Travel,” as well as attempting drafts of a poem that linked Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dickinson, presenting the two poets as “self-caged birds” (*Pr* 412).<sup>82</sup> In the year prior to her voyage to Brazil Bishop had also written a review of Dickinson’s letters to Doctor and Mrs Josiah Gilbert. The review was titled “Love from Emily” and was published in 1951 in *The New Republic* (*Pr* 262-263).<sup>83</sup> Although Dickinson’s hummingbird is not mentioned in the letters to the Gilberts that Bishop reviewed, it does appear towards the end of the

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<sup>81</sup> Bullock is quoting from *The History of Birds* (1812) by George-Louis Leclerc, the Comte de Buffon.

<sup>82</sup> Brett Millier records that “Questions of Travel” was “published in 1956 [in *The New Yorker*] though begun much earlier” (273). Drafts of the poem held at Vassar College are dated 1955-1956 (*Bishop Papers* 57.8; 73.2).

<sup>83</sup> Review of *Emily Dickinson’s Letters to Doctor and Mrs. Josiah Gilbert Holland*. Ed. Theodora Van Wagenen Ward” (*Pr* 262).



volume of Dickinson's letters that Bishop also owned.<sup>84</sup> Thus, Bishop is very likely to have seen and read "A Route of Evanescence" in 1951 at the time of writing her review, just prior to her arrival in Brazil.

The bird-like airborne movement of Dickinson's thoughts in letters is also central to Bishop's review, and links back to what Croll describes as the key characteristic of baroque prose: the representation of "a mind thinking." Bishop quotes a letter in which Dickinson writes "I'd love to be a bird or a bee, that whether hum or sing, still might be near you" (qtd. in *Prose* 262). The insect-like hummingbird is perhaps again hovering just out of the frame here. Bishop goes on to say that these sentimental "embarrassing remarks" are "rescued in the nick of time by a sentence like, 'If it wasn't for broad daylight, and cooking-stoves, and roosters, I'm afraid you would have occasion to smile at my letters often, but so sure as 'this mortal' essays immortality, a crow from a neighbouring farmyard dissipates the illusion, and I am here again.'" (262). This seems reminiscent of Dickinson's remark in another letter that "A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend" (Johnson II, 460). Here, a crow breaks the spell as everyday elements like the "cooking-stoves" and "roosters" intrude on the letter's "illusion" of "immortality," drowning out the ethereal hum of the bird/bee. As in Bishop's "Roosters," crowing cocks are associated with brute reality: "At four o'clock / in the gun-metal blue dark / we hear the first crow of the first cock" (*P* 36).

However, as Bishop observes, it is the inclusion of these everyday elements, roosters as well as hummingbirds, and the abrupt change in tone in a single

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<sup>84</sup> Bishop notes in her review: "Twenty-nine of the letters are included in the most recent edition of *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, with an introduction by Mark Van Doren" (*Pr* 263). This edition was published in 1951, and contains Dickinson's hummingbird poem sent as a letter to Mabel Loomis Todd in 1882 (Todd 368).

letter, which rescue Dickinson's letters "in the nick of time" and elevate them from mere expressions of "extreme sentimentality" (*Pr* 262) to something more profound.

As Vidyan Ravinithran observes, what drew Bishop to Dickinson's letters was their controlled energy, and resistance to facile confessionality, which is reminiscent of the baroque prose stylists: "Bishop finds in Dickinson a poet with a very different relationship to prose; also a resister of the confessional, who reveals herself to the reader in a style closer to the baroque prose writers Bishop admired" (*Bishop's Prosaic* 92). Bishop praises the "terse and epigrammatic qualities" (263) of Dickinson's letters, concluding that "these letters have structure and strength. It is the sketchiness of the water-spider, tenaciously holding to its upstream position by means of the faintest ripples, while making one aware of the current of death and darkness below" (263). Like hummingbirds, water-spiders must constantly move in order to hold their position. Jonathan Ellis remarks in relation to Bishop's critique of Dickinson's letters: "The crucial thing in all this is movement. A letter had to be in flight from its author to be seen as art, yet it had to retain its dive and shape characteristic enough to recall its maker" (*Art and Memory* 157). This bird-like movement and ability to move from the autobiographical to the descriptive, from the momentous to the everyday, and back again, is very like Bishop's own epistolary style.

Although it is clear that Bishop's admiration for Dickinson and her poems grew during her residence in Brazil, the unfinished draft poem titled "Notes for the E. Dickinson/Hopkins Poem," begun in 1955, demonstrates Bishop's lingering ambivalence surrounding Dickinson and her work. The draft

links together the two poets—Dickinson and Hopkins—listing their similar birth and death dates: “E. Dickinson (1830-1886) G.M. Hopkins (1844-1889)” (*Bishop Papers* 74.14), and comparing their lives of solitude and religious devotion: “The same god / in both / sustained their songs / with iron” (74.14). The draft centres on the characterisation of the two poets as “self-caged birds” (as Bishop explains in her letter to Stevenson), and meditates on forms of writerly enclosure. Bishop depicts the two poets carefully and painstakingly constructing their own cages, and connects feathers with quill pens:

... peeled withies & a village elegance

They chose, themselves, their cages, one

.. one—the other—made by hand

peeled withies, cut along the brook—

(water) chipped Sunday saucer, gold&

white, of water

[...]

A rusty nail dropped in the cup or saucer

How they complained! ?sustained? ....

iron in the stale green(?) water

FEATHERS

barbs, barbules, hooklets vanes

“structured colours”? quill & shaft (*Bishop Papers* 74.14)<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> All punctuation and ellipses in original, unless indicated by square brackets.

In this fragmentary draft we see elements and ideas that Bishop explores, in a different but related way, in “Questions of Travel.” In the Dickinson-Hopkins draft, the intricately constructed imaginary worlds created by these two poets finally become a cage that encloses them. Bishop combines elements of beauty with things that appear sinister and dangerous. A chipped “gold” cup contains a “rusty nail.” The “structured colours” of the feathers contain “barbs, barbules, hooklets.” Later in the draft Bishop notes that the “metallic, prismatic” feathers of certain birds (including hummingbirds, although she does not specify this) are in fact “horny outgrowths” whose colours are not formed through pigments but are instead made by “structural peculiarities” which give the feathers their colour.

The sense of admiration mixed with elements of revulsion in the draft tallies with what Bishop later says about Dickinson in her letter to Stevenson:

I never really liked Emily Dickinson so much, except a few nature poems, until that complete edition came out a few years ago and I read it all more carefully. I still hate the oh-the-pain-of-it-all poems, but I admire the others, and, mostly, phrases more than whole poems. I particularly admire her having dared to do it all, all alone—a bit like Hopkins in that. (*Pr* 412).

Bishop both admired and rejected Dickinson’s chosen life of solitude and religious self-denial. However, as Bishop suggests, certain “phrases” stayed with her and influenced her poems. Although she never finished the Dickinson/Hopkins poem, Bishop used some of the same ideas and imagery in

“Questions of Travel.” The connection between the “iron” bars of Dickinson’s and Hopkins’ cages and “their songs” mirrors the “weak calligraphy of songbirds’ cages” (P 92). Moreover, references in the draft to “elaborate, wires & sliding doors / pseudo-gothic (Gothic revival!)” seem to correspond with the “whittled fantasies of wooden cages” in “Questions of Travel,” and its depiction of architectural flights of fancy. The “metallic, prismatic” feathers in the draft might of course also belong to the “tiniest green hummingbird” in Bishop’s later poem.

In “Questions of Travel” Bishop explores the impulse to possess, control and cage elements of the natural world, which drew explorers and naturalists to Brazil in the nineteenth century. Elizabeth Bishop’s inclusion of “the tiniest green hummingbird” surely also echoes Dickinson’s use of the hummingbird as a metaphor for a letter. That Dickinson and Bishop chose to depict a hummingbird is significant given the status of these birds as highly collectable objects in the nineteenth century. Like a museum cabinet displaying stuffed birds or a hummingbird lithograph with specks of gold leaf, Dickinson’s hummingbird poem-letter recreates, in a manner analogous to the baroque style, a sense of immediacy and animation that recalls a tiny hummingbird at the same time as it gestures towards the physical presence of the author herself.

If the hummingbird is a letter, which continues to be passed on to different “re-sipients” (Esdale 162), then Bishop seems deliberately to join in this exchange herself. The appearance of the hummingbird in “Questions of Travel” represents another exchange: one poet corresponding with another in verse. Various sources that Bishop had encountered and read merge and crystallize in the poem. These include her reading of Dickinson, and also of

Charles Darwin's *Beagle Diary*, as well as her own early observations of Brazil recorded in her letters, particularly the numerous references to the clouds and mountainous scenery in her letters to friends.

### **Darwin's *Beagle Diary***

Darwin's *Beagle Diary* is another example of "writing to the moment" and "a mind thinking." The spontaneity and energy that Darwin manages to capture in his prose informs the imagery and temporal structure of Bishop's poem.<sup>86</sup>

Darwin's *Beagle Diary* exhibits a number of characteristics that tally with the attributes that Morris Croll identifies in seventeenth-century baroque prose.

The development of scientific theory through the gradual and careful accumulation of what Bishop, in her "Darwin letter," calls "facts and minute details" (*Pr* 414) mirrors the way that baroque prose often moves from a "literal to a metaphoric statement" where the reader sees the "author's mind turning toward a general truth, which emerges complete and abstract" (Croll 435).

Croll's description of Thomas Browne's scientific writings is an almost perfect depiction of Darwin's prose in the *Diary*: "He writes like a philosophical scientist making notes of his observation as it occurs. We see his pen move and stop as he thinks" (Croll 448). It seems as if Bishop is also thinking back to this passage in Croll's essay when she writes to Anne Stevenson in the "Darwin

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<sup>86</sup> Other critics have explored the influence of Darwin on Bishop. For example, Francesco Rognoni has analysed Bishop's marked copies of *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1962) and *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin* (1958), pointing out that Bishop marked passages she liked and that may have influenced her poems (241). Jonathan Ellis argues that Bishop's appreciation of Darwin is based on his use of "language and word association" rather than a detailed engagement with his scientific theories ("Reading Bishop" 190). These critics offer useful and illuminating readings of the connections between Darwin's prose and Bishop's poetry. However, they do not observe the significance of Bishop's reading of the *Beagle Diary*, the immediacy of which is important, nor do they explore connections between the *Diary* and "Questions of Travel."

letter.” It is worth quoting the passage at length, since it is vitally important not just as a description of Darwin’s methods of observation, but also of Bishop’s own:

There is no ‘split.’ 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 really see full-face but that seems enormously important. I can’t believe we are wholly irrational and I do admire Darwin! But reading Darwin, one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless heroic *observations*, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden forgetful relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one *feels* the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration. (In this sense it is always ‘escape,’ don’t you think?) (*Pr* 414)

Passages from Darwin’s diary correspond to passages in “Questions of Travel.” The poem’s depiction of Brazil, particularly in the first stanza, as a fantastical space match passages from Darwin’s *Beagle Diary*, which Bishop tells Moore she is reading in a letter dated April 11 1953 (*OA* 256). Bishop writes to Moore that “[t]he front view [at Samambaia] is stupendous mountain scenery

interspersed with clouds" (OA 256).<sup>87</sup> Bishop's phrasing, in this and other letters from the same period, resembles the "clouds on the mountaintops" in "Questions of Travel," which "spill over the sides in soft slow-motion / turning to waterfall under our very eyes." We can also hear echoes of Darwin's diary. After a trip to mountains near Rio de Janeiro in March 1832 he observes, "Brazilian scenery is nothing more nor less than a view in the Arabian Nights, with the advantage of reality. — The air is deliciously cool & soft; full of enjoyment one fervently desires to live in retirement in this new & grander world" (*Beagle Diary* 43). Bishop's clouds overflowing in "soft slow-motion" match Darwin's "deliciously cool & soft" air. This passage from Darwin's diary also seems to be reflected in Bishop's repeated refrain in her letters that living in Brazil she felt she had "died and gone to heaven" (OA 246, 249). And furthermore that it had taken her until aged forty-two (not retirement, but early middle age) to feel "at home" (OA 262).

In a 1953 letter to Pearl Kazin, in which Bishop describes a trip to the Baroque town Ouro Preto, she writes (of Brazil in general): "This place is *wonderful*, Pearl. I just spend too much time in looking at it and not working enough. I only hope you don't have to get to be forty-two before you feel so at home" (OA 262). However, "just [...] looking" at things is a central facet of Bishop's poetics. In "Questions of Travel" she complicates the implications of spending "too much time looking," questioning the egotistical impulse that lies behind the forms of observation carried out by the traveller, and also similarities between Darwin's scientific observations and her own poetic and

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<sup>87</sup> In a 1952 letter to Anny Baumann Bishop writes, "a few clouds spill over the tops of mountains exactly like waterfalls in slow motion" (OA 243), a line that is almost exactly repeated in the opening of "Questions of Travel:" "the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops / makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion" (P 91).



artistic observation. Spending “too much time in looking at things and not working enough” anticipates the way that Bishop describes the practice of letter writing itself. In a letter to Kit and Ilse Barker Bishop writes that she loves to write letters because writing them is “kind of like working without really doing it” (*OA* 273).<sup>88</sup> Critics have found this last comment difficult to read as straightforward. Brett Millier and Joelle Biele observe that writing letters *is* a form of working for Bishop, though she might not recognise it, and observations in letters often turn up later in poems after undergoing a kind of artistic distillation process.<sup>89</sup> In a related sense, Langdon Hammer argues that for Bishop letter writing was not solely a way into poems, but a concentrated avoidance of the pressures she felt to produce publishable work: “[B]ecause they are gifts, Bishop’s letters shun the literary marketplace where her poems and her poethood were on sale” (174). Looking at things and writing letters, while they may not be financially remunerative activities, were both valuable forms of working for Bishop. They are central to the accumulation of “facts and minute details” that underpins both Bishop and Darwin’s working methods.

The observations about the natural world that Bishop collects in her letters overlap with those that Darwin collects in his diaries. Many of these are instances of what she describes in the “Darwin letter” as “the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life” (*Pr* 414). In a letter to Moore, Bishop

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<sup>88</sup> The phrase “just looking at things,” which belies the care and attention Bishop devotes to observing the world around her, also anticipates Bishop’s phrasing in her letter to Gold and Fildale about her Harvard seminar on “just *letters*” where again the use of the word “just” is a way of simultaneously drawing attention to and downplaying the seriousness of letters as an art form (*OA* 545).

<sup>89</sup> Millier writes, “She [Bishop] complained often in early letters that she found herself unable to write about Brazil, but there she was, doing it, “working” in the best sense, to learn what she thought about the country, to discover what tone she would take when she did come to write formal prose and poetry” (259). Similarly, Biele observes that letters allowed Bishop to try out her writing voice, describing letters as a form of “unconscious pre-writing” (93) or “sentient rough drafts” (96).

describes the surreal sight of a hummingbird in her kitchen pantry: “Just a few minutes ago I found a hummingbird in the pantry—quite a big one, yellow and black. I got it out with an umbrella” (OA 238). Darwin’s diary also records the thrill of a hummingbird sighting. Darwin’s sighting is perhaps another source, along with Dickinson’s poem-letter and also Bishop’s own first-hand observations of Brazilian birds, for the “tiniest green hummingbird” in “Questions of Travel.” Darwin writes:

As we passed along, we were amused to watch the hummingbirds.—I counted four species—the smallest at but a short distance precisely resembles in its habitats & appearance a *Sphinx*.—The wings moved so rapidly, that they were scarcely visible, & so remaining stationary the little bird darted its beak into wild flowers.—making an extraordinary buzzing noise at the same time, with its wings. (73)

Not only does Darwin’s diary record his looking at birds and wildlife, but also collecting specimens. The hummingbird is not one he collects, however, only observes. Similarly, in Bishop’s poem “the tiniest green hummingbird” appears earlier than the other bird in the poem, the “fat brown bird,” and away from the descriptions of caged birds and “whittled fantasises of wooden cages” (P 92).

But when does “just [...] looking” turn into a desire for possession? A kind of touristic window-shopping is not enough to satisfy “the traveller” (P 92) in Bishop’s “Questions of Travel,” who desires not only to “dream our dreams” but “have them too” and take home “one more folded sunset” as a keepsake from their travels. Further sections of Darwin’s diary appear to inform the

poem, including the temptation on the part of “the traveller” (*Beagle Diary* 73; *P* 92)—a phrase that both Darwin and Bishop employ as a third-person description of themselves—to treat Brazil as a fantasy, or “a view in the Arabian Nights” (*Beagle Diary* 43) to use Darwin's words.<sup>90</sup> For example, Darwin observes that the exaggerated scenery is like that of an opera or theatre, writing, “I do not know what epithet such scenery deserves: beautiful is much too tame; every form, every colour is such a complete exaggeration of what one has ever beheld before.—If it may be so compared, it is like one of the gayest scenes in the Opera House or Theatre.—” (70). These same thoughts are found in sections of Bishop's poem that use theatrical metaphors and refer to the scenery as “exaggerated.” In the second stanza Bishop's speaker asks “Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres?”, and at the beginning of the third stanza, “But surely it would have been a pity / not to have seen the trees along this road, / really exaggerated in their beauty, / not to have seen them gesturing / like noble pantomimists, robed in pink” (91). These sections of the poem are engaging with, and crucially also testing and questioning, imperialist stereotypes and baroque tropes. The concept of “the theatre of the world” and life as a dream are key tropes in colonial baroque literature. Antonio Maravall writes: “The topos of the world as a stage, the human being as an actor, of life as a comedy [...] became profoundly renewed in baroque writers, in Lope, in Villamediana [...], reaching its peak in Calderón”

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<sup>90</sup> Both Darwin and Bishop refer to “the traveller” in their accounts of Brazil in *The Beagle Diary* and “Questions of Travel” respectively. Darwin uses the phrase many times in his diary. For example, in the Rio de Janeiro section Darwin writes: “I have no where seen liliaceous plants & those with large leaves in such luxuriant plenty; growing on the border of the clear shaded rivulets & as yet glittering with drops of dew, they invited the traveller to rest” (73). At the close of Bishop's “Questions of Travel” comes: “rain / so much like politicians' speeches: / two hours of unrelenting oratory / and then a sudden golden silence / in which the traveller takes a notebook, writes” (*P* 92).

(199). Spanish writer, Pedro Calderón de la Barca's plays *The Great Theatre of the World* (1633) and *Life Is A Dream* (1635), feature the idea of the world as a stage as their central conceit and as a means of depicting Catholic doctrine.

Although it seems clear that Bishop picked up observations and phrases from the *Beagle Diary*, there is a subtle difference in tone between the two texts. Where Darwin observes, Bishop questions. There is a hint of self-consciousness in Darwin's phrasing—"if it may be so compared"—which Bishop elaborates on and extends in her poem. Darwin's tentative unease becomes the question "Is it right to be watching strangers in a play?" Bishop's is a stronger questioning of the dangers of viewing a country as a form of spectacle, and beautiful scenery as something that, like the specimens that Darwin collected, can be packed up and taken home in a suitcase. Observation, such as that of the naturalist and/or poet is both something to be admired for its beauty, but also questioned for its attempts to possess or capture that beauty. In this context, the "beautiful solid case being built up out of [Darwin's] endless heroic *observations*" that Bishop describes in her letter to Stevenson is reminiscent of a museum cabinet or a poem. Careful observation, on the other hand, does not seek to cage and control, but allows its subjects to retain a sense of subjectivity and freedom. The theme of escape is also important here. As Bishop says in the Darwin letter, "What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration. (In this sense it is always 'escape,' don't you think?" (*Pr* 414). For Bishop, art can be an escape into a kind of dream world, albeit one that should still retain a connection with reality.

### A trip to Ouro Preto

Bishop characterised her residence in Brazil as a form of escapism. As her letters show, she was both giddy with the euphoria of her newfound Brazilian life, and sceptical of the illusions that accompany escape and exile. She writes to the Barkers in October 1952: “My New England blood tells me no, it isn’t true. Escape does not work; if you are really happy you should just naturally go to pieces and never write a line—but apparently that—and most psychological theories on the subject, too—is all wrong” (*OA* 249). As “Questions of Travel” demonstrates, Bishop’s delight in her new surroundings was accompanied by a dogged questioning of its validity. The second stanza is almost entirely made up of questions. The initial delight at the beauty of the scenery in the first stanza slowly gives way to recognition of the absurdity present in a possessive desire for things and experiences. The traveller’s wonder becomes an attempt to control, contain and cage. Bishop finds a visual metaphor for this in wooden clogs and birdcages, as the speaker muses:

—Yes, a pity not to have pondered,  
 blurr’dly and inconclusively,  
 on what connection can exist for centuries  
 between the crudest wooden footwear  
 and, careful and finicky,  
 the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.  
 —Never to have studied history in  
 the weak calligraphy of songbirds’ cages. (*P* 92)

The lines meditate on wooden forms that cage and enclose, finding a parallel between clogs and cages, clogs being a kind of cage for the feet.

Like a letter, the poem's structure is conversational. Remarks like "—Yes, a pity not to have pondered" seem to be directed at a particular other. The phrases are structured like fragments of a conversation, with the other half seemingly just out of earshot; or like the replies to elements of a previous letter the reader cannot access. The asymmetry of the poem also extends to its offbeat musicality, and a fascination with pairs that do not quite match. Like a lopsided conversation, the "disparate wooden clogs" play "a sad, two-noted, wooden tune." The slant-rhymed pairing of "blurr'dly and inconclusively" is repeated in "careful and finicky," another pair of words whose "f" sounds and falling rhythms are alike, although not exactly. The poem itself at this point becomes "careful and finicky"—as if the poet is carving the elaborate façade of a baroque church or whittling a wooden cage, the words sound the repeated and concentrated motion of carving shapes in wood. Reading the poem aloud requires the kind of "useless concentration" that Bishop says is necessary to the creation and experiencing of art, in order to say the right words.

The poem also recalls Bishop's fascination with baroque architecture, and her trip to the baroque town of Ouro Preto. Architecture is its own kind of whittling of natural materials in order to express man-made "fantasies." It is also a kind of language, which the speaker of "Questions of Travel" reads, studying "history" in these connected elements: baroque church, clog and birdcage. In her letter to Pearl Kazin written shortly after visiting Ouro Preto for the first time, Bishop describes hers and Lota's determination to see the baroque chapels that evening:

It was almost deserted. The town is really worth the trip. I haven't been sightseeing for so long that maybe I overrate it, but all those churches and chapels—white with the soapstone trimmings, sort of green-ish-gray—are very fine, I think. I'm hoping to write some sort of piece about it, but the information is poor, or just technical, and I'm afraid it doesn't make much of a 'story.' The prophets are really impressive—almost spooky, they look so real at a distance. We arrived just after sunset and were determined to see the front of the church before dark. Lota started rushing up a wall-like stone street, calling out the window, 'The Prophets! The Prophets!' One old lady, sitting on her stoop, yelled that the road was too *aguda*—apparently a very strange archaism—and it certainly was . . . There were the prophets, brooding and prophesying doom and destruction, against the stars—really quite a sight above that funny, completely dead little town. Our pictures are being developed in Rio now—I'll send you some if they're any good. (OA 262)

This letter could be a precursor to the poem, though it has its own free-standing narrative. Bishop's epistolary style mirrors the scene that she is describing. Set at dusk, the letter is concerned with shapes and shadows, themselves a key trope of baroque architecture. Earlier in the letter she describes the discovery and purchase of "three huge old soapstone jars, really enormous and beautiful ones" in a grocery shop along the road to Ouro Preto. The description of the jars anticipates the "soapstone trimmings" of the ornate chapels. Describing in detail the journey to the town, Bishop's letter takes her correspondent along with her

on the journey, detailing the difficulties of arrival as much, perhaps even more so, than the destination itself. Bishop is afraid it “doesn’t make much of a ‘story,’” despite having already folded the story into the narrative of the letter. The letter is itself the “story,” and an attempt in writing to capture the experience of the visit. The desperation to catch a glimpse of these churches before dark, followed by the act of capturing their appearance in photographs, anticipates “Questions of Travel,” itself another version of this “story.” As in the letter, the poem features an almost compulsive desire to keep on “looking at” (OA 262) things, itself a kind of caging, finally symbolised by the birdcages at the close of the poem.

#### **“a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque”**

As much as it re-uses details from Bishop’s 1953 Ouro Preto letter to Pearl Kazin, along with sections of Darwin’s account of his stay near Rio De Janeiro, “Questions of Travel” also takes flight into an imaginary space that could be anywhere. The details of a “bamboo church of Jesuit baroque” are only loosely sketched. And, like the “disparate wooden clogs,” some of these details do not quite fit together. The “bamboo church” is a logical impossibility; a baroque church cannot be made of bamboo. It is more likely that Bishop is thinking here of an elaborate birdcage that she owned, which was shaped like a baroque church.<sup>91</sup> The impossible “bamboo church” forms part of a fascination in the poem with the representations of things, as much as with the things themselves, and with “imagined places” as much as with the real places that Bishop visited

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<sup>91</sup> There is a picture of this birdcage “undated, painted wood and wire” in the exhibition catalogue, *Objects and Apparitions* (2011), which shows objects and artwork from Bishop’s collection (28).



on her travels. The “bamboo church” is like the “tiniest green hummingbird” in that both hinge on logical impossibilities. The birdcage-church represents the fantasy of a baroque church carved from wood. The “tiniest green hummingbird” is, as in Dickinson’s letter/poem, a representation of a bird rather than a real bird, and part of an imagined geography that connects the spaces of Brazil and Nova Scotia (or Amherst and Tunis). These carefully observed fantasies are part of Bishop’s strategy of “just [...] looking,” and hinge on a paradoxical sense that exact observation might necessarily involve a form of looking that is blurred and inconclusive.

It is exactly these logical impossibilities, inaccuracies, mixed up details and blurred lines between bird and letter, church and birdcage that contribute to the poem’s fidelity to the multiple, various and somewhat ambivalent experiences of travel. The repetitions in the middle of the poem when the speaker ponders “blurr’dly and inconclusively / on what connection can exist” between these various wooden elements are like careful checks and balances—“careful and finicky”—as the poet carves her own elaborate birdcage in the form of a poem. The poem’s contrivances are reminiscent of Bishop’s comment in her 1933 letter to Donald Stanford, in which she refers to “The Baroque Style in Prose,” and her attempts to emulate it in poetry, where “an equally great ‘cumulative effect’ might be built up by a series of irregularities” (OA 11). The “series of irregularities” in this case could describe the clogs, bamboo church and birdcages. The carefully assembled images are a collection, analogous to Darwin’s careful preservation of specimens.

Like the elements in the poem that are “careful and finicky,” Bishop often described her own need for accuracy in forms of observation as “finicky.” In a

letter to Anne Stevenson, she wrote: "I am afraid you will think these many little corrections both finicky and egotistical" (*Pr* 442). This same, almost compulsive, need to maintain accuracy and to tell the truth is found in Darwin's writing. The *Beagle Diary* strives always to be truthful, to express complex ideas simply, and deplores others' attempts to write about the journey in embellished prose. Referring to the Captain's own rival account of the voyage, Darwin writes in a letter: "I looked over a few pages of Captain King's Journal: I was absolutely forced against all love of truth to tell the Captain that I supposed it was very good, but in honest reality no pudding for little school-boys ever was so heavy" (*Correspondence* II 80-81). Bishop called her own fidelity to truth her "George Washington handicap" in a letter to Lowell in 1962: "I can't tell a lie even for art, apparently; it takes an awful effort or a sudden jolt to make me alter facts" (*OA* 408).

In the cases of Dickinson's "A Route of Evanescence," Darwin's *Beagle Diary* and Bishop's "Questions of Travel" fidelity to truth means capturing a sense of the original experience, if not always holding fast to exact details. The "bamboo church of Jesuit baroque" is an alteration of facts, but one that adheres to what Croll calls in his essay on baroque style the "imaginative truth" of experience. In her 1933 letter to Donald Stanford Bishop specifically quotes this section of Croll's essay: "[W]riters in this style like to avoid prearrangements and preparations. . . The first member therefore exhausts the mere fact of the idea; logically there is nothing more to say. But it does not exhaust its imaginative truth or the energy of its conception" (qtd. in *OA* 12).

The question of form is also centrally important here in relation to Darwin. As Bishop writes to Anne Stevenson in a later addendum to the “Darwin letter”:

I really just got off on Darwin because of my readings about Brazil when I first came here; his first encounter with the ‘tropics’ was on the outskirts of Rio and a lot he says in his letters home about the city and country is still true. Then I became very fond of his writing in general—his book on Coral Island is a *beauty*, if ever you have a long stretch to read in,—specialized but beautifully worked out. It seems to me that in the world of hate and horror we all inhabit that contemporary artists and writers, some of the ‘action painters’ (although I like them, too), the ‘beats,’ the wildest musicians, etc.—have somehow missed the point—that the *real* expression of tragedy, or just horror and pathos, lies exactly in man’s ability to construct, to use form. (*Pr* 433)

Bishop here attributes a moral dimension to the imposition of form. Form can be an attempt to contain and control, but it can also be a more complex means of expressing human tragedy in ways that might go some way to alleviating it. I think form here also applies to a nuanced sense of the kinds of written forms that Dickinson, Darwin and Bishop all use to capture an “imaginative truth.” It is important that Bishop notes Darwin’s “letters home” in this passage, which along with the *Beagle Diary* (also a kind of letter since Darwin sent portions of it back home for his family to read at intervals along his journey), form an

immediate record of Darwin's observations, and an apt form with which to preserve "a mind thinking."

Moreover, the particular literary forms he chooses in order to capture his observations about the natural world—the letter and the diary—play an important role in the shaping of these observations. Darwin's letters home and *The Beagle Diary* are attempts, to use Croll's words, to represent not only "a thought, but a mind thinking." Bishop writes to Moore in April 1953 that she has "just finished Darwin's Diary on the *Beagle*—not the Journal, although I guess it's mostly the same—and I thought it was wonderful" (OA 257). Although Bishop brushes over the difference between the *Beagle Diary*, and the version later published as the *Journal of Researches*, it does matter that she began by reading the *Diary* and not the *Journal*. Darwin's *Beagle Diary*, first published in 1933, is a direct transcription of his manuscript diaries, which accompanied him on the voyage and were a record of his day-to-day immediate impressions. The *Diary* preserves a sense of immediacy and Darwin later used it, along with a number of field notebooks, as the basis for his *Journal of Researches* (first published 1839), rewriting sections of the original diary and adding further scientific observations. The two books are, as Bishop writes, "mostly the same," but also display important differences, particularly in the way that they represent a sense of time. As Richard Darwin Keynes, editor of *The Beagle Diary*, writes: the *Diary* "preserves the continuity that he [Darwin] sacrificed to some extent in his better known work, and constitutes an account of his daily activities that is matchless in its immediacy and vivid description" ("Introduction" xxi).

Darwin valued his diary because of this sense of immediacy. In letters to his sister, he reflects on the importance of the *Diary* as a way of preserving his thoughts and ideas in a form of writing that was composed not long after the original events occurred. In a letter to his sister Caroline written in April 1832, Darwin wrote, “Be sure you mention the receiving of my journal, as anyhow to me it will [be] of considerable future interest as it [is] an exact record of all my first impressions, & such a set of vivid ones they have been, must make this period of my life always one of interest to myself” (*Correspondence* I 226-227). His sense of the importance of the diary grew as time went on, and he later came to regret sending the first volume home to his family. In a later letter to Caroline, Darwin worries about the safety of the diary if it is sent on for others to read: “[D]o not send it by Coach, (it may appear ridiculous to you) but I would as soon loose a piece of my memory as it. — I feel it is of such a consequence to my preserving a just recollection of the different places we visit. — When I get another opportunity I will send some more” (I 279). Darwin’s use of the word “preserve” here mirrors the preservation of specimens. Not only did Darwin collect animal specimens on the Beagle voyage, he also collected and preserved his own thoughts in the form of his diary, prizing what he terms his “set” of “vivid” impressions. The desire to preserve an “exact record of all my first impressions” is an example of Croll’s “baroque style” and attempts to pin down the “ardor” of a thought’s “conception in the mind” (Croll 430).

In her Brazil letters Bishop collected fragments to be re-used and changed into poetry later. Descriptions in the letters, the image of the hummingbird from Dickinson’s letter-poem and sections from Darwin’s *Beagle Diary* found their way into the early Brazil poems, particularly “Questions of

Travel.” These hybrid prose-poetry elements are what Bishop used to lend her poems a sense of immediacy, and to create the impression of watching “a mind thinking” and discovering form as it goes. In this way, Bishop’s letters and letter-like poems conform to the key components of what Morris Croll termed, writing in 1929, the “baroque style in prose” (427). However, in the context of 1950s Brazil, the baroque took on a new significance. “Questions of Travel” contains a growing sense of the connection between intricate baroque forms, simulated energy and part-fantasy worlds and the impulses to cage and control that necessarily accompany them. Bishop’s Brazil letters seek to collect and display a dazzling range of Brazilian images, and bring the correspondent into the partly imaginary space of correspondence with her. The poem “Questions of Travel” is more ambivalent and questions the acquisitive, caging, gaze of the traveller. The lines at the end of the second stanza “Oh, must we dream our dreams / and have them, too?” represent a turning point. In the poem this anxiety in relation to the dangers of viewing Brazil as a fantasy is more clearly tied to themes of mastery over animals and landscapes, and legacies of colonisation in Brazil. Travel and tourism are presented as yet another acquisitive, possessive, even caging, desire for objects, animals and experiences. The images of birdcages in the third stanza encapsulate (literally) this desire to control and contain things that were previously free. Careful observation, however, which paradoxically involves the accumulation of blurred and incomplete detail, goes some way to preserving a sense of freedom and vitality in poems and letters.

It is significant, I think, that in a letter to Moore written about a month after she acquired Sammy, Bishop noted that a cage had been built for him:

“Sammy, the toucan, is fine. A neighbour built him a very large cage in which he seems quite happy, and I give him baths with the garden hose” (238).<sup>92</sup> Bishop is aware of an element of cruelty in keeping the toucan, although this is only implied by the statement that he “seems happy.” In the poem, the reference to “whittled fantasies of wooden cages” state more clearly than in her letters both the compulsion and the absurdity present in the desire for possession of previously wild things. But Sammy, like Bishop’s poem about Dickinson and Hopkins, never found a visible place in her published poetry. He exists, as they do, in allusions and echoes, traces of an epistolary past that does not wholly survive the transition to poetry.

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<sup>92</sup> In a 1958 letter to Lowell, Bishop describes a tragic accident that led to Sammy’s death. In an attempt to treat the bird for fleas, Bishop used an insecticide recommend as safe to use on animals, which in effect poisoned Sammy (*WIA* 256). The final line of an unpublished elegy Bishop tried to write for the toucan reads: “I loved you, and I caged you” (*EAP* 179).

## Chapter Four

### “our looks, two looks”: (Miniature) Portraits in the Letters of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell

As well as taking inspiration from the letters and journals of nineteenth-century figures, Bishop’s correspondence with her immediate predecessors and poetic contemporaries was a crucial and shaping influence on her work. David Kalstone’s seminal study, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (1989), sets forth the story of Bishop’s development as a poet in relation to her two most important literary friendships, those with Moore and Lowell. Kalstone’s analysis captures the cocktail of admiration and resentment, imitation and envy, affection and despair, which often characterised, in different but related ways, Bishop’s creative relationships with the two poets. Kalstone also demonstrates the essentially epistolary nature of this triangle of literary influence, drawing on the large, and at the time unpublished, collections of Bishop’s letters with Moore and Lowell. Since Kalstone’s study, Bishop’s correspondence with Moore has received a significant amount of attention from critics, particularly in relation to the models of female friendship and influence that it both represents, and in its many complexities and ambiguities, resists and complicates.<sup>93</sup> With the publication of the complete correspondence of Bishop and Lowell in *Words in*

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<sup>93</sup> For example, in *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: The Psychodynamics of Creativity* (1993), Joanne Feit Diehl applies psychoanalytic and object-relations theory in order to analyse Bishop’s complex engagement with Moore as a mentor and substitute mother figure. In *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson: The Feminists Poetics of Self-Restraint* (2002), Kirstin Hotelling Zona compares the Moore-Bishop relationship and Bishop’s friendship with May Swenson in order to explore “the feminist potentials of self-restraint” (2) that all three employ in their poetry. The correspondence between Bishop and Lowell adds a further dimension to questions regarding the role that gender plays in Bishop’s poetry.



*Air* (2008), which contains all 459 of their surviving letters to one another, Bishop's long and enduring epistolary friendship with Lowell has come under the spotlight. Moreover, the structuring of the volume of letters as a two-way conversation that captures the original back and forth between the two correspondents makes possible, for the first time, more extended analyses of interactions between Bishop and Lowell's letters to one another and their published works.

In this chapter I look at some of the many connections between Bishop and Lowell's conversation in letters, and the conversation that also takes place, in a related way, in their published poems, memoirs and drafts. I focus particularly on a preoccupation on the part of both poets with portraits and portraiture, which a close reading of their letters alongside their poems and memoirs makes visible, and which is missing from previous analyses of the correspondence. I argue, drawing on accounts of the practice of exchanging miniature portraits in late eighteenth and nineteenth-century letters, that portraits go hand-in-hand (often literally as well as figuratively) with the genre of letter writing. In the correspondence between Bishop and Lowell the material practice of miniature portrait exchange is replicated in their exchange of photographs, which function in a similar manner to their eighteenth-century counterparts in the way that they act as physical substitutes for the two correspondents.

However, as in the case of painted miniature portraits, these photographs are never wholly accurate portrayals of their subjects, and frequently feature elements that seem inaccurate or distorted. For Bishop, particularly, inaccurate or distorted representations, either in photographs,

paintings or in poems, are a troubling reminder of the discrepancies that exist between life and art, and highlight some of the key differences between Bishop and Lowell's creative practices. Where Bishop seeks to represent the world around her in ways that are as accurate as possible, Lowell's approach involves a much greater degree of artistic license and embellishment. Bishop's letters, poems and drafts show her wrestling with what she sees as the dangers of Lowell's poetic style when it veers too closely towards inaccurate copying and hollow mimicry. I explore this theme of inaccurate or distorted portraits in relation to Bishop and Lowell's paired poems and memoirs. Bishop's poem, "The Armadillo," and Lowell's response, "Skunk Hour," also experiment with representations and reflections of themselves and each other, which are facilitated by their correspondence. Moreover, their two memoirs "91 Revere Street" and "Memories of Uncle Neddy," mirror each other in their use of family portraits as a framing device. Here, Bishop draws on the correspondence with Lowell, and the portraits featured in the memoirs, as a prompt for self-exploration and a means of foregrounding the similarities and differences in their two approaches.

### **Mirroring and copying**

One of the very first poems of Lowell's that Bishop comments on at the start of their correspondence is called "The Fat Man in the Mirror" and represents a disparity that the speaker feels between an internal sense of self, and an external reality as seen in a mirror.<sup>94</sup> Janet Altman observes that images of real

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<sup>94</sup> Responding to the poem in a letter to Lowell dated 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947 Bishop writes: "my interpretation of it may be too literal but, whether I have it all wrong or not, I admire its sense of horror and panic extremely" (*WIA* 5).

mirrors, along with figurative mirrors in the form of letters, occur in many epistolary novels. For example, in a discussion of the French epistolary novel, *Mitsou*, by Colette, Altman observes that mirror-like representations of self and other reflected in the correspondence between a pair of lovers are central to the epistolary nature of the novel:

The mirror image appears frequently in Colette's work, but it is usually linked with narcissism [...] What is striking in *Mitsou's* use of the mirror image, on the other hand, and more closely related to the choice of the letter form, is its nonnarcissism. *Mitsou's* and Robert's letters, desire, and even their specular glances are addressed to the other, not turned uniquely back on the self; the self is progressively discovered and developed through the other, in an exchange that is more arguably and profoundly epistolary. (*Epistolarity* 45)

Identities are formed in the two-way dialogue, and the back and forth between correspondents. Identity is thus not just singular, but relational. In a related sense, Altman and others also highlight the "performative" nature of letter writing. Letters can be a mirror or a self-portrait for the writer, but this portrait is often crafted and constructed, and more like a kind of "mask," as both Altman and Paulin observe.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Altman writes: "The letter is unique precisely because it does tend to define itself in terms of polarities such as portrait/mask, presence/absence, bridge/barrier" (*Epistolarity* 186). Similarly, Paulin observes that "In letters [...] the self wears the mask of the performing self, making an artful naturalness seem artless, as though self and mask are the same" ("Writing to the Moment" 222).

This kind of epistolary mirroring, and the formation of the self in conversation and comparison with the other, also applies to Bishop and Lowell's epistolary relationship. In their letters, Bishop and Lowell bounced reflections off one another, and each was inspired by the other. Critics have tended recently to focus on the egotistical impulses behind Lowell's refashioning of others' letters for personal and artistic gain, and the ways in which he appropriates and absorbs Bishop's material into his own more confessional style. There are indeed a number of examples of this. His version of Bishop's subtle memoir "In the Village"—"The Scream"—takes Bishop's quiet and implicit tone and makes it explicit and confessional. Lowell's poem, "Water," presents an altered and romanticised version of his friendship with Bishop.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, Lowell's sonnets for and about Bishop published in *Notebook* (1969) and *History* (1973) re-use elements of Bishop's correspondence in ways that she objected to, and which highlight the dangers of forms of mirroring and copying that trespass into areas of another's life and biography. For example, Lowell's "For Elizabeth Bishop 3: Letter with Poems for Letter with Poems" takes verbatim elements from a letter Bishop wrote to Lowell and re-fashions them as a sonnet.<sup>97</sup> In his recent study, *On Elizabeth Bishop* (2015), Colm Tóibín is rightly critical of what he sees as Lowell's inaccurate imitations of Bishop's reticent poetic and epistolary style: "the tone of the third poem, in which Lowell had seemed to quote from a letter of hers,

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<sup>96</sup> Lowell sends Bishop his poems "The Scream" and "Water"—both Bishop-inspired or derived—in a letter dated 10<sup>th</sup> March 1962. "The Scream" takes Bishop's memoir "In the Village" and turns it into a poem, and "Water" borrows details partly from a 1948 letter from Bishop to Lowell in which she describes "finding a gasping mermaid" in a dream (*WIA* 59) as well a visit that Lowell made to see Bishop in Stonington, Maine in the same year. Both of Lowell's poems alter the original details and circumstances of the sources from which they derive.

<sup>97</sup> Lowell's sonnet uses elements of Bishop's letter dated February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1970 (*WIA* 663).

seemed strange, a dramatic, personal and highly charged tone that had never entered into Bishop's poetry and seemed closer to Lowell's own work. It was Bishop's calm voice turned shrill" (46). Tóibín finds a subtext in the correspondence in *Words in Air*, arguing that Bishop's letters to Lowell, although they appear on the surface admiring and complementary, betray an uneasiness with Lowell's increasingly confessional style: "There is an undertow in the letters Bishop wrote about *Life Studies* and *Imitations*, a sense that she was containing herself [...] and that she was deeply uneasy about Lowell writing so openly about himself and his family" (154).

Similarly, in an essay on the Bishop-Lowell letters, Paul Muldoon paints a picture of a mutually critical relationship between the two poets, again reading, almost to the point of over-interpretation, a subtext into the correspondence and poems.<sup>98</sup> He casts Lowell as frequently self-aggrandising with "a penchant for self-dramatisation" ("Fire Balloons" 221). Against these predominantly negative readings of the Bishop-Lowell letters, I argue that the influence relationship flowed both ways, and that both bounced reflections off one another in their letters, and the poems and memoirs that arose from these. Although I agree that Lowell's tributes and imitations of Bishop sometimes misfired, taking too many liberties with personal details, a close reading of the entirety of their correspondence demonstrates the complexity of their friendship, and the difficulty of making broad statements or generalisations in regard to which poet borrowed from, imitated or copied the other. A reading of their literal and figurative portrait exchange, and the linked memoirs,

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<sup>98</sup> Muldoon argues that Bishop and Lowell's linked poems, "The Armadillo" and "Skunk Hour" are not just dedicated to, but are about, each other. For example, he suggests that the word "armadillo" contains echoes of "Lowell," and that Lowell's reference to a "hermit" in "Skunk Hour" is a representation of Bishop. ("Fire Balloons" 221)

“Memories of Uncle Neddy” and “91 Revere Street,” which the above critics gloss over or neglect entirely, demonstrates the deep level at which their later work is inextricably entangled in a relationship of mutual influence.

### **Letters and miniature portraits**

I want now to turn to related ideas surrounding letters and portraiture, and the way that letters can represent an exchange of self-portraits between two correspondents, as well as also facilitating and encompassing a literal exchange of portraits. The letters between Bishop and Lowell refer at key points to portraits and portraiture. Throughout their correspondence, Bishop and Lowell speak of photographs of themselves that they exchange and which help to bridge the geographical distance between them. As Thomas Travisano and others have noted, Bishop and Lowell spent the majority of their friendship living on different continents, so that letters played a crucial role in sustaining their friendship across a significant geographical distance: “[T]heir letters served as a powerful and self-renewing form of attachment” (*WIA* xii).<sup>99</sup> In addition to this, photographs enclosed in letters also helped to renew this attachment.

The way that Bishop and Lowell exchange photographs with their letters bears a resemblance to the exchange of miniature portraits that became popular in Europe during the late eighteenth century. Although Bishop and Lowell send photographs rather than painted miniatures, the significance of the exchange of likenesses between the correspondents and the way that they are

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<sup>99</sup> David Kalstone also observes that the friendship between the two poets was primarily epistolary: “[a]fter 1950, [Bishop’s] friendship with Lowell was one of frequent letters and infrequent visits” (111).

enclosed in letters is similar to this earlier practice, which has recently received a greater degree of attention from both art historians and literary critics. Marcia Pointon has highlighted the significance of miniature portraits in late eighteenth-century England.<sup>100</sup> These portraits, Pointon argues, became part of “social and economic exchange systems” (49) and were “acquired, given, received and circulated as objects” (50) in the form of gifts, jewellery and as an addition to a letter. Indeed, the practice of exchanging miniature portraits is intimately bound up with the exchange of letters. Like letters, the portraits “not only represent people, they also stand in their stead” and “secure a connection between an absent person and the viewer” (57). Pointon observes that “miniatures are culturally related to, if not actually analogous to, letter writing” (65).<sup>101</sup> They were sometimes sent as “substitutes for letters of introduction” (66), and in the reverse case, as demonstrated by a gift from Queen Charlotte to a friend that contained a miniature letter, a letter could also act as substitute for a miniature portrait (66). Joe Bray has also explored the connections between miniature portraits and letter writing in his analysis of eighteenth-century novels of sensibility, arguing that it is not so much the portraits themselves, real and fictional, but the way that they are exchanged and circulated, that is significant: “it is often not who or what the miniature portrait claims to represent which makes it significant in fiction of this period, but rather how it is circulated and interpreted” (*The Portrait in Fiction of the Romantic Period* 48).

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<sup>100</sup> Pointon writes: “the grand tour (leading to lengthy sojourns in Rome by young aristocratic men), military and naval campaigns, mercantile expansionism, and emigration generated the conditions for the production and circulation of portrait-objects” (“Surrounded with Brilliants” 67). In the case of Bishop and Lowell, lengthy geographical separation also facilitated the exchange of letters and photographs.

<sup>101</sup> To illustrate this point, Pointon cites a painting by Pompeo Batoni, *Sir Sampson Gideon and an Unidentified Companion* (1767), in which Sir Gideon is showing his companion a miniature image sent to him by a female correspondent, while holding the letter in which the portrait was enclosed in his other hand (65).

Pointon provides examples of full-size paintings that depict subjects either wearing or holding miniature portraits. She connects this pictorial trope to the concept of *mise-en-abyme*, which derives from Andre Gide's fascination with representations within representations, such as Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini portrait in which two figures are shown reflected in a convex mirror in the background, one of whom may be the artist himself. The idea of things enclosed within other things is also central to the nature of miniature portraits, which often draw much of their significance from the contexts that surrounded them. For Bishop and Lowell, the photographs they exchange are part of a "symbiotic" (to borrow Pointon's term, 57) relationship with the letters themselves, as in the case of a photograph that Bishop sends Lowell of herself sitting in her new car with the mountainous backdrop of Petropolis in the background, which I will explore in greater depth later in this chapter. This picture acts as a visual counterpart to the descriptions of her new Brazilian life in letters.

However, Pointon leaves the point that portraits and letters are analogous as genres somewhat underdeveloped. In *Treasuring the Gaze: Intimate Vision in Late Eighteenth-Century Eye Miniatures* (2012), Hanneke Grootenboer focuses on eye miniatures as further examples of portraits that overlap with epistolary spaces.<sup>102</sup> Grootenboer finds the bond between letters and miniatures to be even closer than Pointon indicates, demonstrating that the two forms were often "interchangeable" (30) and concludes that "[l]etters and miniatures collaborate in creating the shrunken sphere of intimacy" (41). However, none of these critics considers the implications of the analogous

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<sup>102</sup> Grootenboer describes eye miniatures as a "short-lived subcategory of portrait miniatures, eye portraits are renderings in miniature of an individual's single eye that were exchanged as gifts in Britain, and later in Europe and the United States, around 1800" (5).



relationship between letters and portraits in a twentieth-century context in which miniature portraits are substituted by an exchange of photographs in letters.

Many of the key aspects or functions of miniature portraits that Pointon observes could equally be applied to photographs. For example, portraits and photographs both “work actually and metaphorically to secure a connection between an absent person and the viewer” (Pointon 57). Similarly, portraits and photographs, like letters, can possess “talismanic” properties. Drawing on Susan Stewart’s influential study of the function of miniature forms, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993), Bray and Pointon both observe that the small size of miniature portraits served to heighten their symbolic value, bestowing on them talismanic properties. Pointon describes similarities between miniature portraits and “sacramental artifacts and reliquaries,” particularly in the case of miniatures that were displayed in a case along with a lock of hair (60-61). Similarly, Bray recounts the use of a miniature portrait as a talisman between the lovers St. Preux and Julie in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s epistolary novel *Julie; ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) (Bray 55-60).

Despite this idea that the miniature portrait is used in a person’s stead, and that their exchange brings people together and strengthens social or romantic ties, a repeated theme in criticism surrounding portrait exchange is the inaccuracy or inadequacy of the images and also their promotion of misunderstanding and discord. The exchange of miniatures did not simply help to collapse geographical distances between correspondents, or always bring them closer together in an emotional sense. Bray observes that “miniatures will

not fully compensate for the lack of presence,” (55) noting that miniature portraits exchanged in novels often prove to be inaccurate copies of their subjects (61). Similarly, Grootenboer records that in the medieval correspondence between Heloise and Abelard, and also in Laclos’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, portraits are characterised as “mute” and “cold” representations of the self, which are inferior to letters (31).

### **A portrait of Moore**

For Bishop, the exchange of photographs is a part of the formation of her identity as a poet, and is also bound up with the genre of letter writing. Yet, as in the case of the miniature portraits, Bishop also finds that photographs cannot entirely compensate for the physical absence of a correspondent. An early exchange with Marianne Moore includes a discussion of a photograph of Moore that Bishop had tucked into the frame of a mirror in a Paris hotel where she was staying on her travels. The photograph of Moore is also figuratively framed in the letter as a visual stimulus and aid to the correspondence. Bishop uses the photograph as a kind of imaginary interlocutor, and refers to it in her actual correspondence with Moore. In May 1937, Bishop writes:

Thank you so much for your letter, which lightened my sensation of being an EXILE very much, and for the wonderful photographs. I had scarcely dared hope you would send the one with the long fingers leaning on the “manuscript” and the typewriter to one side. I shall treasure them all, even though I fail to find a trace of you among the sand dunes . . . (OA 60)

Both the letter and photographs from Moore help to soften Bishop's sense of isolation, and provide a connection to a sense of literary community. In Bishop's own words, the letter lightens her sense of herself as an "EXILE." The word exile is capitalised to emphasise its separateness, and the word itself is exiled from the rest of the sentence. Moreover, the photographs provide a further, visual connection to Moore.

Bishop's reference to the arrangement of objects in the photographic portrait is also significant given Moore's role as her literary mentor. The presence of the "manuscript" and "typewriter" clearly signal Moore's literary status and dedication to her craft. Yet, there is also a sense here that the letter and photographs, while they help to bridge the distance between the two correspondents, cannot wholly compensate for the lack of physical presence. Bishop's placing of the word "manuscript" in inverted commas draws attention to the apparently staged nature of the photograph, which shows Moore poised as if having just transcribed a poem. Moreover, Bishop's final comment, "I shall treasure them all, even though I fail to find a trace of you among the sand dunes..." is evidence again of the failed connection and the physical separateness that letters try to, but can never quite entirely, make up for.

Bishop mentions this favourite photograph of Moore again in a later letter. Once more, the arrangement of objects in relation to the photograph is significant:

Before your letter came I had tried in vain to semaphore myself back into normalcy by putting one of your pictures in the mirror frame (the one with the fingertips resting on the little heap of 'work' [...]) but, probably

because Louise has a very languorous picture of Proust on the other side, it wouldn't work. Proust appeared in my 'primitive,' and I feel that I must tell you, because I am sure that one would interpret him as a picture on the wall by my bed instead of something tucked in the mirror frame. (*OA* 62)

Bishop uses the photograph of Moore as a means of transporting her back to a state of "normalcy" following the car accident that she, Louise Crane and Margaret Miller (who was badly injured and lost an arm) were involved in during their travels in France in 1937. Bishop's use of Moore's photograph as a means to "to semaphore myself back into normalcy" (*OA* 62) gives Moore's photograph almost magical properties, which recall the "talismanic" (60) importance that Marcia Pointon argues is central to the appeal of portrait miniatures.

However, as in the case of Bishop's earlier letter in which she failed to "find a trace" of Moore, the attempts here to conjure a sense of "normalcy" using the visual prop of the photograph do not succeed. The "languorous picture of Proust" on the other side of the mirror disrupts this séance-like operation. There is a sense that Moore's picture represents an image of the unassuming, conscientious female writer at work, which contrasts, and contradicts, the "languorous" image of Proust the literary giant. As Langdon Hammer has persuasively argued, Bishop held Moore up as a kind of paragon of hard-working literary activity that she was at pains to replicate, but was frequently unable to ("Useless Concentration" 166). The placing of Moore's picture in the mirror is further evidence of Bishop's conflicted relationship to both Moore as a

mentor figure, and to her own work. By positioning it in such a way Bishop is able to view herself and Moore simultaneously, thus offering a kind of visual representation of the mentor relationship and its influence on her.

**“exchange anxiety”**

Bishop and Lowell also exchanged photographs of each other, in a way that echoes this earlier exchange with Moore. Again the photographs complement the letters themselves, acting as a visual counterpart to written descriptions, and adding another way for the pair to bridge the geographical distance that separated them throughout the majority of their friendship. In July 1953 Bishop wrote to Lowell requesting that he send her some photographs of himself for her studio in Brazil: “I’m getting old & sentimental, but now that I have a studio I think I’d like to have some photographs to put in it. I have only one, of Marianne. Could you give me one of you?” (*WIA* 144). In her letter, Bishop also enclosed pictures of herself and her studio at Samambaia. In a following letter she enclosed a photograph of herself posing in an MG sports car with her cat Tobias seated on her lap and the mountainous scenery of Petropolis in the background. Bishop had purchased the car with the money she earned from *The New Yorker* for her memoir “In the Village.” She writes to Lowell:

Well, I got a car, too—I guess since I wrote you. I think I’ll even enclose another bad picture that looks as if I were heading to the Andes in it, when as a matter of fact I can’t even get a license. I made enough on a story in the *New Yorker* to get it—a slightly second-hand MG, almost my favorite car, black, with red leather” (*WIA* 147).

These photographs are a visual counterpoint to the descriptions of her new Brazilian life in the letters, which also abound with visual details. However, as in the case of Moore's image, with its self-consciously staged arrangement of Moore with a typewriter, Bishop here draws attention to the way that her own photograph is staged and deceptive. She calls it a "bad picture," and notes that while it "looks as if I were heading to the Andes in it" she is in fact unable to drive the car because she cannot get a license. The car functions primarily as a prop in the photograph. Moreover, Bishop could not head off "to the Andes" even if she were able to drive the car, since these mountains are on the western side of South America, and Petrópolis, where Bishop lived and the photograph was likely taken, is in Brazil on the eastern side.

When Lowell neglected to send a photograph of himself in exchange for this image, Bishop reiterated her request in a letter dated 21<sup>st</sup> may 1955:

I should like so much to have a picture of you, or of you & E. [Lowell's wife Elizabeth Hardwick] maybe. I never had such things before but somehow they seem to go in my *estudio*—age or Latin sentimentality I don't know which. So far I have only Marianne and 3 Brazilian birds, so it really isn't like the Gotham Book Mart. Rollie McKenna, that photographer, was here just before Christmas & took a lot of photographs—those of me are horrible, but those of the house & animals, etc., fine, and I think I'll try to get a copy or 2 for you. She told me that Dylan Thomas, in the little house he worked in, had two photographs—Marianne and Walt Whitman! (163).

For Bishop, the photographs of Moore and Lowell that she intends to place in her studio are a means of engaging with her two most important literary mentors. There is a characteristic touch of irony here too, however. Bishop cannot quite take the customary reverence for one's literary mentors entirely seriously. The reference to the photographs in Dylan Thomas's study is a kind of in-joke with Lowell. In the memoir that Bishop later wrote about her relationship to Marianne Moore, "Efforts of Affection," (1970) she strongly implied that Moore disapproved of Walt Whitman, and could not bear to have his name mentioned in her presence:

I do not remember her [Moore] ever referring to Emily Dickinson, but on one occasion, when we were walking in Brooklyn on our way to a favoured tea shop, I noticed we were on a street associated with the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and I said fatuously, 'Marianne, isn't it odd to think of you and Walt Whitman walking this same street over and over?' She exclaimed in her mock-ferocious tone, 'Elizabeth, don't speak to me about that man!' So I never did again. (*Pr* 132)

Again, there are multiple layers to this statement. Emily Dickinson famously disapproved of Whitman on moral grounds, although she claimed never to have read his poetry.<sup>103</sup> Moore and Whitman would therefore seem to be a highly unlikely combination of literary idols for Dylan Thomas to have. In making reference to Thomas's deliberately playful combination of photographs

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<sup>103</sup> In an April 1862 letter to T.W. Higginson, Dickinson wrote: "You speak of Mr Whitman—I never read his Book—but was told that he was disgraceful—" (Johnson, II 261).

(Whitman and Moore), Bishop complicates any straightforward or too easy narrative of literary influence and mentorship. Photographs of literary forbears in a writer's study cannot, Bishop implies, always be taken at face value.

Bishop's earlier reference to Gotham Book Mart here in the May 1955 letter to Lowell is also significant. A bookstore in New York City open between 1920 and 2007, Gotham Book Mart was famous for the many photographs of writers on its walls. Bishop may be referring back to a photograph of herself in Gotham Book Mart, which was published in *Life* magazine in 1948. The photograph shows a group of famous literary figures at a reception held for Osbert and Edith Sitwell at the bookstore and includes Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Tennessee Williams, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell and others.<sup>104</sup> It is as if Gotham's famous literary portraits have come to life in the photograph. Bishop disliked the photograph and thought that its subjects appeared "distorted" (*WIA* 67). She described the photograph in a letter to Lowell on 5th December 1948:

*Did I ever tell you anything about the Sitwell party? At any rate you may have seen the picture now with everyone of the extra-select group of poets looking distorted as well as wretched. Pauline kindly pointed out to me that I looked as if my head had been removed and then screwed back on again the wrong way. Marianne looks like a little ghost (*WIA* 67).*

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<sup>104</sup> See Bishop's description of the photograph along with the editors' commentary in *Words in Air* (67 n4).



Bishop's objections to the photograph involve its staged nature, and the literary elitism conveyed by the "extra-select group of poets." Bishop, as she humorously observes, is positioned at an awkward angle and Moore is small and ghost-like. Their stiff formality in the photograph contrasts with the easy postures of some of the male figures, particularly Charles Henri Ford who is shown cross-legged on the floor in the centre, and W.H. Auden perched on a step-ladder. While the photograph tries to capture a literary salon-style gathering Bishop's comments draw attention to the elements of fabrication. She was a self-proclaimed literary outsider and made clear her negative views of what she saw as the male-dominated, posturing literary culture of the mid-century.

The deliberate arrangement of photographs in relation to other objects in a room is also revealing. For example, Bishop positions the photograph of Moore in the mirror above her bed as a means of having an imaginary conversation with her at the same time as contemplating her own image. As her 1955 letter to Lowell demonstrates, Bishop wanted to create a similar assemblage of photographs in her *estudio* at Samamabaia in order to transform it into an ironic Gotham Book Store or shrine to her literary friends and mentors. Although Bishop is self-mocking about the quasi-religious "Latin sentimentality," with its suggestion of Catholic devotion to religious iconography, that has prompted this, her repeated requests for a photograph of Lowell are evidence of the symbolic, talismanic importance that such a photograph might hold.

A draft epistolary poem titled “Letter to Two Friends” gives further clues as to Bishop’s wish for the photograph.<sup>105</sup> The poem is addressed to Moore and Lowell and includes the lines “Marianne, loan me a noun! / Cal, please cable a verb!” (*EAP* 113). The draft draws attention to Bishop’s sense of isolation living in the mountains of Brazil where it has been raining and “the ‘view’ / is now two weeks overdue” like a letter that has failed to reach its destination. Bishop’s singling out of Moore and Lowell in the poem, and her request that they send her “a noun” and “a verb,” respectively, makes visible the role that letters played for Bishop in helping to assemble poems, with Moore providing Bishop’s descriptive facility, and Lowell a sense of innovation and renewed energy. In the poem, Bishop addressed the pair as if talking to their portraits. But the end of the poem finds Bishop again feeling trapped and isolated: “exchange anxiety / with a visa about to expire / with a car with one good tire,” “Exchange” here represents both money (exchange rate) and correspondence, hinting at both the practical worries associated with the unreliability of the post in Brazil, and Bishop’s anxiety in relation to her poetic imitation of, and the “exchange” of ideas with, her two friends.

In a letter which followed the one which includes Bishop with her cat in the MG sportscar, Lowell claimed he had positioned this photograph of Bishop at the top of a small Christmas tree, reiterating the talismanic role of the photographs exchanged by the pair: “We have your photograph perched high on our little foot-and-a-half Maine Christmas tree, sent us by my Cousin Harriet. I’m sure you remember her from Washington. I’d never dare take the wheel

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<sup>105</sup> Bishop says she is writing “Letter to Two Friends” in a 11<sup>th</sup> December 1957 letter to Lowell, but that the poem was “started two years ago” (243) around the time of her 1955 request for Lowell to send a photograph.

holding a kitten, and I doubt my car would be up to reaching to that roof of the world you seem to have attained" (*WIA* 151). Lowell's comment is jocular, and the diminutive nature of both the photograph and the tree itself make the whole arrangement seem comedic rather than serious or religious. Yet, the positioning of Bishop's photograph atop the tree mimics the positioning of angels at the top of Christmas trees. Moreover, Lowell's reference to "that roof of the world you seem to have attained" suggests admiration for Bishop's new geographical surroundings and the elevated burst of creativity that they have facilitated. Therefore, Bishop and Lowell both mock quasi-religious reverence for images of literary idols yet take part in this reverence at the same time.

Therefore, as in the case of painted miniatures, portraits serve as a visual counterpart to letters that help to renew the attachment between correspondents, but the accuracy of these images is often called into question. A repeated theme in the *Words in Air* correspondence is Bishop's anxiety surrounding portraits and photographs that distort reality or do not offer an accurate reflection either of the self or another's image. This anxiety is present throughout the pair's long correspondence, as in the examples of Moore's typewriter photograph and Bishop in the car she cannot drive discussed above, and in many others. In an early letter to Lowell, Bishop describes a fanciful steel engraving of the poet Robert Burns that Moore has hanging in her Brooklyn apartment. Bishop writes: "Oh—Marianne has a very nice, old-fashioned steel-engraving of Burns in the front hall. I admired it; said I hoped sometime to write something about him, & didn't he look nice. She replied, 'But he couldn't have looked that nice, really, of course'" (*WIA* 37). Towards the end of the correspondence with Lowell, Bishop reiterates her distrust of (photographic)

portraits when she remarks: “Photographers and undertakers are the worst characters I know, I think” (*WIA* 753), in response to a letter in which Lowell bemoans an unflattering “family portrait photograph” published in *Newsweek* magazine without his knowledge. As this chapter will go on to demonstrate, this anxiety surrounding inaccurate portraits and photographs appears again, and is further developed, in relation to the poets’ corresponding memoirs, “91 Revere Street” and “Memories of Uncle Neddy.”

### **“lava cameo”**

Before coming to these memoirs, however, I want to turn now to the example of an antique miniature cameo that Lowell sent to Bishop as a gift in order to reflect on the indirect portrait of Bishop that this gift represents. Lowell sent the cameo along with a letter to Bishop in December 1957. The gift of the cameo mirrors even more precisely the tradition of miniature portrait exchange in late eighteenth-century letter writing. Bishop wrote to Lowell in December 1957 thanking him for both a photograph of himself that he had sent and as well as the Christmas gift of a cameo:

The photograph is a very nice one; I’m having it framed in Petrópolis. Lota’s “grandchildren,” the two older ones, that is, are here and they asked me who that “disarrayed” man was. They also want to know what everyone has died of—all portraits apparently strike them as being of dead people! The Christmas present—well, I kept it unopened for a week, thinking I’d keep it that way until Christmas. But finally that label ‘lava cameo’ was too much for me, and I opened it [...] It’s really a

marvelous, curious, quaint, and evocative piece of workmanship and I am crazy about it. . . It makes me think of the Brownings, *The Marble Faun*, *Roderick Hudson*, and my own strange stay in Naples. Did you notice the high point of the carving—that one romantic curl that you can see through? I also like the other cruder curls of gold, which remind me strongly of sucked dandelion stems; but I’m getting altogether too Marianne-ish about this, I’m afraid. You can see I’m very much taken with it. It really is pure 19<sup>th</sup>-century romanticism, late. (*WIA* 241)

The two nineteenth-century novels Bishop refers to, by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1860) and Henry James (1875), respectively, both feature a central concern with the relationship between art and life, portraits, copies and likenesses. Moreover, her allusion to Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s epistolary courtship is evidence of the way that Bishop and Lowell’s correspondence often hovers on the boundary between romance and friendship. There is no evidence that the two poets were ever lovers, although Lowell famously wrote to Bishop in August 1957 (six months prior to sending the antique lava cameo) in which he described having half-contemplated proposing to her during the pair’s stay in Stonington, Maine in 1948: “I assumed that [it] would be just a matter of time before I proposed and I half believed that you would accept” (*WIA* 225). In the same letter, Lowell compares his relationship with Bishop to another famous literary, and epistolary, pairing: “I suppose we might almost claim something like apparently Strachey and Virginia Woolf” (*WIA* 226). Strachey and Woolf are perhaps a more appropriate comparison for Bishop and Lowell, since the pair were briefly engaged on

February 17<sup>th</sup> 1909, but their relationship faced the impediment of Strachey's homosexuality, in a reversal of the situation between Bishop and Lowell. Lowell's reference to Woolf and Strachey, and Bishop's mention of the Brownings, represent a trying on of likenesses that is connected to the idea of letters as an exchange of portraits, and a comparison of the self with representations of others. It also demonstrates again the performativity of letter writing that many critics have noted [see Paulin (1996); Jolly and Stanley (2005); Favret (2004)], where correspondents experiment with different personas and voices, in this case mimicking the epistolary voices of famous literary pairings.

There is no evidence that Bishop ever reciprocated Lowell's half-muffled romantic advances, nor did she ever respond directly to the section of the letter in which Lowell discusses the imagined proposal. The tone of Bishop's letters indicates her fondness and affection for her "Sad friend," as she addressed Lowell in her elegy for him after his death, "North Haven." Yet, there are many moments when the letters enter, or nearly enter, a romantic register, as seen in Lowell's quasi-proposal letter. On Bishop's side there was affection and admiration, but she tries to evade or diffuse any romantic connotations, usually by delaying her responses to those letters in which Lowell trespasses into a different tone. For example, she waited a fortnight to reply to Lowell's proposal letter, and even then her reply did not address the matter of the proposal directly, instead focusing on shopping lists that she and Lota had been asked to buy in New York for Brazilian friends, and providing frenetic descriptions of a trip to East Hampton:

There are little lists everywhere and jotted calculations changing waist-measurements in centimeters into inches [...] We had a friend with a car here today and over the week-end we went down to East Hampton where Fizzdale and Gold were giving a concert. It poured and rained and the millions of automobiles on the endless highways *whished-whished* by, almost in silence" (*WIA* 228).

The effect of the lists and automobile descriptions in the letter deliberately do not allow Bishop or her correspondent too much room to stop, think or breathe.

While the many exchanges of photographs, gifts and poems in the letters do at times mirror a romantic correspondence, by the same token, what could be a mutually affectionate and admiring correspondence also had a distinctly competitive edge. The figurative portraits that the two poets painted of each other in letters and poems were not always wholly complimentary. In the case of their two interlocking poems—"The Armadillo" and "Skunk Hour"—Bishop and Lowell's tributes to each other are as flattering as they are ambivalent. Taking his cue from the image of the "weak mailed fist" ("mailed" in the sense of both armour and letter writing) at the close of Bishop's "The Armadillo," Paul Muldoon writes that the correspondence between the two poets "was more often than not guarded rather than unbuttoned, more often than not representing an iron fist in a velvet glove, but sometimes, a velvet fist in an iron glove" ("Fire Balloons" 216).

Muldoon finds a subtext in the correspondence and poems suggesting that the pair were more mutually critical than they might first appear. For example, Muldoon cites an early review of Bishop's work that Lowell published

in the *Sewanee Review* around the time of their first meeting in 1947 in which he wrote: “Compared with Moore, she is softer, dreamier, more human and more personal; she is less idiosyncratic, and less magnificent” (qtd. in *WIA* 5). Muldoon reads these comments as profoundly double-edged: “It’s hard not to read the phrase ‘less magnificent’ as another put-down. ‘Softer’ and ‘dreamier’ are hardly qualities we normally associate with first-rate poetry” (229).

Muldoon sees this review as one of the key influences behind Bishop’s “The Armadillo,” finding echoes of Lowell’s language in the poem’s closing lines “*Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry*” (P 102). Here, Bishop moves from a literal to a symbolic register, first describing the St John’s Day fire balloons and then moving to contemplate something larger and more mysterious that is played out in the damaging effect of the balloons on the animal world. These final lines point to the dangers of the “frail, illegal fire balloons” in the poem as well as seeming to question the associated dangers of a poetic style too prone to “*dreamlike mimicry*” and a form of copying which is an escape from reality into a world of imagination and fancy. Muldoon goes on to link these lines to Bishop’s anxieties surrounding her supposed “imitation” of Moore, who Lowell saw as an idiosyncratic and unworldly poetic influence (“Fire Balloons” 223-224).

The gift of the lava cameo is, I want to argue, another facet of this particular exchange and its attendant concerns surrounding copying, mimicry and miniaturist description. Lowell sent Bishop “Skunk Hour” in a letter written on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1957. He dispatched the lava cameo three months later, along with a letter dated 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1957 commenting that: “I am dedicating ‘Skunk Hour’ to you. A skunk isn’t much of a present for a Lady poet, but I’m a



skunk in the poem" (*WIA* 239). In his September 1957 letter Lowell again used diminutive language to describe Bishop's poem, thus somewhat tempering his praise. Lowell's comments keep coming back to ideas about size, specifically the "small" size of Bishop's poems. Compared to his other new poems, which Lowell says "beat the big drum too much," "Skunk Hour" is written "in a small voice that's fairly charmingly written I hope (called 'Skunk Hour,' not in your style yet indebted a little to your 'Armadillo.')" (*WIA* 230). A "small voice that's fairly charmingly written" is another example of the sometimes muted nature of Lowell's praise for Bishop. In his 1947 *Sewanee Review*, Lowell had remarked on the "size" of Bishop's poems saying that: "[t]he splendor and minuteness of [Bishop's] descriptions soon seem wonderful. Later one realizes that her large, controlled, and elaborate common sense is always or almost always absorbed in its subjects, and that she is one of the best craftsmen alive" (qtd. in *WIA* 5).

What the lava cameo gift captures is this sense that Lowell sees Bishop as a miniaturist writing in a "small voice that's fairly charmingly written." The lava cameo itself is small and charming yet it also represents the other side of Lowell's praise, and what Muldoon terms as "the iron fist in a velvet glove." In another sense, the "*lava cameo*," (*WIA* 241) again Bishop's use of italics here as in the close of "Armadillo" are significant and revealing, taps into the fire imagery that Muldoon highlights as central to Bishop's poem.<sup>106</sup> Lowell's gift is another "fire balloon" itself: both "pretty" and "dangerous" at the same time. This tiny cameo, like the fire balloons that mirror and replicate, in miniature

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<sup>106</sup> Discussing Bishop's emphatic use of italics at the close of "The Armadillo," Muldoon writes: "The italicisation of the sentence may be read as a restatement of the argument, if we may term it such, of the last stanza of 'The Armadillo' in which the 'pretty' response is inadequate to either the fate of the animals before the fire or the fate of the citizenry of Hamburg or the Bikini Atoll or Rio de Janeiro in the face of their predicaments" (228).

form, the sun, is loaded with significance. Lowell's comments in relation to the dedication of "Skunk Hour" to Bishop are distinctly gendered. He says that the skunk poem is not much of a gift for a "Lady Poet, but I'm the skunk in the poem," therefore associating Bishop's poems with feminine delicacy and his own with a kind of odorous masculinity. The two gifts—"Skunk Hour" and the cameo—are both portraits of a kind. "Skunk Hour" is Lowell's own animal self-portrait and also reflects Lowell's image of Bishop as a "Lady Poet," and a stickler for "minuteness of detail." As Jean Arnold has argued, cameos were highly gendered objects in themselves, and served to reinforce Victorian stereotypes of femininity.<sup>107</sup>

Moreover, Bishop strongly disliked being referred to as a "Lady Poet", as a number of her comments in letters indicate. For example, in a letter to Lowell dated July 1953 Bishop expresses her fears that if she were to publish a book of short stories it would be written off as too feminine and delicate: "I'd like to follow [*A Cold Spring*] in the fall with a book of stories, but I am afraid the total effect is pretty 'precious,' 'lovely, sensitive prose,' etc." (WIA 141). In the same letter, Bishop responds to an article published in *Vogue*, titled "Poets Among Us," which profiles both Bishop and Lowell: "(The blurb said my poetry was written like *chiselling in quartz*—quite a feat.) But 'women poets' either have to be COLD or HOT, obviously" (141). The chiselling metaphor in *Vogue* echoes Lowell's earlier description of Bishop as a "craftsmen," which is then reflected in the delicately chiselled image in the lava cameo. In a later exchange in 1956, Lowell writes: "There's a review of Auden's *Faber Book of Verse* in the *New*

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<sup>107</sup> In *Victorian Jewelry, Identity, and the Novel: Prisms of Culture* (2011) Jean Arnold writes that cameos were, in the nineteenth century, "a small fashion detail that replicated the gender separation of Victorian culture" and presented idealised images of women (107).

*Statesmen* by Walter Allen, who calls you the best woman poet since Emily Dickinson. I know you like neither E.D. nor being called a ‘woman’ poet” (*WIA* 188.). Bishop responds with a humorous story about meeting a Brazilian lady who, “determined to show off her English,” mistakenly calls Bishop a “poetress”: “‘Woman’ poet—no. What I like to be called now is *poetress* [...] I think it’s a nice mixture of poet and mistress” (*WIA* 190). Although Bishop makes a joke of the label here, it is clear from her comments that she disliked the term “woman poet” and found it a patronising and unhelpful distinction. That Lowell later chose to use the term “Lady Poet” to describe Bishop in proffering his gift of the poem “Skunk Hour” along with the lava cameo might therefore be read as an ironic gesture. However, as Muldoon argues, it is frequently difficult to untangle genuine praise from veiled critique in Lowell’s comments about Bishop’s poetry. The cameo represents part of a figurative, and distinctly gendered, if also partly ironic, portrait of Bishop that Lowell is painting.

The cameo is a multi-faceted portrait, acting as a substitute miniature likeness of Bishop, and reflecting some of what she called her own “worst fears” about her poetry. In the 1947 letter in which Bishop responds to Lowell’s *Sewanee Review* comments, she writes:

It is the only review that goes at things in what *I* think is the right way . . . I also liked what you said about Miss Moore [...] I suppose for pride’s sake I should take some sort of stand about the adverse criticisms, but I agreed with some of them only too well—I suppose no critic is ever really as harsh as oneself. It seems to me you spoke out my worst fears as well as some of my ambitions (*WIA* 5).

Although Muldoon's arguments about Lowell's sometimes disingenuous and belittling comments on Bishop's poetry are convincing, what he does not mention is that Bishop's response showed how Lowell's criticisms often reflected back Bishop's own misgivings about her poetry. Lowell's critique cuts to the heart of what Bishop sees as the central flaws in her poetry. She recognises that its "splendour and minuteness," as well as its "dreamy" qualities tread a delicate line between painstakingly detailed observation and escapist whimsy.

Bishop deliberately incorporated and reflected upon these "worst fears" in her poetry. In "The Armadillo," and also in her response to the lava cameo, she keys into the set of miniaturist characteristics that Lowell attributes to her poetry. To go back to the 1957 letter in which Bishop thanks Lowell for the cameo, she writes that: "It's really a marvelous, curious, quaint, and evocative piece of workmanship" (*WIA* 241). The choice of words and sentence structure almost repeat Lowell's much earlier account of Bishop as "softer, dreamier, more human and more personal" along with his comments about the "minuteness of her descriptions." Bishop's admiration for the "workmanship" involved in the creation of the cameo also reiterates, in slightly altered form, Lowell's description of her as "the best craftsmen alive" (qtd. in *WIA* 5). In what she writes about the cameo, Bishop also enacts what Lowell sees as her inescapable Marianne Moore influences, describing in minute and painstaking detail the appearance of the hair on the miniature: "I also like the other cruder curls of gold, which remind me strongly of sucked dandelion stems; but I'm getting altogether too Marianne-ish about this, I'm afraid" (*WIA* 241). The choice of the word "curious" in this 1957 letter is also significant. This is

another term that Lowell went on to use at the start of a blurb that he wrote for the publication of Bishop's *Questions of Travel* (1965): "I am sure no living poet is as curious and observant as Miss Bishop [...] She has a humorous, commanding genius for picking up the unnoticed, now making something sprightly and right, and now a great monument" (qtd. *WIA* 580). As Muldoon has also observed, the word "curious" is double-edged "meaning both 'careful attention to detail' and, more often in the popular imagination, 'somewhat surprising, strange, singular, singular, odd, queer'" (227). Yet, the terms "curious" and "queer" need not be read as a negative description. Bishop's later poem "The Moose," for example, celebrates the "curious," otherworldly appearance of the moose on a bus journey through Nova Scotia (*P* 193).

Bishop knowingly plays with this representation of herself as she sees it reflected in Lowell's comments. If Bishop's poetry is "more human" than Moore's (as Lowell wrote in 1947), then she deliberately complicates this idea in "The Armadillo." The poem is about an animal and it is precisely the armadillo's non-human characteristics that are observed and described in the poem, and on which the central message of the poem turns. When the armadillo appears towards the end of the poem "all alone" and "glistening" we realise the destruction caused by the "frail" miniature imitations of the sun's powerful rays that the fire balloons represent.

Moreover, Bishop re-appropriates some of the miniaturist characteristics with which she is associated, and uses them to her advantage. She writes that she is flattered and moved by what Muldoon sees as Lowell's injurious comments. In her response to Lowell's blurb for *Questions of Travel*, which Bishop was so moved by she said that it had her "shedding big tears," she

writes that “I like especially of course, being ‘curious’ and ‘sprightly’—both words I hope I really live up to” (*WIA* 582). As her comment about “shedding big tears” indicates, Bishop again picks up on the implicit comments that Lowell makes about size in relation to her work. Her letter offers a corrective to the idea that her work has any large-scale ambitions; it is primarily (in Lowell’s words) the small and “the unnoticed” that Bishop is interested in rather than any (again Lowell’s words) “great monument[s].”

As if in response to this particular passage in Lowell’s blurb for *Questions of Travel*, Bishop writes of her travels in Brazil and her plans to write a “memoir” or “two or three (true) short-story kind of stories [...] It’s not the big places like that [Bahia] that I intend writing about, however, but smaller odds and end[s], and people, and possibly music and architecture” (*WIA* 584). Again, a preference for “smaller odds and end[s]” shows Bishop’s miniaturist aspirations and preference for small works of art. As she wrote in her “Gallery Note for Wesley Wehr,” written in 1967 not long after the above-quoted letter to Lowell: “Why shouldn’t we, so generally addicted to the gigantic, at last have some small works of art, some short poems, short pieces of music [...], some intimate, low-voiced and delicate things in our mostly huge and roaring, glaring world?” (*Pr* 352).<sup>108</sup> Memoir and short stories, as opposed to long and ambitious travel pieces or long novels, are genres typically associated with the small-scale, the “intimate,” and the “low-voiced,” to borrow Bishop’s description of Wesley Wehr’s miniature paintings.

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<sup>108</sup> Wesley Wehr was a painter and had been a student in one of Bishop’s poetry classes. In her “Gallery Note,” Bishop describes the small size of Wehr’s paintings, recounting the story of a briefcase that Wehr used to transport and display his miniature art works. Bishop admires the paintings’ unique ability to capture an eerily compacted sense of the magnitude of time and space (*Pr* 352).

While Bishop seems to have agreed with Lowell's assessment of her poems as picking up "the unnoticed," her comments about wanting to write about "smaller odds and ends," including architecture, and deliberately avoiding the "big" places, lend an ambiguity to Lowell's claim that Bishop also occasionally constructs out of the material of her poetry "a great monument" (*WIA* 580). However, Bishop's attention to the small-scale does not necessarily rule out the chance that her poems might simultaneously represent "a great monument."

In her an article on Bishop's miniaturist interests, Susan Rosenbaum argues that Bishop deliberately positions herself as a miniaturist in ways that challenge a dominant post-war American culture obsessed with gigantism: "In both her poems and watercolour paintings, Bishop employs forms of representation associated with the miniature—namely copying, reduction of scale, and an exaggerated attention to detail—so as to challenge the perspective of the 'huge and roaring world'" ("Bishop and the Miniature Museum" 63). Bishop's delight in the gift of the lava cameo, not one that features in Rosenbaum's excellent analysis, reveals both Bishop's fascination with, and also in my view nagging misgivings about, miniature forms.

The portraits of Bishop that Lowell painted in his reviews, blurbs and letters are ones that Bishop seems generally to have agreed with, and which she responded to in letters and poems. What Muldoon is in danger of missing in his use of the metaphor of the "fire balloons" to describe particularly Lowell's letters is the extent to which both Bishop and Lowell were engaged in an exchange which was productive for both poets. What Muldoon refers to as the "intertextuality" (226) of the Bishop-Lowell letters is so deeply enmeshed that

it is almost impossible to untangle which poet influenced, borrowed or “stole” from the other.

In the case of their autobiographical memoirs, Lowell’s “91 Revere Street” was inspired by Bishop’s “In the Village,” and Bishop’s “Memories of Uncle Neddy” in turn borrows the trope of the family portrait from Lowell’s “91 Revere Street.” Moreover, when Bishop decided to place her story “In the Village” at the centre of the collection *Questions of Travel*, she credited Lowell’s placing of “91 Revere Street” at the centre of *Life Studies* as the inspiration for the idea.<sup>109</sup>

Muldoon’s final point about “The Armadillo” and “Skunk Hour” highlights the difficulty of attributing the genesis of the two poems to one individual in particular. He concludes, “When Lowell praises the armadillo because he (and it is a *he*) ‘run[s] off with the whole poem,’ it’s yet another projection of himself that Bishop, his forbear, with all her customary forbearance, has already figured in” (229). Here Muldoon suggests that Bishop is the tortoise that wins the race, and that her (miniature) portrait of Lowell as the armadillo is one that Bishop had already factored in before Lowell transposed it into his own miniature self-portrait in “Skunk Hour.”

Yet, the complexity of this line of argument, and of working out who anticipated who, demonstrates the extent to which the two poems, and the two poets, are inextricably tied together in a relationship of mutual influence and inspiration. Lowell says in one letter that after reading “The Armadillo” and “Skunk Hour” side-by-side, he felt like a “petty plagiarist” (*WIA* 258). Bishop’s

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<sup>109</sup> In a March 1965 letter to Lowell, Bishop writes: “I decided I’d put in ‘In the Village,’ too—to go with the several Nova Scotia poems.— At first he [Robert Giroux, Bishop’s editor] said no, it was imitating you too much (it was)—but then when he’d read the story he changed his mind, and is now all for including it” (*WIA* 573).



poem also borrows, according to Muldoon, specific phrases from Lowell's 1947 *Sewanee Review* piece about Bishop, particularly the words "softer" and "dreamier" in its closing lines ("Fire Balloons" 229). Although Muldoon demonstrates the extent to which the "The Armadillo" and "Skunk Hour" can be read intertextually, in close connection to the letters, he neglects to state that Bishop originally titled "The Armadillo" "From A Letter" therefore indicating its genesis in two-way correspondence, rather than a battle of wills. Discussing drafts of "The Armadillo" held in Bishop's archive, Joelle Biele observes:

That Bishop looked at the poem as a kind of letter is apparent from the drafts. Before she titled the poem "The Armadillo," she played with other headings, moving back and forth between "The Owls' Nest," "Minor Catastrophe," "Minor Tragedy" with "From a Letter" at the start. "From a Letter" is the title to which she returned while she tried out the others. "From a Letter" was at the center of the poem, the center from which her other ideas would emerge. ("Like Working" 95)

Biele demonstrates that Bishop's poem emerged from letters to a number of different correspondents, borrowing and combining images from letters to Pearl Kazin, Anny Baumann and Isabella Gardner, among others, and eventually inserting a dedication to Robert Lowell at the beginning of the poem (96). This complicates Muldoon's emphasis on the poem as a riposte aimed solely at Lowell, and demonstrates its status as a gift formed from and shared via correspondence.

### **“91 Revere Street” and “Memories of Uncle Neddy”**

Bishop’s memoir “Memories of Uncle Neddy” is also “from a letter” in the sense that it arises directly from the exchange with Lowell.<sup>110</sup> Bishop’s memoir about her Uncle Artie (referred to as Uncle Neddy in the story) grows out of her correspondence with Lowell about his own memoir “91 Revere Street” and its relationship to the other poems in *Life Studies*.<sup>111</sup> Bishop borrowed aspects of her memoir from a 1957 letter to Lowell in which she describes a pair of portraits sent to her by Bishop’s aunt Grace in Nova Scotia. In the same December 1957 letter to Lowell in which Bishop thanks him for sending the lava cameo, she also mentions that she has recently received the two child portraits, which depict her uncle Artie and mother Gertrude.

It could be said that the “theme” of Bishop’s letter as a whole is portraiture, and in it Bishop refers to a number of different kinds of portraits and representations, as well as the related subject of frames and framing. At the start Bishop thanks Lowell for the photograph he has sent of himself saying that Lota’s grandchildren asked about the picture of Lowell and “want to know what everyone has died of—all portraits apparently strike them as being of dead people!” (*WIA* 241). This silently links to the close of the letter in which Bishop describes the two child portraits of now “dead people” in their frames—her mother and uncle Artie— which have arrived in Brazil from Nova Scotia:

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<sup>110</sup> “Memories of Uncle Neddy” was first published in the *Southern Review* in 1977. However, as the correspondence with Lowell demonstrates, it was begun much earlier, around 1957 (*WIA* 247).

<sup>111</sup> Lowell included the prose memoir “9 Revere Street” at the centre of his collection of poems *Life Studies* (1959).

They are awfully nice, just as I'd remembered them, except that I'd had Uncle Arthur leaning on the red-plush-hung table and my mother leaning on the red-plush chair, instead of vice-versa, I suppose because I like the chair so much. They are in huge gold frames, a little hard to reconcile with our modern architecture, but so charming we can't resist them.

"Gertie" aged 8, wears little boots with one leg crossed over the other, and "Artie" aged 12, has *his* little boots crossed the other way. (He looks very much like me.) And how strange to see them in Brazil. (WIA 244)

This description of the portraits in the letter to Lowell establishes key themes that Bishop goes on to explore in more detail in her memoir. For example, the act of looking back at the past and the distorting effects of memory, the staged nature of the portraits and the way that they mirror one another, the discrepancies between the paintings' origin in Nova Scotia and their new home in Brazil, and the importance of the frames that encompass the paintings, both real and symbolic.

As well as the portraits themselves, frames and framing are central to the two memoirs. Lowell's "91 Revere Street" and Bishop's "Memories of Uncle Neddy" both use descriptions of family portrait heirlooms as a framing device. They also pay close attention to the relationship between the pictures and the frames that enclose them. "91 Revere Street" depicts Lowell's childhood living on the edges of elite Boston society, and his troubled relationship with his domineering mother and retired naval officer father. Lowell makes clear that his family were both literally and figuratively on the edge of these privileged Bostonian circles, recounting a statement his mother once made that the

family's Revere Street house was "barely perched on the outer rim of the hub of decency" (*Life Studies* 16), a sentence that itself sounds like a balancing act in danger of falling off. The memoir begins and ends with Lowell's descriptions of family portraits, which act as a framing device. He begins with the memory of a portrait of Major Mordecai Myers, now lost, which used to hang in the parlour of his parents' Boston house on Revere Street, and which is referred to in a catalogue of objects in the Smithsonian Museum:

The artist painted Major Myers in his sanguine War of 1812 uniform with epaulettes, white breeches, and a scarlet frogged waistcoat. His right hand played with the sword 'now to be seen in the Smithsonian cabinet of heirlooms.' The pose was routine and gallant. The full-lipped smile was good-humouredly pompous and embarrassed. (*Life Studies* 11)

The portrait presents a subject who appears somewhat uncomfortable and at odds with his grand, military surroundings. Lowell uses the portrait as a jumping off point into his childhood memories:

Major Modercai Myers' portrait has been mislaid past finding, but out of my memories I often come on it in the setting of our Revere Street house, a setting now fixed in the mind, where it survives all the distortions of fantasy, all the blank befogging of forgetfulness. There, the vast number of remembered *things* remains rocklike. Each is in its place, each has its function, its history, its drama. There, all is preserved by that motherly

care that one either ignored or resented in his youth. The things and their owners come back urgent with life and meaning—because finished, they are enduring and perfect. (*Life Studies* 13)

The recounting of “remembered things” structures the memoir. 91 Revere Street is both a real place and a kind of metaphorical house for Lowell’s memories. Moreover, his memoir becomes a kind of parallel to “Cousin Cassie Mason Myers Julian-James’s privately printed *Biographical Sketches: A Key to a Cabinet of Heirlooms in the Smithsonian Museum*” (11), which is mentioned at the very start. Lowell uses this parallel account as another frame for his own looser and more impressionistic key to the contents of a house and its inhabitants. As with the lost portrait of Mordecai Myers, many of these objects no longer exist, yet they are “preserved” in the imaginary museum of Lowell’s memory.

Ideas of portraiture, self-portraiture and framing are central to *Life Studies* as a whole. The poems in the “Life Studies” section that follows “91 Revere Street” are portraits of a kind. They describe Lowell’s family members and function as a gallery or family photograph album. Moreover, as the above section from “91 Revere Street” shows, these various portraits “function” as presences in the collection, like ghosts that “come back urgent with life and meaning.” In the passage Lowell also implies that the particularities of his own experience when viewed in this way become representative of something wider, larger and more universal. There is a shift from the first to the third person in the passage when Lowell writes, “There, all is preserved by that motherly care that one either ignored or resented in *his* youth” [my emphasis].

It is significant too that in the preceding paragraph Lowell tells us that Major Mordecai had been “a mayor of Schenectady” (12). Schenectady is a city in New York State, but it also sounds very similar to the figure of speech synecdoche (a part standing in for the whole) thus gesturing at the representative nature of Lowell’s memoir. Lowell both seeks to represent his own individual experience, as well as accessing a shared American experience. This is a theme that Bishop picks up on in her comments about the memoir in a letter to Lowell where she makes the point that his life seems to translate more easily than hers into this symbolic, universal register. She writes that Lowell’s memoir “seems significant, illustrative, American” (*WIA* 247).

At the close of the memoir, Lowell brings up the subject of the family portraits and their frames (literal and contextual) again. Major Mordecai’s son, Colonel Theodorus, is displayed in an ostentatious frame: “his vainglorious picture frame was a foot and a half wide” (*Life Studies* 50). Yet the pomp of the frame appears to belie its subject’s relative ordinariness. Taken out of its original context as part of the décor of “Cousin Cassie’s Washington Mansion” (50) the painting loses its sheen and appears simultaneously overdone and drab, attempting to portray a social stature and lineage that never really existed in reality: “Colonel Theodorus Bailey Myers had never been a New Englander. His family tree reached to no obscure Somersetshire yeoman named Winslowe or Lowle. He had never even, like his father, Mordecai, gloried in a scarlet War of 1812 waistcoat. His portrait is an indifferent example from a dull bad period” (50). The portrait is described in terms of its theatricality and the embellishment of a subject that, underneath, appears relatively ordinary. Colonel Theodorus is depicted wearing “an obsequiously conservative costume

which one associated with undertakers and the musicians at Symphony Hall,” as he stands before a “majestic Tibetan screen” in a pose that makes him seem like “an ancestor-god from Lhasa, a blasphemous and bogus attitude” and with his “colonel’s tabs [...] crudely stitched to a civilian coat” (50). These are all details that point out the staged nature of the portrait. In comparison to the portrait of his father, Major Mordecai, this picture shows that the family’s stature has depreciated over time. The portrait of Colonel Theodorous is an unintended picture of a disappointing son. It also functions, in its deliberate positioning at the close of the memoir, as a kind of mirror for Lowell himself to view his father’s and his own perceived diminished standing.

Bishop’s memoir “Memories of Uncle Neddy” is remarkably similar to Lowell’s “91 Revere Street” in a number of ways, demonstrating that it was an important source of inspiration for her own thinking in relation to her family history and memories. However, there are also important differences between the two memoirs. Bishop takes up the idea of family portraits as a framing device, describing the two child portraits of her Uncle Arthur and her mother, Gertrude, at both the beginning and the end of the memoir. The two memoirs use very similar list-like sentence structures in order to describe the family members depicted in the portraits. In “91 Revere Street” Lowell describes Major Mordecai as:

[M]y Grandmother Lowell’s grandfather. His life was tame and honourable. He was a leisured squire and merchant, a member of the state legislature, a mayor of Schenectady, a ‘president’ of Kinderhook village. Disappointingly, his famous ‘blazing brown eye’ seems in all

things to have shunned the outrageous. After his death he was remembered soberly as a New York state gentleman [...].” (Lowell *Life Studies* 12)

Bishop’s description of the portrait of her Uncle Neddy/Artie reads almost like a deliberate comedic reversal of these traits: “This is ‘little Edward,’ before he became an uncle, before he became a lover, husband, father or grandfather, a tinsmith, a drunkard, or a famous fly-fisherman—any of the various things he turned out to be” (*Pr* 146).

Bishop also repeats Lowell’s use of fog as a metaphor for memory and looking back into the past. In the passage quoted above from “91 Revere Street,” Lowell writes that the portrait of Major Myers is “fixed in the mind, where it survives all the distortions of fantasy, all the blank befogging of forgetfulness” (13). In a similar manner, at the very beginning of “Memories of Uncle Neddy,” Bishop describes the fog in Rio de Janeiro, where she writes that she is composing her memoir: “The sea—I’m writing in a penthouse apartment, eleven floors up, facing southeast over the sea—the sea is blurred with rain, almost hidden by the mixture of rain and fog, that rarity here” (146). This echoes the “blank befogging of forgetfulness” in Lowell’s memoir. In both accounts, however, Bishop and Lowell are able to peer through the fog and, in the act of remembering, see their relatives and the past more clearly. The climate of damp and fog becomes the perfect setting, paradoxically, for Bishop to remember her Uncle Neddy, as she connects the climate of mildew to a more finely attuned sense of time and mortality:



That grey-green bloom, or that shadow of fine soot, is just enough to serve as a hint of morbidity, attractive morbidity—although perhaps mortality is a better word. The gray-green suggests life, the sooty shadow—although living, too—death and decay. And now that Uncle Neddy has turned up again, the latter, the black, has suddenly become associated with him. (*Pr* 147)

Bishop constructs a continuum between damp, fog, mould, mildew, life and death in her memoir. The mildew that forms on objects and people during the rainy season in Brazil throws into sharp relief this connection between life and its shadow, death. Moreover, the mould also represents a kind of life.

Similarly, the picture of Uncle Neddy, as with Lowell's Major Mordecai portrait, appears to come alive:

And Uncle Neddy, that is, my Uncle Edward, is *here*. Into this wildly foreign and, to him, exotic setting, Uncle Neddy has just come back, from the framer's. He leans slightly, silently backwards against the damp-stained pale-yellow wall, looking quite cheerfully into the eyes of whoever happens to look at him—including the cat's, who investigated him just now. Only of course it isn't really Uncle Neddy, not as he was, or not as I knew him. (*Pr* 146)

The comma after "Uncle Neddy has just come back" creates a deliberate pause in which Bishop almost suggests that Uncle Neddy has come back to life. The emphasis on "*here*" points to the mismatch between this seemingly life-like

child portrait and his new surroundings of Rio de Janeiro. The detail of the curious cat investigating this new portrait heightens the sense that Uncle Neddy is a foreign object in “wildly foreign” surroundings. The way that the portrait almost appears to come back to life is similar to Lowell’s account of family portraits, which, he writes, “come back urgent with life and meaning.”

As in Lowell’s memoir, Bishop plays with the concept of frames and framing. Uncle Neddy is not only literally in a new frame; he is also framed anew by the setting of Rio de Janeiro. Moreover, like Lowell, Bishop highlights the dialogue that takes place between the pictures and the frames that contain them (both literal and contextual frames). Like Lowell’s relative Colonel Theodorus whose “vainglorious picture frame [is] a foot and a half wide,” Bishop’s child-portraits sit in gold frames that are almost as big. Fittingly, the paragraph in which Bishop describes these frames is itself framed in parentheses:

(The frames that these ancestor-children arrived in were a foot wide, painted and repainted with glittery, gritty gilt paint. They were meant to hang against dark wallpaper in a hair-cloth-and-mahogany northern parlor and brighten it up. I have taken the liberty of changing them to narrow, carefully dulled, gold ones, “modern.” Now the portraits are reduced to the scale suitable for hanging in apartments.) (*Pr* 147)

The phrase “ancestor-children” is an oxymoron. Similarly, the original large gold frames seem out-of-place and out-of-time in the context of Bishop’s Rio de

Janeiro apartment, since they were originally intended, as Bishop explains, to be hung in a “northern parlor” in Nova Scotia.

A number of the details within the paintings themselves also seem out of scale. As in the case of Lowell’s memoir, in which he highlighted the staged and theatrical nature of the family portraits, Bishop draws attention to the idealised and logically impossible elements in the paintings of the “ancestor-children.” The fringed chair on which Uncle Neddy’s arm rests appears to levitate, and is not one that Bishop remembers having been in her grandmother’s possession:

This chair is a holy wonder; it must have been the painter’s “property” chair—at least I never saw anything like it in my grandmother’s house. It consists of two hard-looking maroon-coloured pads, both hung with thick, foot-long maroon fringes; the lower one makes the seat, the upper one, floating in the airless air, and on which Uncle Neddy’s arm rests, the back. (147-148)

Not only is the chair a prop that seems to have been pre-inserted into the painting, it defies the laws of physics and serves only an ornamental purpose. Bishop extends this theatricality to her description of Uncle Neddy’s face, which again seems out of place in the painting: “It could almost have drifted in from another place, or another year, and settled into the painting. Plump (he was never in the slightest plump, that I can remember), his hair parted neatly on the left, his cheeks as pink as a girl’s, or a doll’s” (148). Later in the same paragraph Bishop remarks that “[h]is body looks neatly stuffed” as if describing a taxidermy animal.

As Bishop remarks in a letter to Lowell, she started to write “Memories of Uncle Neddy” shortly after composing the poem “First Death in Nova Scotia,” which describes the death of Uncle Arthur’s son, also called Arthur (*WIA* 394). The poem is a haunting account of the speaker’s encounter with the body of her “little cousin Arthur” (*P* 123). There are a number of parallels between memoir and poem, and Bishop’s description of the two Arthurs. In “First Death” the child’s body is described in contrast to and comparison with a “stuffed loon / shot and stuffed by Uncle / Arthur, Arthur’s father” (123). In the memoir it is Uncle Arthur who instead appears “stuffed” (*Pr* 148). Both poem and memoir depict a confrontation with mortality and the attempt to reconcile appearance and reality. They also feature a blurring together of the two Arthurs, old and young, father and son in the poem, and portrait Neddy and real Neddy in the memoir, and the perspective of the young Bishop herself. The two “Arthurs” are separated only by a comma in the line “Arthur, Arthur.” In Bishop’s memoir the painting’s surface functions as a mirror (*Pr* 161).

The poem describes the photographic portraits, in the form of old-fashioned chromographs, which are displayed in the parlor above the dead Arthur’s body. The chromographs feature English royalty: “Edward, Prince of Wales, / with Princess Alexandra, / and King George with Queen Mary” (*P* 123). These (photographic) portraits of paired monarchs anticipate the significance of paintings and pairings in both “Memories of Uncle Neddy,” and they are another example of how miniature portraits take on a symbolic value, and facilitate a blurring of the self-other divide. They are evidence of Nova Scotian ties to Britain and the monarchy, and represent an Anglophile nostalgia, as well as seeming quaint and somewhat out of place in the Canadian parlor depicted in

the poem. At the close of the poem Bishop imagines little dead Arthur travelling into the portraits to be “the smallest page at court,” although the young Bishop worries about how he will get there: “But how could Arthur go, / clutching his tiny lily, / with his eyes shut up so tight / and the roads deep in snow?” (125). This final moment in the poem troubles the boundary between art and life.

The painting in “Memories of Uncle Neddy” fixes a partly idealised image of Uncle Neddy, which Bishop struggles to reconcile with the version that exists in her own memories: “He never looked so clean and glossy, so peaceful and godly, so presentable, again—or certainly not as I remember him” (148). In a memoir that is all about time and memory, the portraits appear to disregard time and depict a state of perpetual, albeit staged and unreal, or “stuffed,” childhood.

While these paintings are full-size rather than miniatures, they belong, like miniatures, to the genre of the “copy.”<sup>112</sup> Bishop speculates that the two paintings “unsigned and undated [are] probably the work of an itinerant portrait painter” (150). They appear to have been copied partly from photographic “tin-types,” and partly from life, thus adding to their air of unreality: “Or perhaps the painter did the faces—clearer and brighter than the rest of the pictures, and in Uncle Neddy’s case slightly out of proportion, surely—from ‘life,’ the clothes from tintypes, and the rest from his imagination” (150).

Furthermore, although the ancestor-children are not depicted on a miniature scale in the sense that the paintings are full-size, the children are

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<sup>112</sup> Eighteenth-century miniature portraits were often copies of full-size paintings, as Marcia Pointon states: “Eighteenth-century miniaturists were part of an industry of copyists who provided full-scale replicas for a range of residences and official sites or reduced life-size portraits to handy pocket-size miniatures” (55).

miniaturised in other ways. Bishop compares both to dolls. Uncle Neddy's cheeks are "as pink as a girl's, or a doll's" (148). The two portraits also follow a trend in nineteenth-century American "folk art" in that they look like miniature adults rather than real children. Bishop remarks on their stiff, formal-looking poses, and the mismatch between their child-like, doll-like heads and older (but still smaller) bodies. Referring to the portrait of Neddy, Bishop writes: "I want to try to be chronological about this little boy who doesn't look much like a little boy. His semidisembodied head seems too big for his body; and his body seems older; far less alive, than the round, healthy, painted face" (149).

### **Miniatures in "Poem" and "New Year's Letter as Auden Says—"**

The phrase "from 'life'" Bishop uses to describe the faces of the portraits in her memoir anticipates Bishop's use of the same phrase in her later "Poem," in which she considers the nature of the miniature landscape painting by her Great Uncle Hutchinson. In "Poem" the miniature is itself a composite painting, which copies both from life and from memory and the imagination, like the child portraits with their mixture of tin-type, life and fantasy. In "Poem" Bishop writes (of herself and her uncle contemplating the same scene in Nova Scotia): "Our visions coincided—'visions' is / too serious a word—our looks, two looks: / art 'copying from life' and life itself, / life and the memory of it so compressed / they've turned into each other" (*P* 197). Although "Poem" makes no explicit reference to Lowell, Bishop sent it to him in a letter dated April 12<sup>th</sup> 1972 in which she also discusses Lowell's poems in *The Dolphin*, which included sections of Lowell's ex-wife Elizabeth Hardwick's letters. Bishop writes that in Lowell's poems it is "the mixture of truth & fiction that bothers me" (*WIA* 716).

Thus, Bishop must have had Lowell's poems, and her own objections to them, on her mind when she drafted "Poem." I think "Poem" also revisits many of the themes that Bishop and Lowell explored in relation to mirrors and paintings in their two memoirs and the correspondence that surrounds them. Lowell is perhaps a silent presence in the poem, representing another figure with whom Bishop's "visions" often coincided in an exchange that prompted Bishop to reflect on portraits and her own childhood memories.

Like the miniature painting in "Poem," the ancestor-children in "Memories of Uncle Neddy" are also composite images, which belong to a marginal genre of nineteenth-century itinerant painting, not unlike the marginal genre of miniaturist painting that Marcia Pointon describes (48). The descriptions of their respective family portraits allow both Bishop and Lowell to paint a composite self-portrait, formed from family images and memories. In both memoirs, the portraits appear to come alive. For Bishop, looking at the portrait of Uncle Neddy becomes a kind of looking in the mirror at herself. Towards the end of the memoir, describing the damp climate of Rio de Janeiro and the tendency of everything in her apartment, including pictures, to mould, Bishop writes: "I must watch out for the mildew that inevitably forms on old canvases in the rainy season, and wipe them off often. It will be the gray or pale-green variety that appears overnight on dark surfaces, like breath on a mirror" (161). This comment invokes a ghostly image. It is as if Bishop is Uncle Neddy in some sense, or elements of Uncle Neddy are alive within her.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> The passage recalls the scene in *King Lear* in which Lear asks for a looking-glass to test whether Cordelia is alive: "Lend me a looking-glass. / If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, / Why, then she lives" (Wells 270). Here, breath is a sign of life.

However, the social context in which Bishop places her two family portraits is, in many ways, very different from Lowell's upper crust Bostonian heritage. The angelic child Neddy is contrasted with the image that Bishop paints of a kind of "devil": "he represented 'the devil' for me, not a violent, active Devil, but a gentle black one, a devil of weakness" (*Pr* 147). Uncle Neddy was a man who was not well-travelled, who lived a relatively simple and rural life, and who was in many ways an outsider: "a tinsmith, a drunkard, [and] a famous fly-fisherman" (146). As Bishop puts it in a letter to Lowell, this seems a far cry from the portrait of Major Mordecai and the Cabinet of Heirlooms in the Smithsonian Museum:

And here I must confess [...] that I am green with envy at your kind of assurance. I feel that I could write in as much detail about my Uncle Artie, say—but what would be the significance? Nothing at all. He became a drunkard, fought with his wife, and spent most of his time fishing . . . and was ignorant as sin. It is sad; slightly more interesting than having an uncle practising law in Schenectady maybe, but that's all. Whereas all you have to do is put down the names! And the fact that it seems significant, illustrative, American, etc. gives you, I think, the confidence you display about tackling any idea or theme, *seriously*, in both writing and conversation (*WIA* 247).

The irony is that Bishop did go on to write her memoir about Uncle Artie/Neddy, and used the down-and-out status that she describes here as the glue to hold her story together. It is exactly Uncle Neddy's peripheral status that



makes him “significant, illustrative” in Bishop’s memoir, although in a smaller and quieter way than Lowell’s. Here, Bishop is also quietly critical of Lowell’s social standing. In comparison to Bishop’s Uncle Neddy, Lowell’s family portraits are of social insiders. However, there is an air of pretence about Lowell’s paintings, and a claim to a social standing that was perhaps not quite as grandiose as the paintings would suggest. After all, the painting of Major Mordecai is now symbolically “misaid past finding” (*Life Studies* 13), so cannot be the treasured possession it once was. Yet Bishop suggests in this letter that Lowell still trades on his names and social standing. She sees the memoir as evidence of the easy confidence that Lowell derives from his upper-crust lineage: “all you have to do is put the names down” (247). The differences in the two memoirs, and their ambitions in terms of size and scale, hark back to their correspondence. The two memoirs were born out of this back and forth.

Bishop’s close attention to the pairing of her two family portraits, and their twin-like mirrored nature, draws attention to the way that Bishop and Lowell creatively mirrored one another. They did so in “The Armadillo” and “Skunk Hour,” as well as what we might term their twin memoirs, “91 Revere Street” and “Memories of Uncle Neddy.” The two child portraits match each other in the way that the legs are crossed over in opposite directions. In addition to the theme of portraits, Bishop’s letter also touches on the related theme of mirrors, particularly in relation to the self contemplating its own image, or a version of its own image in a reflective surface. For example, commenting on Lowell’s poem, “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,” which forms the first part of the “Life Studies” sequence at the end of *Life Studies*, Bishop comments that “I love the face in the water, and the

marvellous description of Uncle D., his cabin, his trousers, etc., etc.” (*WIA* 246). The lines in the poem she is referring to read: “Distorting drops of water / pinpricked my face in the basin’s mirror. / I was a stuffed toucan / with a bibulous, multicoloured beak” (*Life Studies* 69). The toucan may well be Bishop-inspired given the importance of her pet toucan Sammy. The taxidermy also links back to her poem “First Death in Nova Scotia,” which features a stuffed bird.

Bishop’s previously unpublished epistolary poem, “New Year’s Letter as Auden Says—” is further evidence of the galvanising importance of Lowell’s image, and the image of himself that Bishop finds in his work, for Bishop’s own identity construction. In the poem, Bishop addresses a photograph of Lowell on the wall, which she mentions Lowell sent her at the start of her December 1957 letter (*WIA* 241). In the draft, the picture appears to come to life.<sup>114</sup> You can see the influence on her thinking in relation to Lowell’s “91 Revere Street” in this poem, as in “Memories of Uncle Neddy.” The poem demonstrates the analogous connections between letters and portraits as genres, and also the talismanic properties of both. In the poem, writing a letter is akin to addressing an image of the absent addressee in the form of a portrait. The image of Lowell is poised as if about to speak, or having just spoken: “your picture on the wall / as if you had just said something, / something good I just missed / Dearest—[Cal,] you look, / up from the back of your book” (*EAP* 115). The key phrase here is “as if”: Lowell’s portrait only appears to have “just said something” as a letter only conjures the imagined presence of the addressee.

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<sup>114</sup> Portraits coming to life in the context of an exchange of letters is a theme in real and fictional eighteenth and nineteenth-century correspondence. Grootenboer cites a similar example of Byron’s lover who addresses a portrait of the poet that appears to come alive (32).

The poem is characterised by anxiety surrounding mimicry and copies. The image of a parrot repeating back inappropriate things that Bishop has said is also a kind of epistolary metaphor for an imaginary conversation with someone who is not there or with oneself, although its mimicking is hollow:

Oh when the sun comes out—  
 the toucan spreads his wing  
 and re-oils every feather  
 and polishes up his bill  
 & the parrot calls  
 “Lota! Get out of the sun!”  
 (And naturally wants “A coffee!”  
 instead of what we consider appropriate)                    (EAP 115)

The image of the parrot is, I think, an indication of Bishop’s anxiety about Lowell parroting back elements of Bishop’s letters; private fears and family secrets that she would rather not hear repeated back to her in a different form. In the pivotal December 1957 letter in which Bishop discusses portraits of various kinds and responds to Lowell’s new *Life Studies* poems, Bishop writes:

While I remember it—one small item that I may have mentioned before. If you ever do anything with the poem about me, would you change the remark my mother was supposed to have made? She never did make it; in fact I don’t remember any direct threats, except the usual maternal ones. Her danger for me was just implied in the things I overheard the

grown-ups say before and after her disappearance. Poor thing, I don't want to have it any worse than it was. (*WIA* 243)

In an early draft of a sonnet for Elizabeth Bishop that eventually became "For Elizabeth Bishop 2. Castine Maine," Lowell had written that Bishop's mother had threatened to kill her. Here, Bishop refutes this claim. However, where in her letter Bishop is careful to phrase the request in the terms of a casual afterthought, in "New Year's Letter as Auden Says—" the sense of the dangers of Lowell's inaccurate mimicry of "things overheard" is more obviously apparent. Thus, Bishop's poem shows both the positive connection between correspondents that portraits can strengthen, and the hazards of poems that function as inaccurate and distorted representations.

This chapter has argued that there is a close, analogous relationship between letters and (miniature) portraits. The exchange of miniature portraits in letters in late eighteenth-century correspondence is a useful parallel to the way that Bishop and Lowell exchange photographs of one another in their letters, as well as Lowell's gift of a lava cameo. Bishop and Lowell's exchange replicates many elements that are fundamental to miniature portraits, in particular their status as talismanic and almost magical objects, similar to religious relics and reliquaries. In the context of the Bishop-Lowell correspondence, photographs of literary mentors or friends take on symbolic importance. Bishop attempts to create a kind of shrine in her *estudio*, and Lowell playfully places a photo of Bishop on top of his Christmas tree. Both poets demonstrate a degree of ambivalence in relation to the accuracy of photographs and portraits, however, as their letters, poems, and particularly

their interlocking poems and memoirs—"91 Revere Street" and "Memories of Uncle Neddy" show. "The Armadillo" and "Skunk Hour" feature animal portraits, which act as a form of portrait-painting in relation to each other, and a form of self-portraiture. The two memoirs describe family portraits that seem somehow out of scale, unreal or embellished. These two memoirs grew out of the correspondence between the two poets, and demonstrate the impossibility of untangling lines of influence between them. However, Bishop's poems, particularly "New Year's Letter as Auden Says—" demonstrate her deep anxiety in relation to inaccurate portraits, and the dangers of hollow mimicry and copying, which she associates with Lowell's confessional style. Ultimately, the exchange of portraits and letters produced a contemplation of the self in relation to the other, which is a central facet of correspondence. This informed both Lowell's and Bishop's work, demonstrating that the business of crafting poems and stories is often a combination of "two looks" rather than one.

## Chapter Five

### Transatlantic Epistolary Voyages: Amy Clampitt's "community of response"

Amy Clampitt was something of a literary outsider during her lifetime, and in critical studies of post-war American poets she sits slightly apart from more established figures of the Middle-Generation poets, including Bishop and Lowell, who, though her contemporaries in age, were in a number of ways not her exact contemporaries in poetry. Her distance from these other key figures stems, in part, from Clampitt's Midwestern roots but also, more importantly, from her late arrival on the poetry scene at the age of 63. The continuities and differences between Clampitt and her Middle-Generation peers or predecessors give Clampitt's poems their unique backward and forward looking character, and her use of letters simultaneously recapitulates and reframes many of the central concerns of this thesis.

Like Duncan and Bishop, Clampitt was steeped in epistolary culture, both in her reading and her writing of letters. Yet her late start as a poet means that her correspondence is primarily a record not of her interactions with other poets, but with friends. Willard Spiegelman, the editor of *Love, Amy: The Selected Letters*, writes: "She never became part of a poets' community. She wrote few literary letters even after she became well-known, in part because she lacked the time to do so and in part because she had nothing to gain from it" (x). It is true that this volume contains relatively few letters to fellow poets. Yet this statement does not do justice to the centrality of letter writing to Clampitt's work, and the narrowness of Spiegelman's definition of a "literary letter" misses out the very many literary ways that Clampitt did incorporate letters into her

poetry. Her poems make use of images and thoughts from her own letters, and explore, borrow and quote from the letters of the poets and writers she most admired. As this chapter will demonstrate, Clampitt's "Voyages" sequence, which draws on Keats's letters, represents Clampitt's efforts to forge her own "poets' community" using correspondence as a vital means of connection.

Clampitt, the eldest of five children, was raised a Quaker and grew up on a farm in the hamlet of New Providence, Iowa. After graduating from Grinnell College in 1941 she left the Midwest in order to escape the parochialism of the Iowa prairie for the bohemian, artistic circles of Greenwich Village in New York. Clampitt was briefly enrolled in graduate school at Columbia University before dropping out, after which she pursued a career first as an editor at Oxford University Press, and later as a reference librarian at the Audubon Society. During the 1950s and '60s she tried, unsuccessfully, to publish three novels. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that Clampitt began to write poetry in earnest. The turn from prose to poetry came after she took a poetry class at the New School for Social Research, and following several successful readings of her poetry in the backrooms of bars in Greenwich Village. From this point, Clampitt's star ascended rapidly. In 1978 *The New Yorker* accepted Clampitt's poem "The Sun Underfoot Among the Sundews," after which her poems started appearing regularly in the magazine. Clampitt published her first full collection of poetry, *The Kingfisher*, in 1983 to almost universal acclaim. Critics described her as a virtuoso and praised her finely observed, linguistically dexterous and strikingly original poems. Helen Vendler wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* that she predicted in one hundred years time *The Kingfisher*

would “take on the documentary value of what, in the twentieth century, made up the stuff of culture” (qtd. in Salter xix).

Clampitt published five major collections of poetry before her death from ovarian cancer in 1994. Despite the high praise she received during her lifetime, most notably and effusively for her first collection, *The Kingfisher*, Clampitt is still at the margins of the study of post-war poetry. She has received sustained attention from only a handful of critics. James Longenbach devotes a chapter to Clampitt in his study, *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (1997), placing her alongside a number of other post-war American poets including Bishop. Michael O’Neill considers Clampitt a model post-Romantic poet in his reading of the “Voyages” sequence and her homage to John Keats (*Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* 1997). More recently, Clampitt has become what Bonnie Costello deftly, and not uncritically, terms “a plausible subject for the ‘ecologically oriented’ critic” (*Shifting Ground* 137). Both Costello herself in *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (2003) and Robert Boschman in *In the Way of Nature: Ecology and Westward Expansion in the Poetry of Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Bishop and Amy Clampitt* (2009) pay close attention to Clampitt’s nature poems in order to explore further her insights into landscapes (particularly the Midwestern prairie), travel, westward expansion and American exploitation of land and peoples. Costello’s study reads Clampitt’s poems in light of ecological concerns, however she remains wary of co-opting Clampitt’s highly idiosyncratic position into the service of facile narratives that romanticise the concept of natural “wilderness” in opposition to culture and cultivation (Costello 137). Rather, Costello views Clampitt in terms she once used to describe herself in an interview: as “a poet of place” and “a



nomad” (qtd. in Costello 118). Costello argues that Clampitt’s nomadic tendencies in her poetry—“searching out and crossing boundaries, scavenging, finding value in what has been ignored, setting up formal patterns which she then works to defeat” (Costello 119)—offer a mode of being that resists the commodification of nature at the same time as it avoids retreat into nostalgic ideals of landscape, privileging instead a kind of restless wandering from place to place coupled with wonder at the natural world. Boschman’s study focuses specifically on what Clampitt’s poetry of the 1980s and early ‘90s intuits regarding the increasing effects of globalisation, exploring Clampitt’s poetic meditations on the altered nature of travel and the “collapse of distance” (*CP* 340) in her 1990 volume *Westward*.

This chapter takes up the theme of poems that collapse space and time; however, I look at the way that Clampitt employs literary letters in order to do this. I focus on the sequence of eight poems contained in “Voyages: A Homage to John Keats,” which forms the centrepiece of Clampitt’s second major poetry collection *What the Light Was Like* (1985). I argue that an appreciation of Clampitt’s use of other writers’ letters, in this case Keats’s, and the motivations behind this, have been left out of existing Clampitt criticism and should be viewed as an important facet of Clampitt’s concern with “the collapse of distance,” the relationship between America and Europe, and the aftereffects of western expansion. In shifting the focus to letters, both the real letters of Clampitt and Keats as well as the letter as a metaphor or poetic device, I am also drawing on sources that previous Clampitt criticism has not had access to, in the case of Clampitt’s *Selected Letters* (2005), or that have not yet been fully

explored, in the case of Clampitt's archive held in The Berg Collection at the New York Public Library.

My central argument is that Clampitt uses the personal address of the letter—in this case the epistolary voice of Keats—as a means of indirectly addressing concerns that relate to her own (submerged) autobiography and the (then) contemporary politics of mid-1980s America. Clampitt's almost verbatim quotation of Keats's letters in her poems stands in for, and overlaps with, Clampitt's own voice, offering a way to indirectly write her own memoirs. The idea that letters bridge space and time is key to the sequence, which uses the central epistolary relationship with Keats and his brother George as a means of connecting diverse writers, times and places, thus creating what Clampitt calls "a community of response" (*Clampitt Papers* 21.6). Letters imaginatively reinforce and replicate Clampitt's sense of poetry as a paradoxically both solitary and communicative endeavour.

The technique of using the biographical details of another's life as a means of exploring her own, is one that she employs in a number of poems. In a 1978 letter to her editor at *The New Yorker* magazine, Howard Moss, Clampitt wrote in relation to a series of historical poems in her earlier collection, *The Kingfisher*:

[T]hrough them I discover that I am in fact writing my memoirs, in the process of exploring how a human consciousness acquires its particular shape and texture. It occurs to me that with breakdown and disjunction so widely celebrated as to amount almost to a necessary ritual, such concern with wholeness and continuity tends to be dismissed, if not

disbelieved. Is this an obstacle? And if so, have you any thoughts about how it might be overcome? (*New Yorker Records* 902)

Here, Clampitt sets herself and her poems apart from her poetic contemporaries. Clampitt rejects a preoccupation with “breakdown,” as represented by the confessional lyrics and post-modern experiments with language that dominated 1970s American poetry. Instead, Clampitt claims her poems are focused on “wholeness and continuity.” This comment also describes her fundamental approach in the Keats poems. Here it was a poetic method that Clampitt did not seek to overcome, but instead explored further.

My argument builds on and extends observations regarding Clampitt’s transatlantic focus. The studies cited all place Clampitt (or rather fail to place her definitively) between poetic, critical and indeed national traditions. Nearly all comment on her unique periscope-like perspective on Europe and America. Clampitt’s poems about or set in Europe, both past and present, particularly those contained in *What the Light Was Like* and the later *Archaic Figure* (1987), offer a method for her to address her relationship to the Iowa prairie, and to America more generally. As Longenbach writes, Clampitt’s eastward-facing Europhilia might seem like a turning away from, and a rejection of American culture as inferior, but it is in fact much more complex: “Clampitt’s preoccupation with European places and literature does not replace her troubled fascination with the Midwest; on the contrary, it makes that fascination possible” (105). Supplementing this, I argue that Clampitt’s fascination with Keats’s life and letters in “Voyages” does not replace her desire to narrate the her own life and relationship to American culture; instead, in an

indirect yet powerful way, it makes that process possible. Clampitt's "Voyages" sequence does require a reader familiar with the details of Keats's life and letters in order to appreciate its full range, but such knowledge allows the reader to see the way that these poems embrace larger themes beyond Keats, addressing both past and present.

### **Reading letters, writing poems**

Clampitt's own correspondence demonstrates that reading literary letters, and association with the lives of her literary predecessors, offers her a way of forming her own sense of her identity as a writer. Her *Selected Letters* provides evidence of the many collections of literary letters she read including those of Keats, Katherine Mansfield, Flannery O'Connor, and George Eliot. In a letter to her younger brother Philip written in 1956, Clampitt describes writing in her journal and finding that the words took on the form of a poem. This discovery is precipitated by her reading of the letters of Katherine Mansfield and John Keats, and also, in a kind of Russian doll effect, Clampitt's reading of Mansfield reading Keats. She writes "I had been reading the letters of Keats, which sent me back to the poetry" (LA 51), and later in the same letter describes reading aloud from the letters of Katherine Mansfield to her artist friend Peter. Clampitt's reaction to the letters is a mixture of both admiration and envy:

[We] were both so carried away by her description of a nightmare journey to Marseilles, a sea-storm on the Riviera, and the morning when she first coughed up blood, read Keats, and knew she was going to die, that we came out of it blinking, not quite sure where we were. The fear of

death is what more than anything gives her letters their beauty, and I had found myself almost envying the intensity of her fear [...] But it was though, that afternoon, any possibility of envy like this had been obliterated. (52)

Immediately following this, Clampitt describes her own moment of epiphany, which involves the spontaneous writing of a poem. She recounts writing an entry in her journal that turns into verse:

Quite as though they had a will of their own, the sentences broke in a way that was not my usual style at all. Rather frightened, I must admit, for the moment, I let them break. The next thing I knew, they had begun to reach out for rhymes. This frightened me almost more, until I discovered that finding a rhyme could be almost as natural a process as the resolution of a dominant chord: I didn't have to look for them, they simply came. (53)

Here, Clampitt suggests that the words of her poem have a life of their own. The source of poetic inspiration seems to come from elsewhere, and is paradoxically both a frightening and a natural process. In an interview, Clampitt appeared to refer to this same event, describing poetry as "an uninvited guest." In answer to the question of whether she remembered "a particular moment when you felt you had made a breakthrough, finding yourself 'at home' in a poem, discovering, as it were, your own voice?" Clampitt responded:

No I don't remember anything so specific as feeling that I'd "found my own voice"; what happened was that, sometime in the late fifties, I sat down to write about an experience that I didn't quite understand, and found myself doing it in verse rather than prose. This actually frightened me, as though I'd been taken over by some uninvited guest and told what to do—which is not at all the same as feeling "at home" with what was happening. (*Predecessors* 159)<sup>115</sup>

The writing of poetry is an uncanny experience for Clampitt. In characterising poetry as a disembodied force and an "uninvited guest" Clampitt seems to be challenging conceptions of poetry as arising organically from the poet, and the idea that discovering her "own voice" involves a Wordsworthian "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (*Lyrical Ballads* 756). Clampitt's poetic voice, she suggests, did not arrive in an instant, but rather developed over time, in unusual and sometimes "frightening" ways, and not in isolation but with reference to other poets and novelists that she admired.

Clampitt's poetry is rooted in her reading of and appreciation for the work of others, particularly the details and circumstances of their lives recorded in letters and diaries. The pivotal 1956 letter to her brother Philip echoes, either consciously or unconsciously, a line in a letter that Keats wrote to his brother George in October 1818 in which he articulated a precocious sense of his place within the canon. Keats writes, after a discussion of the negative criticism he had received following the publication of his poem *Endymion*: "I

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<sup>115</sup> From an interview with Elise Paschen, original published in *Oxford Poetry* (Winter 1986-1987). Reprinted in *Predecessors, Et Cetera: Essays* (1991).

think I shall be among the English Poets after my death" (*KL I* 394). Similarly in the letter to her brother Philip, Clampitt wrote: "I feel as if I could write a whole history of English literature, and know just where to place everybody in it, with hardly any trouble at all. The reason being, apparently, that I feel *I am in it*" (53). In echoing the words of Keats, Clampitt articulates a burgeoning sense of her identity as a poet, which is bound up with her appreciation for the work of literary predecessors. Although she acknowledges that Mansfield's letters inspire a degree of "envy" this is ultimately "obliterated," and Clampitt's engagements with writers are based on a sense of shared feeling and community as opposed to a straightforward anxiety of influence, as in Harold Bloom's model.

### **"Writers need company"**

Given Clampitt's relatively late entrance into the poetry world, she might be expected to feel the weight of her predecessors' literary successes. In Harold Bloom's famous theory of influence, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), literary predecessors are cast as competitors who must be outdone by the younger poet. Clampitt does not completely reject this model, particularly in regard to the anxiety that poetic successors feel; however, her poems, and particularly the essays collected in *Predecessors* (1991), serve to complicate and add nuance to Bloom's original blueprint. In one of her essays in the volume, "How Everything Connects: Julia Budenz, John Ashbery, and Others," in which Clampitt revels in finding unlikely links between apparently very different poets, she gestures at the heavy-handedness of Bloom's theory: "There is a kind of thinking that regards all this as a misfortune, at least for us latecomers. But I find it hard to

see how such thinking can be taken very far, or very seriously” (167). However, later in the same essay, she comes down largely in support of Bloom’s theory of *misprision* or misreading. Referring to the poet Julia Budenz’s reworking of Plato and other classical sources Clampitt comments: “Such recurrences, if we are to believe Harold Bloom—who calls them misreadings, and after some resistance I now find that fair enough—are what makes the world go round” (168). If Clampitt here supports Bloom’s theory, it is with her own added qualifications. Rather than seeing misreading as a problem, for Clampitt it is a vital part of what makes poetry.

While Clampitt displays an ambivalence about Bloom’s influential theory, she also (writing in the 1980s and early ‘90s) complicates this model because, although a new poet, she is not a young one.<sup>116</sup> In some ways this frees her from some of the knotty debates of post-war, post-modern poetry and its relationship to an earlier legacy. As James Longenbach comments: “[I]t’s worth remembering Clampitt’s birthdate [1920] if only to understand why she seemed so blissfully unconcerned with the debates that have preoccupied American poets since the Second World War: Clampitt was somewhere else” (104). That “somewhere else” refers to the period in the 1950s and 60s when she was not writing poetry (or at least not in any sustained way), but instead writing novels, holding a variety of jobs and engaging in anti-war and other political activism.

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<sup>116</sup> Clampitt may have been familiar with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s influential feminist response to Bloom’s anxiety of influence theory in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) in which the two writers point out the patriarchal, male-centred nature of Bloom’s theory and test its applicability to women writers. Gilbert and Gubar argue that women writers must find their “voice” in relation to a tradition of women writers that either does not exist or has been suppressed in literary history (16). Clampitt’s case does not fit neatly into this theory either. Her early letter in which she finds her poetic “voice” is preceded by an account of reading the letters of a male and a female writer, Keats and Mansfield respectively, and Clampitt finds an intriguing mixture of comfort and anxiety in her engagement with literary tradition.



In the *Predecessors* essays, Clampitt also develops her own distinctive approach in relation to Bloom and others' privileging of poetic "originality." In Clampitt's model, literary forbears provide a source of company and inspiration for the solitary writer, which renders the quest for what Clampitt calls "[a]bsolute originality" (*Predecessors* 47) futile and unnecessary. In the opening essay of the collection she writes:

There is less originality than we think. There is also a vast amount of solitude. Writers need company. We all need it. It's not the command of knowledge that matters finally, but the company. It's the predecessors. As a writer, I don't know where I'd be without them. (5)

The idea of conscious and unconscious borrowing from and imitating predecessors is a strand that runs throughout the collection of essays. In an essay on Marianne Moore, who she cites as an important influence, Clampitt lists poets whose work is reminiscent of Moore, including her own, and observes that "[s]uch unmistakable homages to one's forbears are not only proper but inevitable. Absolute originality would amount to dying of one's own poison, and I for one am not in favour of that" (47). Clampitt's unusual metaphor, presumably made in reference to an unnamed, originality-obsessed poet's comments, suggests that "[a]bsolute originality" is a tincture so concentrated as to amount to a form of literary suicide, whereas the mixing of new ideas with the knowledge of old is "not only proper but inevitable."

For Clampitt, the company of predecessors is infinitely preferable to the stultifying confines of the lone writer's mind. However, this literary company

does not preclude a need for solitude. The desire for a kind of companionable solitude is a recurring theme in Clampitt letters. For example, in a letter to a friend written in 1974, which mentions a bus journey between Iowa and New York. Clampitt writes, regarding bus journeys, “It’s a way of having solitude without feeling like a recluse—in fact, when the weather turns snowy and schedules get fouled up, things aboard become very sociable indeed” (*LA* 169). Clampitt’s understanding of a need and respect for solitude is in part derived from her reading of Henry David Thoreau, as she states in the interview in *Predecessors* when she says, “An American writer from whom I took certain cues (having to do with solitude) was Thoreau” (164). Clampitt’s is a distinctly American, Thoreauvian, sense of solitude, which derives from her pioneer heritage, and sense of the wide-open spaces and vast distances of the prairie landscape. However, this also resonates with a Keatsian sense of solitude, present in the Keats letters, and which informs Clampitt’s sequence. In a letter to his brother George written shortly after George had emigrated to America, Keats writes that he hopes “I shall never marry” and that despite all the luxuries of matrimonial happiness “my Solitude is sublime. Then instead of what I have described, there is Sublimity to welcome me home—The roaring of the wind is my wife and the Stars through the window pane are my Children” (*KL I* 403).<sup>117</sup> Clampitt reads and re-writes these lines with added irony in her poem “The Elgin Marbles,” which is part of “Voyages.” Keats’s solitude is paradoxically one that reaches out for company at the same time as it affirms its own self-reliance, since these are words that are expressed in a letter. Companionable solitude,

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<sup>117</sup> All spelling, punctuation and capitalisation are as in the original letters in Hyder Rollins’ two volume edition of *The Letters of John Keats* (1958). This was also the edition that Clampitt read and used while composing her “Voyages” poems, as her notes held in the Clampitt archive in the Berg Collection demonstrate (*Clampitt Papers* 18.3).

Clampitt suggests, is also a paradox on which letter writing feeds, since letters (like bus journeys) bridge the space between solitude and company.

Clampitt's views on the subject of literary influence are therefore not uncomplicated. In a letter to Helen Vendler written during a trip to London in August 1985, Clampitt records her plans to travel to places in England that Keats visited and thanks Vendler for the inspiration she provided for the sequence of poems about Keats contained in "Voyages: A Homage to John Keats." Clampitt writes, "What you say about Stevens and the imagination touched me especially, awed as I am by him and those longer poems [...] A barnacle is what I think I really am, seizing on any passing thing that may be tempting" (*LA* 252-253). The description of herself as "a barnacle" carries the sense of a negative form of literary influence, and one which involves a kind of parasitical "seizing" and dependency on sources of inspiration. For Clampitt, as she expresses in her essay on Moore, forms of literary derivation tread a delicate line between "herd-following" (*Predecessors* 47) and more considered and complex forms of homage, which is what I argue Clampitt does in her own poetry.

"Voyages" is a complex homage to Keats. The sequence was partly inspired by an essay by Vendler, "Stevens and Keats's 'To Autumn,'" (1980) in which Vendler discusses Stevens' repeated return, in poems throughout his career, to the language and imagery of Keats's ode. Clampitt drew on the links between these two poets, writing in different centuries and on different continents, in her own re-visiting of Keats's letters and poems in "Voyages." In particular, Clampitt drew inspiration from Vendler's argument that Stevens develops and goes beyond Keats's original poem, translating it to an American

context and imbuing it with a more modern sense of isolation and uncertainty. Vendler shows how, in “Sunday Morning” and “The Auroras of Autumn” particularly, Stevens transposes Keats’s quintessentially English images into an American setting, substituting “an American cabin” for the cottage in Keats’s poem, and changing English cornfields to “American hayfields” (Vendler, *Part of Nature* 22). In her own sequence, Clampitt takes these links between Keats and the modern (particularly American) poets further, finding links between Keats’s poems and sections of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* and the poems of Osip Mandelstam.

“Voyages,” though ostensibly a “homage,” re-frames and so adds to the Keats story. Clampitt follows the literal and figurative voyages that Keats’s letters took: journeying from England to his brother George in America, and, after his death, continuing to find a path in the work of his literary successors. In this way, Clampitt is able to relate to the Keats story in ways that alter the original meanings of the letters and poems, are deliberately anachronistic, and place the events of Keats’s life in an alien twentieth-century context. As Vendler observes at the start of her essay on Keats and Stevens, the adaptation of earlier works by modern artists take a variety of different, but connected, forms:

In commenting on a received aesthetic form, an artist can take various paths. He may make certain implicit “meanings” explicit; he may extrapolate certain possibilities to greater lengths; he may choose a detail, center on it, and turn it into an entire composition; he may alter the perspective from which the form is viewed; or he may view the phenomenon at a different moment in time. (21)

Clampitt's sequence performs a number of the above operations in relation to Keats's letters, particularly, and his poems.

What particularly interests Vendler, and also Clampitt, is the translation of thoughts and impressions that are part of a European literary legacy into a New World context. As Vendler eloquently writes of Wallace Stevens and Keats: "to read through Stevens' poetry with the ode 'To Autumn' in mind is to be suffused by the lights that Stevens saw presiding over the trash can end of the world, that resting place of tradition" (22). The "trash can end of the world" stands for America and American artists' attempts to sift through their transplanted cultural heritage.

### **Keats in America**

"Voyages" undertakes a poetic re-telling of Keats's biography. Keats has, of course, inspired countless poets, including his contemporaries Wordsworth and Shelley, and modern poets like Stevens. Clampitt is in some ways the opposite of Keats. As an American writer from the Midwest, whose career as a poet started late in life, why choose an English poet who wrote the majority of his poems in the two years before his early death from tuberculosis at age twenty five? Moreover, in writing a life of Keats, Clampitt is joining an already well-established community of Keats scholars and biographers. The 1960s gave rise to a spate of Keats biographies. This was in large part due to the collecting of Keats materials in the Harvard University Keats Archive and the edition of Keats's letters edited by Hyder E. Rollins and published in 1958. 1963 saw the publication of two biographies: Walter Jackson Bate's *John Keats* as well as Aileen Ward's *John Keats: the Making of A Poet*. These were followed by Robert

Gittings' *John Keats* in 1968. It might seem, therefore, that in the early 1980s when Clampitt was writing her Keats poems, there was little room for yet another re-interpretation of Keats's life. However, Clampitt's "Voyages" adds to these previous accounts in two distinctly new ways. Firstly, it is a biography of Keats in verse, and, secondly, Clampitt chooses to frame Keats's life and poetry in a transatlantic context. As Michael O'Neill observes, Clampitt draws from these earlier readings of Keats's life and work, particularly the Bate biography, in a critical, scholarly way (O'Neill 273).

In the third poem of the sequence, "The Elgin Marbles," Clampitt poses the question: "what can John Keats / have had to do with a hacked clearing / in the Kentucky underbrush?" (CP 169). The sequence "Voyages" is an attempt to answer that question. Keats is usually associated with locations in England and Italy: claustrophobic city lodgings, the semi-rural Hampstead of the nineteenth century and the sublime landscapes of the Lake District and Scotland, Winchester, and finally, the fateful journey to Italy and the Bay of Naples. Clampitt's poem follows Keats as he shifts restlessly between these places, but her poems also introduce out of place elements that relate to an alien American landscape: "catbrier and poison ivy, chiggers, / tent caterpillars, cottonmouths" (169). Clampitt's poems voyage across boundaries of space and time, and weave together a complex set of connections between real geographies of England and the New World, and the imagined spaces of poetry. Indeed, the sequence is as much about these imaginary spaces as it is about tangible places. Clampitt's poem also explores Keats's legacy as it manifests in the work of modern twentieth-century, particularly American, poets, whose poetic responses to Keats function in some ways as undeliverable letters sent back to the dead poet.

Keats had a very real connection to the America of the nineteenth century, which English and European settlers were still exploring. In June 1818 Keats's younger brother George and his new wife Georgiana emigrated to America to establish a new life for themselves in the Western territories. On June 22 they travelled to Liverpool in order to set sail to Philadelphia. From there they travelled to Henderson, Kentucky, eventually settling in Louisville. As a consequence of George's emigration, Keats wrote long, detailed journal-letters to him and his sister-in-law. Though Keats himself never made the voyage across the Atlantic, his letters did, and they often passed through multiple hands and took many months to reach their destination.<sup>118</sup> Keats relied on friends and contacts who were making the journey across the Atlantic to carry his letters, so that he had to wait for weeks or months before he could dispatch individual missives. Keats referred to letters to his brother as a "journal" and developed the habit of collecting news and observations to include in his descriptions, and carrying on a letter over a period of several days, or even months.<sup>119</sup> Keats wrote some of his best, longest, most philosophical and oft-quoted letters to George in America. Some of the most famous quotations from Keats's letters originate in these journal letters to George. For example, in his long letter to the George Keatses, which begins on the 14<sup>th</sup> February 1819 and continues until 3 May 1819 Keats outlines his theory of the world as "The vale of Soul-making" (*KL II* 102).

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<sup>118</sup> See Denise Gigante's excellent description of the idiosyncrasies of nineteenth-century transatlantic postal systems, and the journeys that Keats's letters took to reach their destinations in America in the section of her biography *The Keats Brothers* titled "Letters Across the Atlantic" (238-250).

<sup>119</sup> Keats at first addressed his journal-letters to Tom. In a letter to Tom began on 25<sup>th</sup> June and finished on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1818 he writes, "Here beginneth my journal," (*KL I* 298) but he also included similar accounts in his letters to George. After Tom's death, Keats continued to write long, journal-like letters to the George Keatses.

As well as theories that seek to understand the nature of existence, Keats's letters to George also contain a number of his poems. In a lengthy letter written during the spring of 1819 Keats includes 11 poems or poem sequences including "La belle dame sans merci," the sonnet "To Sleep" and "Ode to Psyche." The letters to George were a workbook for his poetic ideas, a cathartic release for his anxieties, and a repository for his private fears and ambitions. Some of these aspects, of course, overlap with his letters to Fanny Brawne. Keats's love letters to Brawne offer a different picture of Keats's life than those he wrote to his brother. This is partly due to the obvious differences between the romantic vs. filial love that the two correspondences express, and partly I think due to Keats's physical proximity to Brawne, who for a period of time lived in the adjoining house at Wentworth Place in Hampstead, whereas the letters Keats sent to George register the much greater distance that lay between the two brothers.

The letters to George as artefacts reflect and embody the journey they made across the Atlantic and to the "back settlements of America" (*KL I 287*) as Keats referred to the Western territories. Some of Keats's letters almost literally landed in "a hacked clearing in the Kentucky underbrush," as Clampitt puts it, since George eventually settled in Louisville, Kentucky. This also meant that, after Keats's death, many of his letters and manuscripts lay in his brother George's hands. The first ever publication of parts of the letters was in 1836 in the *Western Messenger*, a Louisville newspaper, which printed sections of two letters that George Keats had allowed them to see. Writing in the paper, James Freeman Clarke comments: "They are only letters, not regular treatises, yet they touch upon the deepest veins of thought, and ascend the highest heaven of



contemplation [...]. We feel a little proud that we, in this western valley, are the first to publish specimens of these writings" (qtd. in *KL I*, 3). Clarke's response contains an element of ambivalence regarding the letters. He questions the value of the genre of the letter and its ability to communicate matters of the same importance as a political treaty. I would argue that their status as personal letters is what allows them to reach "the deepest veins of thought," yet Clarke also shows a prescient insight into their intellectual and cultural worth.

In her recent biography, *The Keats Brothers: The Life of John and George* (2011), Denise Gigante places the relationship between the two brothers centre stage, as a kind of spin-off narrative to the much more familiar story of Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne. Gigante observes that the story of George's emigration to America and its impact on Keats has been side-lined in narratives of Keats's life, and "[w]hen George does show up in biographies of his more famous brother, he does not remain long— usually just long enough to disappear with John's money, leaving the poet destitute and on the brink of death, while he pursued his own fame and fortune in America" (7). This is in large part due to confusion over Keats's financial affairs following his death. After Tom's death, George, who was struggling to make a living in Kentucky, returned to England to claim part of his inheritance from Tom's estate, and also, according to Keats's friend Brown and others, left with a large portion of John's as well. Gigante combs through the usual biographical sources including Keats's letters and the letters and writings of his circle of friends, as well as delving into new material relating to George's life in America to prove that George did not act dishonourably towards his brother.

Gigante's larger argument, however, relates to the imaginative imprint left on Keats by his brother's departure. She believes that George's emigration to America, along with Tom's death, were the catalysts that sparked a period of intense creativity during which he composed the odes. Gigante argues that Keats's legacy will always be tied up with his brother's voyage across the Atlantic into the unknown, and that the two brothers, whose lives she narrates in parallel, embodied "sibling forms of the phenomenon we call Romanticism" with the poet John representing the "Man of Genius" and the pioneer George representing a "Man of Power" (7).

Gigante's argument in relation to the Keats brothers is, in essence, the same as Clampitt's. Clampitt, however, published the "Voyages" poems in 1985, more than two decades prior to Gigante's biography. Clampitt intuitively in her poems the arguments that Gigante would go on to explore in *The Keats Brothers*. I can find no evidence that Gigante had read Clampitt's poems when she embarked on her biography, but both writers draw extensively on the evidence of Keats's journal-letters to his brother George. Clampitt's poems and Gigante's biography, however, both share a desire to place Keats in a transatlantic context, and to shed light on aspects of his biography that have been under-examined. There are also a number of differences between their approaches. Clampitt's "Voyages" sequence, as well as the obvious fact that it is written in verse, is an artistic homage, rather than a scholarly biography, and so she is less focused on factual accuracy and linearity and more on capturing a particular mood, re-creating the sensory impressions of the damp climate of nineteenth-century England, as well as the dry heat of the prairie.

### Samphire-gathering

The first poem in the sequence, "Margate," begins not at the very beginning of Keats's literary career, but instead in *medias res* at an ambiguous moment in May 1817. Keats has returned to the seaside town of Margate to try to make progress in the writing of his long poem *Endymion*, which is based on the Greek myth of a shepherd who falls in love with a goddess. Keats's long poem is, like Clappitt's own sequence, a re-visiting or re-telling of an earlier story. For Keats, the location of Margate represents both a beginning and a return mingled together. In the accompanying notes to the poem Clappitt explains:

In the summer and early fall of 1816, John Keats spent two months at the seaside resort of Margate, on the English Channel. It was here that he saw the ocean for the first time. He was not quite twenty-one, and had only recently begun to think of himself as a poet. Not long after his return to London he stayed up all one night reading aloud with a friend from George Chapman's translation of the *Odyssey*, and wrote his famous sonnet, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." In the spring of the following year he was back at Margate, reading Shakespeare and working on a long poem of his own. (CP 506)

The return to Margate is a melancholy, anxious time for Keats. This is reflected in Clappitt's poem, which draws many of its central details from a letter Keats wrote to his friend the painter B.R. Haydon on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> May while in Margate lodgings. In this letter, Keats relays his conflicted emotions on the subjects of fame and literary ambition. The letter begins with a quotation from

*Love's Labour's Lost*, which reflects, morbidly, on the immortality afforded by fame: "Let Fame, which all hunt after in their Lives / Live register'd upon our brazen tombs" (*KL I* 140). Keats relays to his friend Haydon both a desire "that our brazen Tombs be nigh neighbours" (141), but also a sense that the desire for fame and poetic success stifles creativity. He makes a number of other references to Shakespeare, particularly lines from *King Lear* when he writes:

[T]ruth is I have been in such a state of Mind as to read over my Lines and hate them. I am "one that gathers Samphire dreadful trade" the Cliff of Poesy Towers above me—yet when Tom who meets with some of Pope's Homer in Plutarch's Lives reads some of those to me they seem like Mice to mine. (141)

And later in the same letter he asks, "Is it too daring to Fancy Shakespeare [my] Presider?" (142). Keats displays a mixture of both anxiety and arrogance in his engagements with his predecessors Shakespeare and Homer. The reference to "one that gathers Samphire" originates from Act IV, scene 6 of *King Lear*, as Clampitt explains in her accompanying notes to the poem. In this scene, newly blinded Gloucester is being led along the Dover Cliffs. His son, Edgar, in disguise, describes the Cliffside scene, including a lonely figure who is gathering samphire, "a fleshy seaside herb that is at least better to eat than nothing" (Clampitt, *CP* 506). The samphire-gatherer in Keats's mind therefore represents a form of desperate searching for the right words in his poems, a desolate search for scraps of literary seaweed. It also links back to Clampitt's description of herself as "a barnacle" seizing onto sources of influence and inspiration.

In her poem “Margate” Clampitt brings to the surface this complex set of associations and anxieties unfolding in Keats’s mind. In Vendler’s terms, she makes “certain implicit ‘meanings’ explicit” (21). She takes the samphire-gathering metaphor and runs with it, or rather scrambles up the metaphorical “Cliff of Poesy” with Keats:

Reading his own lines over, he’d been  
 (he wrote) in the diminished state of one  
 “that gathers Samphire dreadful trade.”  
 Disabled Gloucester, so newly eyeless  
 all his scathed perceptions bled together,  
 and Odysseus, dredged up shipwrecked  
 through fathoms of Homeric sightlessness—  
 “the sea had soaked his heart through”—  
 were the guides his terror clutched at.  
 Now all of twenty-one, he’d written nothing  
 of moment but one bookish sonnet: “Much have  
 I travelled . . .” Only he hadn’t, other  
 than as unrequited amateur. How clannish  
 the whole hand-to-hand, cliffhanging trade, (*CP* 165)

Clampitt is emphasising Keats’s sense of himself, like Gloucester, standing on the brink of a cliff, although in Keats’s case, this is the metaphorical “Cliff of Poesy.” She is also drawing on, and to some extent mocking, his youth and

naivety, and the irony of his Homer-inspired sonnet, "On Looking into Chapman's Homer," in which Keats, a "bookish" twenty-one year old, places himself in the shoes of a battle-weary Odysseus. The "whole hand-to-hand, cliffhanging trade" becomes a metaphor for Keats's sense that his poems are merely imitations of Shakespeare and Homer ("the guides his terror clutched at"), that he lacks his own originality, and that his poetic craft is a mere gathering of "precarious basketloads of sea drift." The irony is that Keats has not travelled beyond the environs of London and the Devon and Kent coasts. He is an "unrequited amateur" and a "shut-in."

The poem gains another layer of irony when considered in relation to Clampitt's own autobiography. There is a sense that Clampitt the older poet, who is also learning her trade through sapphire-gathering imitation in the form of her Keats homage, lurks at the cliff-edge with Keats. Ironically, although on the whole well-received, criticisms of Clampitt's Keats sequence seem to have repeated back to her some of the anxieties and despondence at imitation and derivation that she invokes in the opening poem of the sequence. In unpublished letters, Clampitt responds to criticisms concerned with the highly allusive qualities of the sequence. In a draft of a letter to the editor of a literary magazine written in November 1982, Clampitt writes:

What you seem to be saying is that it's too much to ask [?] that the readers of a literary quarterly oughtn't to be expected to know of Keats's devotion to *Lear*, his excitement over Chapman's Homer—or to be familiar with the work of Whitman, Hart Crane, and Wallace Stevens to the extent that a link between them and the way Keats himself saw the

ocean might be suggested. As you will gather, I feel passionately about this. If I wanted to be crystalline about the subject, I would opt for prose. But I wanted to do something else. I don't think I'm alone in wishing to find links of this kind—to discover some community of response among them all, among us all. That was part of my intention in beginning the sequence. (*Clampitt Papers* 21.6)

Similarly, in an unpublished answer provided in a letter to interviewer Elise Paschen dated 3 October 1986, Clampitt defends the “bookishness” of her poem itself:

Some reviewers have been downright contemptuous about the obvious borrowings and references. I never pretended to any great originality. It seems to me that we all borrow, and that poetry wouldn't be much fun if we didn't. What I attributed to Keats in that line about the clannishness of “the whole hand-to-hand, cliff-hanging trade” is implicit in the epigraphs to the Keats sequence; it's implicit in any epigraph from another poet; it's the bone and marrow of “The Waste Land” and almost equally of the “Cantos” of Ezra Pound, so far as I've read in them. I'm not an academic (though this year I'm playacting in that vicinity), and my enthusiasms tend to be rather naïve when it comes to reading—which may be why it is mainly academics who sneer at such bookishness. Keats was maybe the most bookish of Romantic poets—and I think I'm that way for somewhat the same reason: he was very young, I'm not but I am incorrigibly naïve. On the other hand, I'm aware that bookishness can be

dull, and that some of the freshest poems in the language (such as Shakespeare's song, "When icicles hang by the wall") are completely unliterary. As I said, I don't know how to answer. (*Clampitt Papers* 21.4)

Clampitt makes clear that "borrowings and references" are, in her view, the bedrock of much modern poetry—"The Waste Land" being here the exemplar par excellence. She is aware that her sequence's self-conscious literariness may make it less accessible, and that "some of the freshest poems in the language" are not those that seek to borrow from, talk back to, and re-purpose the poems of others, but like Shakespeare's "When icicles hang by the wall" simply observe the poet's surroundings. However, Clampitt wishes to draw out the links between writers, and to draw on a "community of response." The sequence is a verse-letter back to Keats, and one that, owing to its own bookishness, uncovers figurative correspondences between poets from remote times and places. The reader is prompted by the four epigraphs to the sequence, containing quotations from Hart Crane, Walt Whitman, Osip Mandelstam and Wallace Stevens, to draw links between Keats and a diverse selection of his poetic successors.

"Margate" is full to bursting with literary echoes. In fact, the scene of Margate is more like a symbolic locus for literary allusions, rather than a real place. Clampitt writes in a letter to Vendler dated September 7, 1985 that she never actually visited Margate on any of her trips to England, but only passed it on the train on her way to the more salubrious neighbouring town of Broadstairs:



Margate I didn't see, except passing through on my way to Broadstairs—  
 itself a wonderfully intact Victorian resort, where I saw the room  
 Dickens wrote in, and understood why he was so partial to the place: a  
 glimpse of a huge fun fair is what Margate offers, along with the English  
 equivalent of Disney World. (*LA* 255)

This sense of “passing through,” and of Margate as a gateway or a threshold is part of its allusive appeal. There are few concrete details relating to the place itself in the poem, except in its symbolic vicinity to Gloucester on the Dover Cliffs and, most importantly, to the sea. The sea functions in the poem as a kind of watery projection screen, and a means of connecting various poets' imaginings of the sea.

Clampitt explains in the accompanying notes that she was inspired to write the poem partly after reading a section of Walter Jackson Bate's Keats biography. Bate quotes Keats's friend Joseph Severn who describes a walk with Keats over Hampstead Heath in which Keats is mesmerised by the way that the wind rippling over a field of grain appears like the sea: “The sea, or thought-compelling images of the sea, always seemed to restore him to a happy calm” (qtd. in Clampitt, *CP* 507). For Clampitt, who grew up in Iowa, this connects in her mind to her own childhood memories of watching fields of corn, and imagining that she is looking at the sea. She writes that the sea-field of grain connection represents for her “[t]he powerful way in which literature can become a link with times and place, and with minds, otherwise remote” (507).

The poem becomes about these connections between minds across different times and places, and the way in which the words and thoughts of

others, though geographically and temporally remote, can provide a reassuring company. Clampitt connects images of the sea in Keats to those in the work of American poets. In the third stanza, Clampitt merges Keats's seaside-musings with washed-up fragments of poetry from Walt Whitman:

the gradual letdown, the hempen slither,  
 precarious basketloads of sea drift  
 gathered at Margate or at Barnegat  
 along Paumanok's liquid rim, the dirges  
 nostalgia for the foam: *the bottom of  
 the sea is cruel*. The chaff, the scum  
 of the impalpable confined in stanzas (*CP* 165)

Margate is coupled with the American place names "Barnegat," a seaside town in New Jersey and "Paumanok," a native American name for Long Island, New York. Paumanok appears in the section of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* called "Sea Drift," and is also a significant starting point for Whitman in his quest to find a style of poetry which represents the New World. There are also resemblances to Marianne Moore's "A Grave" and Elizabeth Bishop's "At the Fishhouses." The sea, in Clampitt's poem, becomes a symbol for poetic beginnings, and a metaphorical as well as literal (in the geographical sense that the sea links land mass) means of linking remote times and places.

### **“The Elgin Marbles”**

Clampitt is also thinking about the way that letters “can become a link with times and places, and with minds, otherwise remote.” The poem “The Elgin Marbles” draws on the literal transatlantic correspondence between John and his brother George Keats, as well as imagining the two very different voyages that the brothers took in 1818. In late June of that year Keats, along with his friend Brown travelled to Liverpool, where the George Keatses were to depart for Philadelphia. At Liverpool, the two parties diverged, and John Keats and Brown travelled further North on a walking tour of the Lake District, Ireland and Scotland for the summer. It was here that Keats began his journal-letters, and the sublime landscapes were a profound influence on many of his later poems. The view of Lake Windermere that Keats describes in a journal-letter to Tom written between the 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> June, for example, seems to be where Keats’s “Bright Star” sonnet originated. Keats writes:

There are many disfigurements to this Lake—not in the way of land and water. No; the two views we have had of it are of the most noble tenderness—they can never fade away—they make one forget the divisions of life; age, youth, poverty and riches; and refine one’s sensual vision into a sort of north star which can never cease to be open lidded and stedfast over the wonders of the great Power. (*KL I 299*)

Clampitt, as she did in “Margate,” takes these letters as a starting point, and elaborates on thoughts and connections in Keats’s mind that are present, although often implicit, in the letters. “The Elgin Marbles,” the third and longest

poem in the sequence, is about connections that were occurring in Keats's own mind between his tour of the North, and his brother's voyage to the New World. Keats's letters hint at the way that his thoughts about his brother's journey across the Atlantic were ever-present in his mind as he observed the landscape of the Lake District. In a letter to George written at the "Foot of Helvellyn June 27," John cannot help comparing the first waterfall he has ever seen with the magnitude of the American landscape that he anticipates his brother exploring: "Before breakfast we visited the first waterfall I ever saw and certainly small as it is it surpassed my expectation, in what I have mentioned in my letter to Tom, in its tone and intellect its light and shade slaty Rock, Moss and Rock weed—but you will see finer ones I will not describe by comparison a teapot spout" (*KL I*, 302). Clampitt's poem captures the sense in Keats's letters that Britain is dwarfed by the vast expanse of space in the New World, and that there is something frightening and over-sized about the American landscape:

How could

Mnemosyne herself, the mother of the Muse,  
 have coped with the uncultivated tangle,  
 catbrier and poison ivy, chiggers,  
 tent caterpillars, cottonmouths,  
 the awful gurglings and chirrings  
 of the dark? (*CP* 169)

Here, Clampitt presents a catalogue of alliterative horrors to invoke the American landscape. She introduces the out-of-place Greek goddess of memory,

Mnemosyne, who appears in Keats's "Hyperion: A Fragment" and the later revised version of the poem in "The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream," and asks how the goddess could "have coped with the uncultivated tangle" of alien North American plants and animals. The species listed are carefully chosen for their geographical specificity and monstrous characteristics. A chigger is a form of mite that attaches itself to and feeds off the skin. The *OED* cites an entry from M. Schele De Vere's *Americanisms* (1872) which describes the chigoe or "chigre" as a well-known phenomenon of Kentucky: "The Seed-tick is, in all probability, the same insect as the hated Jigger or Chigre, of Kentucky" (qtd. in *OED Online*). A cottonmouth is a snake native to the southern states: "a venomous snake of the southern U.S., a species of the copperhead, so called from having a white streak along the lips" (*OED*). If Greek myth provides a dream landscape for Keats's imagination, "the western-wild" (*KL I 399*) of America is a form of nightmare. Similarly, Clompitt represents the Atlantic ocean, as viewed from Keats's perspective, as an over-boiling vat of water. George's journey across it is not a sublime pilgrimage like Keats and Brown's walks in the North, but a long, arduous voyage of "necessity":

Turning his back  
 against the hemp and tar, the  
 creaking tedium of actual departure,  
 the angry fogs, the lidless ferocity of the Atlantic—epic  
 distances fouled by necessity—  
 he left them sleeping, George  
 and his Georgiana [...] (*CP 169*)

The symbolic connection between the two different journeys, both begun in June at the Crown in Liverpool, is made clear in Clampitt's subsequent long poem, "Westward," the eponymous title poem of *Westward* (1990). The poem continues Clampitt's meditation on the theme of westward-exploration and the legacies of imperialism in the late twentieth century, and contains a reference to the Keats brothers:

a bus jolts westward, traversing, and  
 it's still no picnic, the slow route  
 Keats slogged through on that wet  
  
 walking tour: a backward looking  
 homage, not a setting forth, as for  
 his brother George, into the future (*CP* 340-341)

Here, Clampitt re-frames her perspective on the brothers' two voyages. The lines "that wet / walking tour: a backward looking / homage" almost repeat the phrasing in "The Elgin Marbles" in which Keats is shown "turning his back / against the hemp and tar." In both instances, Keats is turning away from his brother and looking backwards to the geographical and cultural landscape of the Old World. This journey north to take in the sights of ancient church ruins, and the tomb of Burns, is now portrayed as a nostalgic journey back into the realms of time and memory. George's westward journey, however difficult it eventually proved to be, is a "setting forth" of a different kind, a forward-looking leap into the unknown future.

### “a distant Idea of Proximity”

Keats’s letters are attempts to bridge the expanse of space between the two brothers, and they provide the link between the Old and New Worlds that Clampitt capitalises on in “The Elgin Marbles.” In his letters to George, Keats makes a number of comments about the power that correspondence has in compressing distances of space and time. In an early letter to George written between the 14-31 October 1818, Keats observes that the sight of his handwriting on the page alone may give George some comfort, regardless of the letter’s contents:

But now I have such a dearth that when I get to the end of this sentence and to the bottom of this page I much wait till I can find something interesting to you before I begin another.—After all it is not much matter what it may be about; for the very words from such a distance penned by hand will be grateful to you—even though I were to copy out the talke of Mother Hubbard or Little Red Riding Hood. (*KL I* 400-401)<sup>120</sup>

Though Keats does in fact expend a good deal of effort on the content of his letters to George, storing up anecdotes and excerpts from books he has read and lectures he has attended, he recognises that “the very words from such a distance penned by hand” are what matters most, particularly the sight of his brother’s handwriting, which for Keats’s represents the spectre of a correspondent’s touch upon the paper. The tension he feels between aspiring to write an entertaining letter, and the necessity of writing anything at all in order

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<sup>120</sup> Spelling as in original letter. Where “I much wait ” read “must.”

to maintain contact, is a theme in the letters to George. Keats says in another letter he expects their correspondence over the course of their lifetimes will be so lengthy no publisher would print it:

We will before many Years are over have written many folio volumes which as a Matter of self-defence to one whom you understand intends to be immortal in the best points and let all his Sins and peccadillos die away—I mean to say that the Booksellers will rather decline printing ten folio volumes of Correspondence printed as close as the Apostles creed in Watch paper. (*KL I 305*)

This observation, with its references to the fantasy of a tediously lengthy edition of their letters, is meant as a joke. However, it is difficult not to take seriously Keats's playful suggestion that he wishes to "to be immortal" through his letters. In his letters to his brother George, Keats seems to be caught somewhere between writing out of a desire to be remembered by posterity and the necessity of keeping the sense of friendship and intimacy between the two brothers alive. In a letter to Mrs James Wylie written on 16 August 1818 in the summer after George's departure, Keats writes, "My brother George has ever been more than a brother to me, he has been my greatest friend" (*KL I 358*). Letters are a way of maintaining this friendship by proxy.

However, the sense of connection sometimes seemed to waver, and Keats's letters make reference repeatedly to the distance that lay between the brothers. In a letter to the George Keatses written on the 16 December 1818, he writes: "The going[s] on of the world make me dizzy—there you are with



Birkbeck—here I am with [B]rown—sometimes I fancy an immense separation, and sometimes, as at present, a direct communication of spirit with you” (*KL II* 5). This idea of letters providing a paradoxical sense of “immense separation” and “direct communication” is repeated in a later letter written on the 27 September 1819 after George sends news that he has lost his entire inheritance in a failed business venture with the famous naturalist John James Audubon. Keats writes, “Notwithstanding their bad intelligence I have experienced some pleasure in receiving so correctly two Letters from you, as it give[s] me if I may so say a distant Idea of Proximity” (*KL II* 217).

Clampitt’s “The Elgin Marbles” is a poem about persons and artefacts uprooted into a new context, which underscores distances at the same time as it compresses them. Clampitt plots Keats’s journey north and juxtaposes it with flashes from George’s journey into the unknown Western wilds. The poem’s point of view is focalised through Keats’s perspective, and registers his attempts, in letters and poems, to grasp the meaning and nature of the New World into which George is venturing. Clampitt’s poem also incorporates, and merges together, a number of differing perspectives and landscapes: the perspective of John with that of his brother George, the North of England and Scotland with the landscape of America, and the classical landscapes of Ancient Greece symbolised by the Elgin Marbles with the landscapes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This mosaic of perspectives, or fractured viewpoint, is reflected in the formal pattern of the poem. The form mirrors the Elgin Marbles of the title. It is a fractured epic, reflecting Keats’s attempts, as Clampitt puts it in the poem, at “re-imagining an epic grandeur” (*CP* 171) in “Hyperion: A Fragment,” his

homage to Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, which Keats began in the autumn of 1818 shortly after George's departure. Clampitt's New World epic stretches to six pages and is written in free not heroic verse. Its fractured stanza pattern recalls—with the final lines of individual stanzas cut in half and carrying over into the next stanza—the dismantling and transporting of the marble statues from the Parthenon carried out by Lord Elgin at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The poem also includes a dedication to poet Frederick Turner, a friend and correspondent of Clampitt's, whose verse-epic *The New World* (1985), which imagines a dystopian, fragmented America in the future, acts as a further intertext.

Like Turner's poem, Clampitt's subject is American culture. However, where Turner looks to an imagined future as a way of shedding light on the present, Clampitt looks to the past, and specifically to Keats's epistolary relationship with his brother. Clampitt makes her own critique of American culture through the epistolary voice of Keats. "The Elgin Marbles" represents Keats's scepticism in relation to the potential of the American continent to match its Old World counterpart in terms of literary and philosophical strength. Longenbach argues that "Clampitt uses Keats's complex attitude toward America to mirror her own" (113). However, he does not consider the complex ways in which Clampitt engages with Keats's epistolary voice, which in my view Clampitt both absorbs and enters into a dialogue with in her poem.

There is no easy one-to-one match between Clampitt's opinions and those of Keats. At the same time as Clampitt appears to criticise America, she also ironizes Keats's words, emphasising the poet's naivety and failure to grasp entirely the New World that his brother had landed in. Through the power of

his imagination Keats is able to conjure the figures and landscapes of classical mythology, but when it comes to the reality of the New World, Clappitt suggests “imagination failed / —and still fails” (169). The premature line breaks and fractured stanza pattern seem to emphasise, with blank spaces on the page, the physical gulf that exists between the two brothers and the missed leaps of Keats’s imagination. America is referred to as “the still unimagined West, that welter / of a monument to hardship” (172). The word “welter,” in frequent use in the nineteenth century according to the *OED*, represents both a “state of confusion, upheaval, or turmoil,” usually in a political sense, or, literally and figuratively “[t]he rolling, tossing, or tumbling (of the sea or waves).” The image of America as a “welter of a monument” is thus a complex one, representing both the confusion and turmoil of the development of a new nation state, recalling the earlier description of “the lidless / ferocity of the Atlantic” (169), and at the same time suggesting with the word “monument” a certain fixity and permanence, as if this turmoil is being viewed from a distance of time, perhaps representing Clappitt’s perspective in the twentieth century. The word “monument” also refers back to the Elgin Marbles, with its connection to stone effigies, and Greek architecture. There is a tension between the wave-like motion of a “welter,” and the permanence of monuments. The image of America as an evolving nation, brought into being in a state of confusion, upheaval and hardship, is set against the permanence and grandeur of classical European monuments. Yet her poem seems at the same time to undercut the implicit belief in the superiority and stability of European culture, drawing attention as it does to the Elgin Marbles as monuments to a different kind of hardship—their status as “dismantled” and “fragmentary” serving as evidence of the various

political upheavals that led to their transportation from Greece to the British Museum at the start of nineteenth century.

The pioneer West, with its struggles for land and independence from Old World politics and values, was too real and too messy to be appealing to Keats, who Clompitt portrays as nostalgic for the classical serenity of ancient civilisations. In stanzas four and five of the poem, Clompitt alludes to Brown's description in his account of the pair's walks, published in 1840 in *Charles Brown's Walks in the North*, of Keats's boyish excitement on first seeing Lake Windermere. Brown writes:

The lake lay before us. His bright eyes darted on a mountain-peak, beneath which was gently floating on a silver cloud; thence to a very small island, adorned with the foliage of trees, that lay beneath us, and surrounded by water of a glorious hue, when he exclaimed— "How can I believe in that?—surely it cannot be!" He warmly asserted that no view in the world could equal this—that it must beat all Italy—yet having moved onward but a hundred yards—catching the further extremity of the lake, he thought it "more and more wonderfully beautiful!" (qtd. in *KL I 426*).

Clompitt echoes Brown's phrasing in her narration of the events: "He stared, / then slowly swore, "'This—/ must—beat—Italy.'/ Imaginary/ Italy, the never-never / vista, framed, of Stressa / on Lago Maggiore" (170). Clompitt reflects Keats's use of Italy as the standard against which he measures other landscapes. The use of dashes between Keats's comical exclamation that Windermere

“must—beat—Italy,” and the choice of the phrases “never-never” and “framed” to describe the vista, as in a painting, of “Stressa / on the Lago Maggiore” (170), emphasise the status of Keats’s Italy as a fantasy place, and a representation gleaned through “literary hand-me-downs” (170). The reference to the lake as a “never-never /vista” also hints at a link to the never-never land of Peter Pan and the Lost Boys. In stanza five, Clompitt draws attention to the elision that is taking place in Keats’s mind between the Lake District and Italy: “Windermere: / the Italy he’d never seen, though in / imagination he’d already lived there: / his mind’s America” (170). An imaginary Italy is the New World of Keats’s imagination, and the symbolic parallel of his brother’s real America.

### **“the first American Poet”**

In the autumn of 1818 news reached Keats that his sister-in-law Georgiana was expecting a child, and in his letter to his brother George written between the 14<sup>th</sup>–31<sup>st</sup> October 1818, which forms the basis for much of the detail in “The Elgin Marbles,” Keats resolves his ambivalence in regard to the unromantic landscape of his fantasy-nightmare vision of America into a lullaby. As Clompitt writes, “Now, / out of that solitude, a child, / another Keats, to be the bard of what / John Keats himself could never quite / imagine: he turned the fantasy / into a lullaby [...]” (172-173). In this letter to George, Keats is critical of the idealism of early American pioneers, such as Morris Birkbeck, and views America as a literary wasteland:

Those American’s are great but they are not sublime Man—the humanity of the United States can never reach the sublime— Birkbeck’s mind is

too much in the American Stryle [...] If I had a prayer to make for any great good, next to Tom's recovery, it should be that one of your Children should be the first American Poet. I have a great mind to make a prophecy and they say prophecies work out their own fullfillment" (*KL I* 397-398).

Keats follows this pronouncement with the lullaby addressed to this imaginary American bard: "Little Child / O' the western wild / Bard thou art completely" (399). Clampitt is again ironizing Keats's words. She is, after all, an American poet herself. More to the point, Keats seems oblivious to the fact that there were already a number of American poets by the early nineteenth century. Anne Bradstreet, for example, who Robert Boschman sees as one of Clampitt's most important literary predecessors, first published her poems in the mid-seventeenth century. 1818, the year Keats wrote his lullaby to his brother's unborn child (who turned out to be a girl) saw the publication of William Cullen Bryant's "To a Waterfowl," John Neal's *Battle of Niagra* and Samuel Woodworth's "The Bucket" (Larson xi).

Although Clampitt is critical of Keats's half-aborted attempts to imagine the "Kentucky wilderness," elements of Clampitt's poem also align with Keats's scepticism in relation to the New World. If Keats was nostalgic for an imaginary Italy, then early pioneers like Birkbeck, Clampitt suggests, were chasing after an impossible vision of New World utopia. Morris Birkbeck's *Letters from Illinois* (1818), published the same year as Keats began his journal-letters to George, and thus is in some ways a parallel text that presents letters travelling in the

opposite direction to Keats's, portrayed America as a utopian society free from the stifling political structures of the Old World. In one letter Birkbeck writes:

I *own* here a far better estate than I *rented* in England, and am already more attached to the *soil*. Here, every citizen, whether by birthright or adoption, is part of the government, identified with it, not *virtually*, but in fact; and eligible to every office, with one exception, regarding the Presidency, for which a birthright is necessary (29).

Birkbeck's fantasy of a utopian English Prairie was prematurely cut short, and as the notes in Keats's letters record, Birkbeck drowned in June 1825 while attempting to cross the Wabash River on his horse and George Keats did not settle in Birkbeck's colony.

Clampitt views the pioneer idealism of Birkbeck and others from a post-civil rights, post-WWII and Cold War perspective that is sceptical of the pioneers' attempts to build a new and better version of Europe:

-Behold

in the back settlements, the rise  
of Doric porticoes. Courthouse  
spittoons. The glimmer of a classic  
colonnade through live oaks. Slave  
cabins. Mud. New Athenses, Corinthians,  
Spartas among the Ossabaws and  
Tuscaloosas, the one no less

homesick than the other for what never was, most likely,  
 but in some founder's warped  
 and sweating mind. (172)

The "one no less / homesick than the other for what never was" ties together Keats's homesickness for Greece with George Keats's homesickness for an American utopia. Both brothers exhibit an impossible homesickness for "what never was." Clampitt highlights the paradox implicit in Birkbeck's vision of American democracy. Contrary to Birkbeck's claim that "every citizen [...] is part of the government," Clampitt's reference to "Slave / cabins" seen next to "The glimmer of a classic / colonnade" reminds the reader that there were in fact several exceptions to the principle of universal suffrage, which excluded slaves and women. The slave cabins prop up the Greek-inspired opulence of Southern plantations. Clampitt is suspicious, as in the earlier poem "The Quarry," which features the capital building of Des Moines, Iowa made of imported marble, of the "glisten" (*CP* 66) and "glimmer" of these imported European forms.

The Greek architecture and Doric porticoes of southern mansions is another uncanny, albeit real, coincidence of apparently separate geographies, and ties in with Keats's conflation of separate locations in his poems and letters. In his letter to the George Keatses written between the 14<sup>th</sup> February and 3 May 1819, Keats speculates about life in Birkbeck's English Prairie in Illinois. He also instructs Georgiana to write him letters: "a Letter or two of yours just to bandy back a pun or two across the Atlantic and send a quibble over the Floridas" (*KL*



II 92).<sup>121</sup> In the same letter Keats enquires, playfully, whether George and Georgiana have encountered any monkeys yet: “Do you get any Spirits—now you might easily distill some whiskey—and going into the woods set up a whiskey s[h]op for the Monkeys” (*Keats Letters II* 92). Gigante observes that Keats muddles his geography in this letter—in imagining letters travelling over Florida and in locating monkeys in North America—although these confusions are perhaps deliberate: “Whether John thought his quibble would fly over the Floridas on its way to George and Georgiana in Illinois, or whether he thought there were monkeys on the prairie, he stretched his imagination to share his brother’s experience. One suspects [...] that the poet was thinking of America more metaphorically than literally” (243).

In “The Elgin Marbles” Clampitt suggests that America remained a metaphor or “fantasy” for Keats. She subtly critiques Keats’s naivety in relation to the “still unimagined West,” his obliviousness in relation to a burgeoning American literary culture, while also presenting a complex critique of America, which speaks to the mid-1980s Reagan era in which Clampitt is writing. She in some ways colludes in Keats’s creation of a fantasy landscape in the poem. She deliberately superimposes an American landscape over an English one, and introduces anachronistic and out-of-place cultural elements. As already mentioned, the choice of the title, “The Elgin Marbles,” recalling Keats’s earlier sonnet “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” gestures at displaced cultural artefacts, and a legacy of British and American imperialism in the twentieth century.

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<sup>121</sup> This comment bears a striking resemblance to the lines from Bishop’s “Letter to Two Friends,” quoted in the previous chapter, where she writes “Marianne, loan me a noun! / Cal, please cable a verb!” (*EAP* 113). Bishop, who had read Keats’s letters, may well have been consciously or unconsciously recalling these lines.

### (Epistolary) Fragments

The poem, in its choice of language, also levers in a number of cultural reference points that seem to have landed from different continents and eras in the form of Americanised versions of European phenomena, particularly representations in art. For example, in the lines “Another / summer gone, Tom worse, his own sore throat / recurring, *Endymion* stillborn, picked over by the vultures” (171) Here, Clappitt is referring in part to the infamous 1818 review of Keats’s *Endymion* printed in the *Quarterly Review*, which was highly critical and wholly dismissive of Keats’s poem. Given Clappitt’s professed love of birds, and background as a librarian at the Audubon Society, the choice of ornithological reference cannot be incidental. Clappitt may be thinking of the species of New World vultures called a Turkey Vulture, a separate and more sinister-seeming species than the Old World vultures found in Europe, which is eagle-sized and able to detect carcasses using its acute sense of smell. John James Audubon depicted this species in his *Birds of America* (1827-1838). Vultures also appear in Keats’s “The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream” his second draft of the sun-god epic. Apollo, the speaker of the poem, address the priestess on the subject of the role of poets:

Majestic shadow, tell me: sure not all

Those melodies sung into the World's ear

Are useless: sure a poet is a sage;

A humanist, Physician to all Men.

That I am none I feel, as Vultures feel

They are no birds when Eagles are abroad. (Cook 295)

In this section Keats places the two types of bird—eagle and vulture—in a kind of hierarchy. Vultures, though of a similar size, are the inferior bird, who feed on dead carcasses, and in the context of poetic composition metaphorically feed on the work of others. This avian hierarchy links to Keats’s own anxiety in relation to his imitation of Milton, which led him to abandon and re-shape his earlier poem, “Hyperion: A Fragment,” into this second, more self-conscious epic, “The Fall of Hyperion.” Clampitt brings in this reference to “vultures” in a highly ironic and multi-faceted way, riffing on the different significance of the birds, in relation to Keats’s poetry, and the landscapes of the Old and New Worlds. Keats, “primed on *Lear*, Milton, Gibbon, Wordsworth” and “re-imagining an epic grandeur” (171) is himself a kind of literary vulture, picking over fragments of others’ poetry to form a new thing. The same is true for Clampitt, who is also “re-imagining an epic grandeur” in her homage to Keats. The hierarchy of Old and New Worlds: the majestic eagle vs. the opportunistic vulture; the romantic John “Man of Genius” and his enterprising brother George “Man of Power,” are not far from Clampitt’s mind.

Clampitt’s homage is thus a reassembling of cultural fragments, not unlike Lord Elgin’s “dismantled, fragmentary, lowered” sculptures. Though she is implicitly critical of Elgin’s removal of the marbles—“the draperied recumbent hulks Lord Elgin / took down from the Parthenon,”—the verb “took” bringing with it a submerged sense of theft—Clampitt cannot help but draw attention to her own forms of literary theft and reassembling. The letters to George that Clampitt reassembles are themselves “dismantled, fragmentary [and] lowered” by Clampitt into her poems. Alexander Regier argues in *Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism* (2010) that Keats’s letters are

fragments of an epistolary exchange, which highlight “a linguistic predicament of brokenness” (119) and “the displacement of oneself, the writer, the reader, and in the act of writing, a displacement of time” (122) necessary in the writing of letters. The Keats archive itself is a record of fragmentation and the displacement of cultural artefacts, with much of it held at the Harvard University archive, giving Keats a further Americanised significance and facilitating, to a large extent, the body of American scholarship that Clampitt draws on in her sequence of poems.

Helen Vendler, in a letter to Clampitt giving her opinions on the poems in draft form, expressed some reservations regarding the deliberate re-assembling of cultural fragments, particularly in the penultimate poem of the sequence, “Winchester: The Autumn Equinox.” In this poem, Clampitt splices together Keats’s famous ode “To Autumn” with “The Fall of Hyperion,” which Keats was also drafting at a similar time in the autumn of 1819, as well as quoting from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73, and sections of a long letter from John Keats to the George Keats written between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> September 1819. Together with these Keatsian and Shakespearean references, Clampitt also brings in tones from Wallace Stevens’s “The Auroras of Autumn,” which as Vendler had argued takes Keats’s ode “further, into, winter, into boreal apocalypse, into inception; to find a new imagery of his own, while retaining Keats’s crickets and bees and birds and sun and fields” (*Part of Nature* 40), thus lending the ode a distinctly modern sensibility not wholly contained in the original. In her letter to Clampitt, which gives high praise to Clampitt’s sequence overall, Vendler expressed discomfort with what she saw as Clampitt’s violation of the original context of

Keats's ode, and her mingling of otherwise separate poems and contexts. She writes:

The roar of the fire sits ill for me with the diminished music of the autumn ode, which thins sound to twitters and whistles. Except for that the first two stanzas are wonderful, esp. the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 ll. of st. 2 and its last 3 lines. I know the roar is for the fall of Hyperion; but the quotations from Shakespeare are apposite to the ode not to *The Fall*; and so the roar gets put in, so to speak, in the middle of the ruminations about the season, and doesn't seem quite faithful to his separation of two moods. (*Clampitt Papers* 46.5)

In her response to Vendler's criticism, Clampitt writes that this splicing together of separate moods, which in many ways mirrors Keats's view of autumn as the mingling of summer and winter, is deliberate and she resists changing it:

Although I think I understand what troubles you, and although I continued to be awed by your argument with each rereading, my own preoccupations somehow can't be made to take proper notice—i.e. the preoccupation with finding (or, if need be, inventing) links between Keats the English poet and the new world his brother went off to live in; which must be what causes me to connect the roar as if of earthly fire with rocketry, and thus with a leap into the twentieth century—violation of the context though I must admit it is." (*LA* 237)

Clampitt does, however, incorporate Vendler's suggestion to alter the final line of the poem from a direct quotation from *Hamlet* ("the rest is silence"), instead combining this line with Keats's observation in one of his last letters that he is leading a "posthumous existence" (*KL II* 359). Clampitt's revised ending reads: "The rest / is posthumous" (184).

Clampitt's admission that she "can't be made to take proper notice" of Vendler's suggestion and her outlining of her "preoccupation with finding (or, if need be, inventing)" the links between the Old and New Worlds of the two brothers is revealing, and makes explicit the deliberate "violation[s] of context" that Clampitt's sequence employs. The sudden, out of context, appearance of "a roar as if of earthy / fire all twilit Europe at his back, / toward the threshold of the west" appears in the middle of a meditation on the seasons, and ingeniously links the fiery lights of Autumn with that of the sun God Apollo and his counterpart Hyperion, who at the end of Keats's epic heads towards the West and away from the fallen realm of Apollo and the old Gods. Clampitt's poem portrays these two rival powers as Old and New Worlds akin to "twilit Europe" as opposed to the new possibilities opening in the pioneer West. The corresponding lines in the third stanza read:

The opening of the West: what Miltonic  
 rocketry of epithet, what paradigm /  
 of splendor in decline, could travel,  
 and survive, the monstrous region (as he'd  
 later depict it) of dull rivers poured  
 from sordid urns [...] (*CP* 183)

Here, Clampitt brings together Keats's struggle to write an epic poem to match Milton's with Keats's pioneer brother George. Clampitt's comment that the link between Hyperion's roar of fire and "rocketry" signifies "a leap into the twentieth century" casts Hyperion in the context of the Cold War Space Race between America and the Soviet powers, which led to a new form of expansion beyond the "west's unentered spaces" (*CP* 183) and into outer space.

**"Letters no one will ever open."**

Keats's letters provide Clampitt with the tangible connection between the Old and New Worlds, and the conversation that they embody acts as a springboard into wider concerns about the power of letters and literature to create links "with times and places, and with minds, otherwise remote" (*CP* 507), the nature of westward expansion, the political and cultural legacies of British and American imperialism in the twentieth century and the ramifications of American dominance. Clampitt explores this ambivalence towards her country of origin, and indeed to the concept of home, in the eponymous final poem of the sequence, "Voyages." The poem draws a series of ingenious parallels between the lives and words of Hart Crane, Osip Mandelstam, Stevens and Keats, and also, implicitly, Clampitt herself. Each poet links in some way to the themes of voyage and exile. The title derives partly from Keats's final voyage to Italy, and his quarantine at the Bay of Naples. Hart Crane's sea poem, "Voyages," is also implied by the title. The opening stanzas detail Crane's origins: "a changeling from along the tire-and-rubber / factories, steel mills, cornfields of the Ohio / flatland that had absent-mindedly produced him" (185), and his suicide in 1932 when he leaped over the taffrail of the *Orizaba* ship. Crane's

status as “a changeling”—a homosexual poet from the Ohio flatlands—makes him an exile of sorts. Crane’s self-imposed exile from the Ohio flatlands “that absent-mindedley produced him” also links him with Clampitt, who in describing her relationship to the Midwest in the 1986 interview for *Oxford Poetry*, echoes these lines about Crane. When asked to reflect on her relationship with Europe, and specifically Great Britain, in part of her answer Clampitt replied:

T.S. Eliot was born in St. Louis and settled in London. Marianne Moore was born in St. Louis and settled in Brooklyn. Elizabeth Bishop began life in Nova Scotia (if I’m not mistaken) and can hardly be said to have settled anywhere. I feel a certain kinship with her nomadism, if that is what it is: though I’ve been based in New York for many years, I feel less and less as though I have really *lived* anywhere. Is that kind of uprooting possibly an American tradition? [...] I feel certain affinities with Hart Crane—the side of him that felt affinities with Keats, anyhow—but don’t know whether that constitutes a line of poetic descent. The more I think about this question, the more intriguing it becomes. Whatever answer there may be, I suspect, will have some relation to being native to the Midwest—and having left it. And then looking back. (*Predecessors* 164)

This notion of having left the Midwest, and then looking back at it in her work, seems to be the same thought behind the lines about Crane as inextricably linked to “the Ohio / flatland that had absent-mindedley produced him.” Moreover, the idea of absent-mindedness seems very much akin to the effect



that Keats's transatlantic letters produce in the way that they constitute an absent presence. The idea that someone can be physically in one place, but that their imagination can travel elsewhere, is vital to an understanding of both Keats's poetry and his letters. It is also central to the operations of Clompitt's "Voyages" sequence.

It is significant that the sequence, which draws on correspondence as well as literal and epistolary voyages, ends with the image of unopened letters:

as now his voyage to the bottom of a crueller  
 obscurity began, whose end only the false-haired  
 seaweed of an inland shipwreck would register.  
 Untaken voyages, Lethean cold, O all but the unendured  
 arrivals! Keats's starved stare before the actual,  
 so long imagined Bay of Naples. The mind's extinction.  
 Nightlong, sleepless beside the Spanish steps, the prattle  
 of poured water. Letters no one will ever open. (186)

The "false-haired / seaweed" takes us back to the opening of Clompitt's sequence, "Margate," and the samphire-gatherer. The "[l]etters no one will ever open" refer on a literal level to the unopened letters, from Fanny Brawne and Fanny Keats, with which Keats was buried. On a metaphorical level, they carry the significance of death as the ultimate form of exile, and of communication cut short. Amid the noise of poets' voices, there is a sense, at the end of the poem, that the line has gone dead. This finally serves both to complicate and enrich

Clampitt's comments about "[t]he powerful way in which literature can become a link with times and places, and with minds, otherwise remote" (*CP* 507). The final stanzas brings with them a plangent silence, and a sense of aloneness, that reinforces the barrier to communication that time and death represent. The phrase, "The mind's extinction," is Darwinian in its curtailment of the idea of a life after death, and its connection to oblivion. Keats is presented as akin to the figures on the Grecian urn, frozen in time "beside the Spanish steps," forever exiled and forever clutching letters that neither he nor anyone else can ever open.

In reading Clampitt's sequence of poems, "Voyages," alongside the correspondence between John and George Keats, which inspired them, this chapter has shown that Clampitt uses Keats's letters as a means of framing his work in a transatlantic context, and drawing real and imaginary links between the Old and New Worlds. The letters are a means for Clampitt to connect times and places that would otherwise seem remote, and to create "a community of response." Clampitt's meditations on the (auto)biography of Keats that the letters provide are also a means for her to reflect on the influence of predecessors, and the piecing together of fragments of conversations—in poetry and in letters—that constitute what it means to be a poet. My broader argument is that Clampitt uses the personal letters of other writers as a means of narrating by proxy the circumstances of her own life. In "Voyages" and again in her later sequence, *A Gathering of Shades* (1987), she employs quotations and images from the letters (and diaries) of other writers as a means of indirectly addressing matters of personal and contemporary importance. The epistolary voices of Keats, George Eliot, Dorothy Wordsworth and others, present a way

for Clampitt to draw links between the nineteenth century and 1980s America. In the Keats sequence, Clampitt uses letters to address American political and cultural dominance and the legacies of Imperialism and the Cold War. The poems incorporate the displacement of people and artefacts, the nature of western expansion and the Space Race. Clampitt ultimately exploits the quality of absent presence that letters possess as a means of voyaging across a range of times, spaces and perspectives.

## Conclusion

### **“perfect! But—impossible”: Communities of Letters**

This thesis began with the question of why so many post-war American poets remained fascinated with correspondence, keeping in contact with their networks primarily through letters and writing epistolary or letter-inspired poems, at a time when it appeared to be, as Bishop wrote, “the dying ‘form of communication’” (*OA* 545). The three poets I chose as my central examples all share similarities with their peers, for whom letters often proved a useful and compelling trope. Other examples include confessional lyrics by Lowell and Sexton, which use the addressor-addressee relationship as a means of conveying autobiographical details, and the verse letters of the Beats and Black Mountain poets, which seek out alternative forms of community through correspondence. However, Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt are also all anomalies that do not quite fit this account. Although they cannot be considered a cohesive group or school of poetry, they are linked by their shared sense of themselves as outsiders and exiles. A profound sense of difference, coupled with practicalities such as Duncan’s geographical isolation from his fellow Black Mountain poets, Bishop’s fifteen year residence in Brazil, and Clampitt’s late entry onto the poetry scene at the age of sixty three, solidified the importance of letters and letter writing for all three poets. Letter writing was a necessary means for each to keep in touch with their closest friends and fellow poets and artists, and it provided a vital sense of connection to an artistic community.

The terms “exile,” “friendship” and “community” reoccur in the cases of all three poets and are fundamentally linked to their letter writing. Duncan’s

*H.D. Book*, which grew directly out of his correspondence with H.D., explores the importance of poets exiled from the ranks of canonical poetry and seeks to (re)construct a literary community centred around H.D. and other women modernists. Bishop draws attention to her self-imposed exile in her Brazil correspondence while simultaneously imagining herself together with her friends in a space made by letters. Clampitt highlights her own “nomadism” (*Predecessors* 164) and exile from the Midwest of her childhood. However, she finds, through letters, imaginative links between her sense of “uprootedness” (164) and feelings of exile experienced by a diverse range of poets including Keats, Crane and Mandelstam, who never met, but whose overlapping lives, letters and poetry formed a “community of response” (*Clampitt Papers* 21.6).

Not only did letters give these poets a practical and material means of communicating with mentors and peers, but the very acts of writing and reading letters were deeply interwoven into the creative process. All the chapters of this thesis demonstrate, through a simultaneous close reading of letters alongside poems, the ways in which each poet uses ideas and images from their correspondence in their poems. More than this, the formal qualities of letters, journals and journal-letters, with their unique immediacy and interpersonal and conversational qualities, provided inspiration that all three sought to recapture in their poems. In Bishop’s case particularly, the qualities of ease and spontaneity, of “working without really doing it” (*OA* 273), even if these were actually carefully crafted and designed effects, were characteristics that provided details and a more general mood in poems. By adding to and extending previous criticism on Bishop’s correspondence, I have sought to demonstrate in Chapter Three how she has gleaned these effects from the

letters and journals of nineteenth-century poets and explorers, particularly Dickinson and Darwin. For all three poets, letters were not static draft material to be used later in poems, but sources that were uniquely alive and malleable, making them ripe for incorporation in, and often alteration into, poetry.

Building on previous criticism that has looked specifically at the unique role of letter writing in relation to poets and poetry, a small but growing field, I confirm in my thesis that we should not simply treat letters as uncomplicated stores of biographical and contextual information. To do so is to neglect their nuanced, performative and artistic qualities. However, departing from a recent critical emphasis on the unique qualities of letters as standalone texts independent from poems, I argue that the two forms developed in parallel, often on the same sheet of paper, and so should be read in this way, together.

Letters and poems benefit from mutual illumination when placed in dialogue with one another. In Chapter One I showed, through an analysis of both the printed text of the letters between Duncan and H.D., as well as the original manuscripts, how poems grew out of this correspondence, were exchanged in the post, and were integrated into the body of letters in ways that challenge the dividing lines between verse and prose. Similarly, Duncan's first exchange with Levertov was in the form of a poem-letter, and a close relationship between these two forms continued throughout their exchanges, with Levertov's final poem continuing, posthumously, their long, poetic-epistolary dialogue. In the similarly extensive and important correspondence between Bishop and Lowell, poems also grew out of the creative and epistolary back-and-forth. As Chapter Four demonstrates, letters often represented and encompassed an exchange of literal and figurative portraits, which partly, I

argue, inspired the pair's poetic tributes to one another, "The Armadillo" and "Skunk Hour." An exchange of portraits, and the processes of self-other comparison that this entails, formed the pictorial bedrock of their two interlocking family memoirs, "91 Revere Street" and "Memories of Uncle Neddy." The reading of letters alongside poems, and integration of letters into poems, and vice-versa, was at the core of Amy Clampitt's approach in her "Voyages" sequence of poems, as seen in the concluding chapter. Clampitt herself reads the letters and poetry of Keats side by side, adding a further self-conscious and meta-poetical dimension to her post-war peers' and predecessors' engagements with letters. Her own and others' letters offered a way into writing poems, and provided evidence of how profoundly and paradoxically the poetic endeavour was both solitary and social.

That Duncan, Bishop and Clampitt saw letters and poetry as intertwined and often interchangeable was in large part due to their shared fascination with earlier, particularly nineteenth-century, epistolary traditions. Their poems and letters hinged on their readings of many of the same figures. For Duncan, Emerson's model of friendship, letter writing and the coterie circulation of manuscripts provided an inspiration for his correspondence with Levertov. At the same time the ambiguities and inherent miscommunications and failures of this model also sowed the seeds of differences and the eventual falling out between these two poets and letter writers. Bishop too was immersed in the letters of nineteenth-century figures including Emerson, Hopkins, Dickinson, Keats, Coleridge, the Brownings, Darwin, and Jane Carlyle. Her correspondence looks back, consciously and unconsciously, not only to the handing around of poems in letters, but also, as I demonstrate in Chapter Four, to the exchange of

miniature portraits and cameos along with letters. However, as in the case of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century miniatures, these portraits often proved to be inaccurate, distorted, embellished and performative, much like the letters that enclose and complement them. Bishop's "New Year's Letter as Auden Says—" and "Poem" reflect on the crucial and shaping influence of the correspondence with Lowell, and the distortions involved in all forms of artistic representation, including painting and poetry.

All five chapters examine the literary influences and the themes of predecessors that a two-way, collaborative correspondence brings to the fore. In my readings of poets' letters I challenge Bloom's both familiar but flawed "anxiety of influence" model, as well as subsequent counter-theories. However, in each case it is clear that the poets' relationships with mentors and predecessors were not anxiety-free. All reject the idea that "absolute originality" (Clampitt, *Predecessors* 47) can ever be possible, and pay tribute to predecessors and peers in the form of poetic homages; such as Duncan's poems for H.D. and Levertov, Bishop and Lowell's dedications to each other in their poems, and Clampitt's poems about Keats. The poets' epistolary relationships complicate any totalising or facile narratives of influence, refuting models of aggressive competition, but also revealing the anxiety involved in balancing imitation with the need to find an individual voice. While poetry may not be a competitive battle of wills, it is also not the motherly "womb of souls" that Duncan idealistically terms it in a letter to H.D. (*H.D.-RD Letters* 23).

This brings me to one of the central findings of my thesis in relation to these particular post-war poets and their fascination with correspondence. In the case of all three, the communities of letters, friendship and poetry that they



forged through correspondence often did not live up to the ideals necessary to their creation. Both Duncan and Clampitt use the similar phrases “community in poetry” and “community of response” to describe the ties constructed through letter writing and poetry. For Bishop, while she never felt she belonged, or perhaps even ever wanted to belong, to any ideal community, her individual friendships and poetic alliances rested on principles of civility, trust and courtesy in letters. These ideals are evident in the care she takes in sustaining her literary friendships, and in her objections to Lowell’s violation of this relationship of “trust” in his use of letters in *The Dolphin* (WIA 708), and in his poetic renderings of Bishop’s letters in his sonnets.

Each chapter has revealed the, at least partial, unravelling of the ideals of epistolary and poetic community and friendship. In this sense, my thesis echoes a key idea in existing epistolary criticism: that letters represent and enact attempts to bridge distances of space and time, and also to conflate presence and absence, while simultaneously underscoring the impossibility of ever truly doing so. Altman captures this fundamental tension when she writes: “the letter straddles the gap between presence and absence; the two persons who ‘meet’ through the letter are neither totally separated nor totally united. The letter lies halfway between the possibility of total communication and the risk of no communication at all” (*Epistolarity* 43). Keats, even more neatly and succinctly, summarises this same phenomenon as the “distant Idea of Proximity” that letters create (*KL II* 217).

Yet, if this is a familiar territory in epistolary criticism, the details of the ways in which letters can act as bridge and barrier, presence and absence, and the complexity of the interactions between these two concepts in practice, have

rarely been detailed and made clear in accounts of letter writing. This is particularly the case in relation to real letters, especially poets' letters, which remain underexplored next to the abundance of studies of fictional letters in epistolary novels. Every chapter in my thesis demonstrates the "distant Idea of Proximity" and the poets' attempts to conjure a sense of presence in letters, and to link together diverse people and ideas.

However, as in Bishop's poem "The End of March"—the epistolary significance of which I discussed in Chapter Three—these ideals of letters, community and companionable solitude were not, and could not be, fully realised. In Bishop's poem the "proto-dream-house," with its accompanying visions of artistic solitude and an imaginary space of distant proximity, proves finally to be "perfect! But—impossible" (*P* 199-200).

Each chapter of this thesis has shown how an ideal of epistolary and poetic community or friendship is first established and later necessarily revised or dismantled. Duncan's letter relationships with H.D. and Levertov are based on his vision of the poet as part of a shared, communal poetic unconscious, one that is necessarily solitary and removed from present day politics, and a vision that is maintained through the companionable solitude that letters provide. However, the various exchanges of letters and poems between these poets reveal fundamental, and in the case of Levertov, apparently irreconcilable, differences in their approaches to poetry, its engagement with the transgression of social norms and the role of the poet in a time of war. Read side-by-side, Bishop's Brazil poems and letters, both her own and others', reveal a tension between letters and poems as carefully constructed cages for vivid and vital impressions, and the risks of attempts to capture and enclose poetic ideas,

animals and people. Bishop and Lowell's letters contain an exchange of elegantly crafted, and often idealised, images of themselves and each other. In contrast, Bishop's poems and prose memoir show more clearly than her letters an acute anxiety about representations that are inaccurate or are hollow forms of mimicry. Finally, Amy Clampitt's "Voyages" sequence reveals an underlying tension between her stated intention to construct a "community of response" between diverse poets, using the idea of letters as a link between different times, minds and spaces, and the sequence's final image of silence, unanswered letters and disconnection. Clampitt's sequence affirms that while letters can collapse time and space, they can never fully compensate for the physical absence that they emphatically represent.

If letters offered all three poets an ideal of solitary companionship that finally proved to be impossible, or at least not wholly possible, in each case, these poets' letters demonstrate the unique way that correspondence inspired, enlarged and occasionally also frustrated, their poetry.

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