Elizabeth Bishop's Theater of the Inevitable

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ELIZABETH BISHOP'S BRAZIL, by Bethany Hicok. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016. 192 pp. $59.50 cloth; $24.50 paper; $24.50 ebook.

ELIZABETH BISHOP'S PROSAIC, by Vidyan Ravinthiran. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2015. 250 pp. $80.00 cloth; $49.99 paper; $42.50 ebook.

"Writing poetry is an unnatural act," Elizabeth Bishop observed in a set of notes dating from the late 1950s or early 1960s, "it takes great skill to make it seem natural. Most of the poet's energies are really directed towards this goal: to convince himself (perhaps, with luck, eventually some readers) that what he's up to and what he's saying is really an inevitable, *only* natural way of behaving under the circumstances."[1] That Bishop, by mid-career, aimed to make her poems seem "natural" and "inevitable" is not surprising to those familiar with her craft. But two recent books, Bethany Hicok's *Elizabeth Bishop's Brazil* and Vidyan Ravinthiran's *Elizabeth Bishop's Prosaic*, enhance our understanding of the cultural circumstances and technical theater behind Bishop's air of inevitability—the uncanny sense, which Bishop readers often have, that her finished poem could not have been written any other way without diminishing its power.

Hicok's and Ravinthiran's books offer new contexts for reckoning with Bishop's enduring appeal. As Angus Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis state in their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop* (2014), "At the beginning of the twenty-first century, her poetry seems, if anything, even more contemporary than during her lifetime, a process facilitated . . . mainly by the sheer originality and variety of her writing."[2] Hicok animates the rich complexity of Bishop's years in Brazil, living among the cultural elite during a period of tumultuous political change and, later, personal urgency, evincing the ways in which Brazilian literature and politics informed Bishop's poetry. It is a book that enables Bishop scholars and readers alike *to see*, vividly, Brazil's place in Bishop's imaginary. Ravinthiran, for his part, draws on a theoretical framework that includes George Saintsbury as well as Derek Attridge and Stanley Cavell to uncover Bishop's use of sonic and semantic structures, typically germane to prose, within her poems, prose poems, literary prose, and letters. He offers a fascinating new

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way to interpret—and *to hear*—Bishop's aesthetic, one with ramifications for the study of poetics, more generally.

Both books work against established critical tendencies to read Bishop primarily as a North American poet, one who happened to spend the greater part of two decades in Brazil, and to consider her primarily as a second generation modernist or narrative lyric poet, principally informed by the techniques of a single genre. Hicok's study steers Bishop scholarship further away from its early North American focus, positioning Bishop's life in Brazil among its political tensions and upheavals, the social architecture of class and race, the influences of Portuguese language and literature, and the informing richness of its landscape and ecology. In Hicok's meticulous narrative, Bishop emerges as a poet influenced by—and indebted to—the cultural and literary legacies of both Americas. From a similarly novel perspective, Ravinthiran reads Bishop not as a poet who also happened to write remarkable letters and stories but as a *writer* intrinsically provoked and guided by the cadences of prose in her work across genres. Prosaic, in his definition, is rinsed of its pejorative force and repurposed to describe ways in which prose structures enhance the sound and cognitive texture of Bishop's inimitable style.

Together, these two books extend our understanding of Bishop's *oeuvre* across generic and national boundaries, moving in the direction of the speaker in Bishop's "Santarém" (1978) who posits:

> Even if one were tempted
> to literary interpretations
> such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female
> —such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off
> in that watery, dazzling dialectic.[3]

Written toward the end of her life, long after Bishop had returned from Brazil, "Santarém" cautions critics who might be "tempted" to apply reductive binaries to the curated ambiguities—and the "contact zones" between cultures, classes, human and non-human actors—in her poems (Hicok, p. 49). Etymologically, a "dialectic" is a dialogue, a conversation, an exchange between counterparts, and in Hegel's classic formulation, a dialectic is also the process by which an idea is defined and fulfilled by its opposite. Hicok argues that Bishop's years in Brazil offered that fulfilling challenge; her adopted home heightened her concerns for ecology, social justice, and abuses of power while honing her insights on "dwelling and traveling" (p. 7).

The general lineaments of Bishop's stay in Brazil are well-known, but Hicok provides nuance, clarification, and depth to scholars' understanding of Bishop's relation to Brazil's politics, class structure, literary tradition, and landscape. Bishop arrived in 1951, traveling on the SS *Bowplate*, which was

scheduled to journey around Cape Horn. As some of her personal letters from the late 1940s indicate, she was fleeing a sense of displacement and dissipation that had increasingly haunted her life since her graduation from Vassar College in 1934. For years, Bishop had been searching for suitable environs—a climate that would not exacerbate her asthma, alcoholism, depression, or bouts of loneliness, conditions that had made her term as Consultant to the Library of Congress, from 1949 to 1950, acutely difficult. Indeed, writing to Robert Lowell, looking back on her years in New York, Bishop noted that she had been "miserably lonely there most of the time" and, while in Washington, DC, endured a most "dismal year . . . when I thought my days were numbered."[4]

In the occasionally happy folly of fate, during the SS *Bowplate*'s stopover in Brazil, Bishop had an allergic reaction to the fruit of the cashew while visiting with friends; the incident detained her in Petrópolis. As she recuperated, she began a love affair with Lota de Macedo Soares, a Brazilian aristocrat who offered to share her privileged life with the American poet, lending Bishop—for a crucial, life-altering interval—a sense of home and domestic ritual in a glass house designed by the prominent architect Sérgio Bernardes, with mountainside views and, soon after Bishop's arrival, an in-ground swimming pool fed by a waterfall (Hicok, pp. 9, 15-16). After a purgatorial stretch, the forty-year-old poet had arrived at something like an earthly heaven.

Hicok adds meaningful complication and detail to this narrative. Bishop lived in Brazil from 1951 to 1966 and made several additional visits to the country between 1966 and 1974. By 1966, she had published two collections that secured her reputation among North American readers: *Poems: North & South – A Cold Spring* (1955) and *Questions of Travel* (1965), the former winning both the Pulitzer Prize and a *Partisan Review* fellowship. Alongside the writing of poems and stories, many of them drawing on local culture and landscape, Bishop was also positioning herself, Hicok argues, "in a Pan-American context" (p. 65). She hosted several visiting writers—such as Robert Lowell and Keith Botsford—through the Congress of Cultural Freedom, a United States government agency later revealed to have been funded by the Central Intelligence Agency "as part of its anti-Communist, pro-American, Cold War cultural propaganda campaign" (p. 13). More significantly, she embarked on several major translation projects that made manifest, as Hicok argues, the "underlying ideologies of race, gender, class, ethnicity, culture, and politics" in the United States and Brazil, as well as the poet's evolving place in that gestalt (p. 66).

Translation, in its Latin roots, entails a bearing across, a carrying over. In her work as a translator, Bishop shuttled the approximate meaning of texts written in one language into another, just as she, in her fifteen years in Brazil, carried coordinates of her identity into a new environment

with a wholly new set of provocations. Hicok notes that shortly after her arrival, Bishop assisted in the translation of Henrique Mindlin's *Modern Architecture in Brazil* (1956), a book that featured the house at Samambaia that she shared with Macedo Soares and that testified to Brazil's place in the architectural avant-garde (p. 9). Although Bishop, in a letter to Robert Lowell in 1960, would deride the poet Anne Sexton for what she termed "'our beautiful old silver' school of female writing"—referring to Sexton's overt references to social class in her poems—Bishop was not, in 1956, overly concerned with disguising her own class privilege or new mountainside residence in poems or personal letters.[5]

For the most part, Bishop would keep the luck of her liaison with Macedo Soares and the particular nature of their relationship from public view. While Macedo Soares's money and status afforded Bishop a generous degree of aegis, the poet had good reasons for making the details of her personal life oblique. When she strayed from the heteronormative codes of the 1950s, the poet did not always meet with acceptance from the literary establishment. Indeed, both the *New Yorker* and *Poetry* magazines turned down her fine poem "The Shampoo" (1955), in which the speaker is addressing—and tending affectionately to—a woman she loves. Katherine White, poetry editor at the *New Yorker*, wrote to Bishop that "this sort of small personal poem" was unsuited to the magazine.[6] Cold War homophobia, which Bishop had witnessed first-hand while working at the Library of Congress, still cast shadows in Manhattan and Chicago as editors policed "the personal."

The glass house in Samambaia, named for a giant indigenous fern, must have seemed worlds away from surveillance in Washington. Hicok relates that within a year and a half of her arrival, Bishop was busily translating the three-hundred-page *Diary of "Helena Morley"* (1957), which brought to an Anglo-American audience the autobiographical narrative of a Brazilian girl living in a mining town shortly after the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the commencement of the Brazilian republic in 1889 (p. 68). Bishop's three years of work on this project seems to have informed, in part, her own autobiographical writing about her childhood in Nova Scotia's Great Village during and after her mother's mental illness and institutionalization. For a $10,000 commission from *Life* magazine's World Library series, Bishop also wrote the prodigious text of *Brazil* (1962). Although the editorship of that volume greatly frustrated her, her research for it suffused other works of poetry and prose. As Hicok notes, "beyond a doubt . . . Bishop's artistic life was all of a piece. It was indeed 'one art'"; even Bishop's unfinished drafts and the *Life* book she repudiated supplied her imagination (p. 99).

Like her letter writing, translation complemented Bishop's poetry and provided a way of relating to her new world and new contacts. After meeting the intriguing, elegant modernist writer Clarice Lispector in Rio

de Janeiro in 1962, for instance, Bishop subsequently translated three of Lispector's stories for *The Kenyon Review* and advocated, successfully, for her work among New York publishers (pp. 74-75). On a broader scale, drawing on her knowledge of Portuguese as well as on her friendships with American and Brazilian poets, Bishop coedited with Emanuel Brasil *An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Brazilian Poetry* (1972), a well-regarded anthology still in print today.

In each of these undertakings, the poet sought to make aspects of Brazil's social strata, colonial legacy, sociology of childhood, architectural styles, modernist fiction, and poetic verse legible to Anglo-American readers and, as Hicok suggests, more legible to herself. Indeed, Bishop explicitly undertook the translation of *The Diary of "Helena Morley"* to strengthen her Portuguese, albeit with the corollary conviction that the book would be a commercial success (p. 67). Yet these translations—and Bishop's epistolary commentary about them—also reveal the poet's prejudices and cultural projections. As Hicok points out, Bishop excised whole portions of Morley's diary—without indicating to readers that she had done so—and used, in several places, racial terms such as "pickaninny," which is indisputably derogatory in American English (p. 69). She also fetishized Lispector, a Brazilian writer born in the Ukraine to Jewish parents, as an exotic foreigner in her letters and insisted that Lispector was "'a self-taught' writer, like a primitive painter" despite the author's high modernist style with its obvious debt to James Joyce, her extensive education, her training in law, and her work as a journalist (qtd. p. 77). Translation, Hicok's analysis suggests, implicates the translator in the same way that the biographer cannot escape being reflected by the lens he or she trains on another's life. While Bishop's years in Brazil heightened her concern for the poor and powerless, the natural environment, and the incursion of commercial interests, Bishop also came of age among the biases of the mid-twentieth century when world wars, racial oppression, and genocide contested how we understand individual responsibility for the collective, the assumed legitimacy of social laws, and the politics of class, gender, and race. Bishop's generation had much moral complexity with which to contend and, in this regard, the poet was profoundly of her time.

Tracking Bishop's journey from tourist to traveler, observer to chronicler, Hicok offers contextualized readings of several major poems, stories, and unpublished accounts. She interprets Bishop's dramatic monologue "The Riverman" (1960) in connection with Charles Wagley's *Amazon Town* (1953), an ethnographic account that the poet cites, in epigraph, as an informative source (p. 122). Describing a young man's desire to become a *sacaca* (shaman) for his village, Bishop integrates aspects of Wagley's ethnographic research, which included an interview of Satiro, a young *sacaca*-in-training (p. 127). Hicok illustrates how Bishop draws on specific

aspects of Wagley's account as well as on the Western myths of Orpheus and Actaeon to create a shape-shifting character who aims to bring the medicinal richness of the Amazon River to his community:

> I'll be there below,
> as the turtle rattle hisses
> and the coral gives the sign,
> travelling fast as a wish,
> with my magic cloak of fish
> swerving as I swerve,
> following the veins,
> the river's long, long veins,
> to find the pure elixirs.[7]

Seeking "the remedy / for each of the diseases," Bishop's *sacaca* is a figure, Hicock surmises, both "ethical and ecological," who undertakes his pursuit with respect for the riverways (*Poems*, p. 106; Hicok, p. 129). Bishop's concern for the environment—and its creaturely inhabitants—reappears in Hicok's readings of other poems such as "Under the Window: Ouro Preto" (1966) and "The Armadillo" (1957). What emerges in Hicok's meticulous literary history is a clearer sense of the ethical inflection in many of Bishop's poems and prose narratives during and after her stay in Brazil.

Hicok situates "The Armadillo" in the context of Brazilians' weeklong celebration of St. John the Baptist's birthday (p. 23). Instead of benediction, however, in the poem, the religious holiday brings threat. Bishop's poem centers on "illegal fire balloons" used in the festivities, which "flush and fill with light / . . . like hearts" as they float towards the mountaintops.[8] At the poem's volta, in the fifth of ten stanzas, some fire balloons are caught "in the downdraft from a peak, / suddenly turning dangerous" (p. 101). The speaker recalls a balloon splattering perilously, "like an egg of fire / against the cliff behind the house" (p. 101). Under the threat of mock-Pentecostal flames, Bishop satirizes colonial Christianity and ceremonial fires that threaten to harm believers, destroy homes, singe land, and route innocent creatures—owls, a young rabbit, a fugitive armadillo—from their nests and burrows. The armadillo's "*weak mailed fist / clenched ignorant against the sky*" might signal nature's retort to human hubris (p. 102). Hicok interprets the poem as an exploration of "environmental disaster" linked to colonialism, and she frames the figure of the armadillo in connection with Bishop's reading of Theodore Roosevelt's *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* (1914) (pp. 24-25). Roosevelt notes in his travelogue that the "armadillo only curls up as a last resort," and Hicok connects Roosevelt's observation with Bishop's image of the armadillo's "*weak mailed fist*" as emphasizing the creature's dire plight, signaling "that what is threatened is our home on a very personal and visceral level" (p. 26).

The cultural, historical, and biographical contexts that Hicok's work provides prompts revelations—new ways of seeing some of Bishop's best-loved poems. She links, for example, "The Shampoo" (1955) to the tradition of *cafuné*, or affectionate head-rubbing, a gesture once common among all social classes in Brazil (p. 17). She connects the political satire in the late poem "Pink Dog" (1979) to the notorious Rio death-squads, which targeted homeless vagrants under the governorship of Carlos Lacerda, once a close friend of Macedo Soares (p. 97). Brazilian sociality and political scandals alike inform Bishop's poems' tenderness and terror. So too, in reading Bishop's travel narratives, Hicok recreates memorable scenes: the pale, well-dressed Aldous Huxley being studied by the Iaualapití Indians or Macedo Soares and Bishop navigating difficult roads in an old Jaguar in "deepening twilight" while men, in passing vehicles, urge them to return, "back to the Kitchen!—*Vai levando*!" (pp. 104, 40-41).

Bishop's life with Macedo Soares proved, for a while, sustaining. Circulating among Brazil's ruling elite, a class largely supported by the labor of the working poor, Bishop was also in active contact with other Brazilian and American writers, artists, and dignitaries. At the same time, daily routines and domestic intimacy balanced her public persona with a personal life that offered its own fulfillments. At Samambaia, the poet enjoyed a living room that flooded with morning clouds and cleared to dazzling vistas, a library of three-thousand books, and a household staff of cooks, gardeners, and servants (pp. 26, 6). But Hicok also turns the reader to Bishop's anxieties about the fragility of this privileged domesticity. In her analysis of Bishop's poem-draft "Foreign-Domestic," dating from the late 1950s, Hicok shows how the poem hints at the precariousness of domestic contentment as it concludes with a parenthetical statement, the mode in which the poet often lodged what could barely be countenanced: "(Said Blake, 'And mutual fear brings peace / Till the selfish loves increase . . .')."[9] Eventually, selfish (or self-preserving) loves and Macedo Soares's disintegrating mental health brought an end to what had been a sanguine bond, a love once "precipitate and pragmatical."[10] After Macedo Soares's tragic death in 1967, Bishop would feel as though the whole continent of South America had been lost to her.

Bishop's immersion in Brazilian culture may have catalyzed her mature sensibility, sharpening her perceptions and extending her sympathies. Bishop had written to Lowell in 1960 that she feared "becom[ing] a poet who can only write about South America. . . . It is one of my greatest worries now, how to use everything . . . and yet be a New Englander-herring-choker-bluenoser at the same time."[11] By the time Bishop left Brazil in 1966 to teach for a semester in the United States, she had found ways of retaining her allegiances to both the "north" and "south" poles of her

experiences as a private writer and a public citizen. She could identify both as a "bluenoser," a term used to describe someone from Nova Scotia or New Brunswick, and as an expatriate like Gertrude Stein, whose adage "And then there is using everything" from "Composition as Explanation" (1926) Bishop might have been glossing here as she mulled "how to use everything."[12] Considering the poet's varied responses to her adopted home, Hicok convincingly argues—in astute analyses and carefully reconstructed contexts of published and unpublished material—that the poet's "mature work is inconceivable without Brazil" (p. 1).

In concert with Hicok's approach, Ravinthiran offers a bold new take on Bishop's incorporative aesthetic. While Hicok contends that Brazil indelibly shaped Bishop's "one art," Ravinthiran claims that Bishop's mature poetry achieved its distinction, in part, through its integration of prose, which leavens her lyricism with an air of intimate detachment, cognitive texture, and tonal music (p. xiv). He is quick to note, however, in chapter one, that he is not the first to have made this claim; the poet and *New Yorker* poetry editor Howard Moss, reviewing Bishop's *Questions of Travel* in 1966, praised Bishop as "revolutionary in being the first poet successfully to use all the resources of prose" with the telling caveat that "if one tries, say, to write out a Bishop poem as if it were prose, one soon realizes it is impossible to do so" (qtd. p. 1). Thus, Ravinthiran sets out to identify how Bishop utilizes "the resources of prose" and why even her more prosaic poetry proves, in the New Critical catch-phrase, irreducible to paraphrase.

His quest results in an archaeology of a neglected critical tradition concerned with prose rhythms and what Robert Pinsky has termed the "prose virtues" of poetry, which include "Clarity, Flexibility, Efficiency, [and] Cohesiveness" (qtd. p. 7). In *The Situation of Poetry* (1976), Pinsky argues that these traits "can become not merely the poem's minimum requirement, but the poetic essence" (qtd. p. 7). Ravinthiran, acknowledging Pinsky, is less interested in the so-called "virtues" of prosaic poetry than in identifying its staple rhythms and means of achieving "cognitive authority" (p. xiv). For a vocabulary commensurate to this task, he turns to the work of George Saintsbury, the Victorian-Edwardian critic and biographer whom Bishop and Lowell praised in their correspondence for his *History of English Prosody From the Twelfth Century to the Present Day* (1906). Writing to Bishop in 1965, Lowell admires Saintsbury's later book "on prose, prose rhythm" and tellingly advises Bishop to try "read[ing] aloud from Saintsbury" in her poetry class at the University of Washington.[13] As Ravinthiran argues, it seems likely that Bishop, given her association with Marianne Moore, a champion of Saintsbury, knew of his *History of English Prose Rhythm* (1912) well before Lowell's recommendation. In this book, Saintsbury sets forth an aesthetics of prose, advocating for the

coordination of sonic patterns—including meaningful variation of stressed and unstressed syllables, unregimented by meter—alongside the pattern of expressed thought.

Quoting from one of Bishop's collegiate letters to Donald Stanford, Ravinthiran shows that the poet was thinking intently about the relationship between meter, meaning, and mood by the early 1930s. Bishop wrote that she could, in fact

> write in iambics if I want to . . . . [But] . . . if I try to write smoothly I find myself perverting the meaning for the sake of the smoothness. . . . I think that an equally great 'cumulative effect' might be built up by a series of irregularities. . . . to get the moods themselves into the rhythm. (qtd. p. 18)

The arc of Bishop's concern coincides with Saintsbury's theory of artful prose. What is truly novel in Saintsbury's methodology is his insistence that prose should be metrically evaluated and *scanned*, albeit "on a principle totally different, and indeed opposed, when compared with that of poetry. Instead of sameness, equivalence, and recurrence, the central idea turns on difference, inequality, and variety" (qtd. p. 5). Thus, instead of "perverting the meaning for the sake of the smoothness," Saintsbury posits that a prosaic aesthetic allows for variation and difference or the "series of irregularities" to which Bishop finds herself attracted.

Intriguingly, Saintsbury cites the paragraph as the "rhythmical unit" yet also contends that "its great law is that every syllable shall, as in poetry, have recognisable rhythmical value, and be capable of entering into rhythmical transactions with its neighbours but that these transactions shall always stop short, or steer clear, of admitting the recurrent combinations proper to metre" (qtd. p. 5). Connecting Saintsbury's aesthetic principles with Bishop's early affection for Baroque prose writers and distaste for the ways in which Wallace Stevens made "blank verse *moo*," Ravinthiran makes the case that Bishop structured her poems to be attuned to variations in syllabic stress, assonance and consonance, typography, and strategic repetition to produce a prosaic music more varied, more cognitively mimetic than the supposed speech-like qualities of iambic pentameter (qtd. p. xvii).

Lest his reader swim in theoretical eddies, Ravinthiran quickly puts his thesis to the test in compelling readings of "Seascape" (1941), "Cape Breton" (1949), and "The End of March" (1976), which show Bishop's abiding interest in the syntactic enactments of perception. Ravinthiran notes that in Saintsbury's *History of English Prose Rhythm*, the critic scans lengthy passages of prose he has lineated to isolate each clause; similarly, in lines of varying, uneven lengths, roughly coinciding with the clausal syntax of thought, Bishop's "Cape Breton" looks like an example from Saintsbury's book. The poem, first published in the *New Yorker*, shows Bishop using lineation to punctuate layers of cognition as she accents the rhythm of "a

mind thinking" with assonance and consonance, anaphora, and occasional rhyme (qtd. p. 5):

> The road appears to have been abandoned.
> Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have
> been abandoned,
> unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,
> where we cannot see,
> where deep lakes are reputed to be,
> and disused trails and mountains of rock
> and miles of burnt forests standing in gray scratches
> like the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones—
> (qtd. p. 12)

Bishop uses lineation to frame perceptions as they follow, one upon the other. The reader, cued by the line-breaks, evaluates them singly—how might a road "[appear] to have been abandoned"?—and cumulatively, as they build upon and qualify what came before. The personification of the road—"unless the road is holding it back"—upends the passivity of the "abandoned" road two lines before it, as the speaker explores whether a landscape might control its own mystery, withholding its "meaning" beyond the reach of human sight or projection. As Ravinthiran observes, the poem engages in an "historical intelligence set to speak on behalf of a landscape which refuses to utter itself" (p. 13). Subtly, the poet draws her readers into the dynamics of visual perception, projective imagination ("where deep lakes are reputed to be"), and the cogs of consciousness in the self-conscious, self-interrogating speaker.

Ravinthiran, himself an accomplished poet, notes that "Bishop's line-breaks work to accommodate the forestalling of prose sense; written out as prose, the successive 'where' phrases and paratactic 'ands' would jar" (pp. 13-14). Anaphora, here, provides sonic footholds in the speaker's shale of lineated thought. The line-breaks, instead of taking on "lyrically suspensive Wordsworthian or Miltonic enjambment," offer "a less intensive pause for consideration, a kind of sense-making rhythmic pivot" (p. 14). Ravinthiran argues that this is fitting for a poem that portrays a secular landscape, denuded of Romantic gloss or religious transcendence—a region in which, "The little white churches have been dropped into the matted hills / like lost quartz arrowheads," shibboleths—or artifacts—of another era's system of belief (qtd. p. 12). This short passage evinces Bishop's prosaic music in that it includes repetitions of whole words ("abandoned," "and," "where," and "stones"), assonance (the play of "oa" and "ou" against "on"), consonance in parallel phrases ("deep lakes" and "disused trails"), alliterative echoes and oblique rhymes ("scratches" and "scriptures"), and the occasional perfect rhyme ("see" and "be"), lending the poem an almost subliminal structure, attuned to the unfolding of thought and consonant

with what Donald Davies terms "'cognitive' syntax" (qtd. p. 16). As Ravinthiran contends, Bishop generates a "dialectical energy" in her work by mixing conventions of prose and poetry, disenchantment and lyricism (p. 23).

Switching between features of these discourses, the poet maintains the reader's attention, holding her expectations in suspense. The concluding lines of "Cape Breton," for example, propose a qualified transcendence, one based on the contest between the seemingly unfettered voice of song and material entrapment. The poem concludes:

> and these regions now have little to say for themselves
> except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating
> upward
> freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and meshing
> in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets. (qtd. p. 12)

The regions' muteness, which is described in the chiding, vaguely parental clause, "have little to say for themselves," registers nature's prosaic resistance to the pastoral projections of human speech. Yet, as Ravinthiran points out, Bishop moves unexpectedly "out of a disenchanted landscape towards birdsong, a phenomenon conventionally linked with lyric utterance itself" (p. 15). The tension between a "freely, dispassionately" offered melody and the "brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets" draws into contradistinction creaturely instinct and the human desire to harness nature for our own nurture and edification.

Tending to the syllabic music, Ravinthiran notes "the suggestive assonance linking through *themselves-except-meshing-wet-nets*" with the recurrent short "e" sound that leads the ear through the end of the concluding line, with its six heavy stresses and internal rhyme of "brown-wet" and "fish-nets" (p. 15). Here, assonance literally dampens the ascendance of song (the latter signified in the long "e" and "ly" sounds of "freely, dispassionately"), weighing it down with the short "e" of "meshing," "wet," and "nets," and the business of harvesting fish. Moreover, the staccato commas of the last two lines reinforce the embattlement between polysyllabic song ("freely, dispassionately") and the monosyllabic heavy stresses of "brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets" that ground the poem in a short, weighty final line. In other words, Bishop stages, sonically, a song that struggles to exceed its "meshing" in the torn nets of apprehension applied to what we observe and hear. Ravinthiran's attention to soundscape and syntactic arrangement unlocks the poem's subtle effects; his analysis makes apparent Bishop's skill in wedding the features of more than one genre. Song, "meshing" with "fish-nets," cannot exceed the prosaic materiality of language. Or can it? Bishop's "dialectical energy" leaves the answer satisfyingly unclear.

Ravinthiran brings his poetic acuity to bear in close readings of a wide range of Bishop's poems and prose poems alongside a literary history of

prose aesthetics, animating a worthy mode of analysis. He also extends his critique to Bishop's letters and literary prose, providing a revelatory way of reading Bishop across genres. In a chapter on Bishop's letters, for example, Ravinthiran parses the acoustics of the poet's epistolary prose in particularly notable passages, such as in the letter she wrote to Anne Stevenson in 1964 about Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Knowing that her letter would likely be made available to tertiary readers, Bishop's prose is particularly vivid and recursively sonic. Ravinthiran asserts that it manifests the "larger assonantal network" that often appears in her published work, and he glosses the following passage, noting recurrent sounds:

> 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-f**a**ce 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 c**a**se being built up out of his endless heroic *observ**a**tions,* almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden rel**a**xation, a forgetful phr**a**se, and one *feels* the str**a**ngeness of his under**t**aking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute det**a**ils, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the s**a**me thing that is necessary for its cre**a**tion, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentr**a**tion. (qtd. p. 86)[14]

Ravinthiran emboldens the "a" sounds in this passage, while the italicized words represent Bishop's own emphases, and the recurrent assonance seems no coincidence, especially alongside the "prose-rhymes on 'full-*face*,' 'forgetful *phrase*,' and 'beautiful solid *case*'" as well as "relaxation," "observations," "creation," and "concentration" (p. 86). In this famous letter, Bishop aligns the work of the artist and the scientist as heroes of vision, pioneers in the lonely work of exploring the unknown, "fixed on facts and minute details," indulging—by necessity—a "self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration." What Bishop's sonic devices register, in her compilation of "a" sounds and prose-rhymes, is the somatic experience of that which she describes. Ravinthiran observes, eloquently, that "her letter is sensuously alive to its subject-matter, manifesting a relationship between form and content which, if not straightforwardly mimetic . . . nevertheless textures the prose with an expressive rhythm to be savored" (p. 86). While many Bishop critics have discussed and parsed this letter, few (if any) have subjected it to close sonic analysis, and what Ravinthiran reveals is useful not only in thinking about Bishop but in extending attention to the play of syllabic sound in the poets and prose writers from the past century who most warrant it.

Building upon several decades of scholarship and accelerating interest in Bishop's poetry and prose, Hicok and Ravinthiran newly characterize

Bishop's dialectical style—her mixture of genres and geographic imaginaries as she reckoned with "life and the memory of it so compressed / they've turned into each other."[15] In the ways in which she chose to write and to score her lines of sight and sound, Bishop dwelled with contradictions, putting them—as Hicok and Ravinthiran prove—to profitable use, allowing a "watery, dazzling dialectic" to abide in place of overly narrow classification. These books, in ground-breaking analyses of significant aspects of Bishop's art, invite us to extend, yet again, our understanding and our nomenclature.

NOTES

[1] Elizabeth Bishop, "Writing poetry is an unnatural act . . .", in *Prose*, ed. Lloyd Schwartz (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 327.

[2] Angus Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. Cleghorn and Ellis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1.

[3] Bishop, "Santarém," in *Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 207.

[4] Bishop to Robert Lowell, 28 July 1953, in *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, ed. Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 143.

[5] Bishop to Lowell, 27 July [1960], in *Words in Air*, 333.

[6] Katherine White to Bishop, 2 July 1953, in *Elizabeth Bishop and "The New Yorker": The Complete Correspondence*, ed. Joelle Biele (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 112-13.

[7] Bishop, "The Riverman," in *Poems*, 106. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[8] Bishop, "The Armadillo," in *Poems*, 101. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[9] Bishop, "Foreign-Domestic," in *Poems, Prose, and Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz (New York: Library of America, 2008), 242.

[10] Bishop, "The Shampoo," in *Poems*, 82.

[11] Bishop to Lowell, 22 April 1960, in *Words in Air*, 317.

[12] Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage, 1962), 518.

[13] Lowell to Bishop, [24 November 1965], in *Words in Air*, 597.

[14] Ravinthiran's text uses bold type to add emphasis; underlining has been added here to make the emphasis visually clear.

[15] Bishop, "Poem," in *Poems*, 197.