

Surfaces and Depths: Reflection and Cognition in the Poems of Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop

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Robert Lowell, generally a great admirer of Elizabeth Bishop's work, once remarked of her early poems that 'On the surface, her poems are observations—surpassingly accurate, witty and well-arranged, but nothing more'.¹ Lowell conspicuously ignored a vocabulary of 'depths' when referring to Bishop's work, so one is therefore led to believe by his closing remark ('but nothing more') that her surfaces constitute the entire work and that speculation concerning depths may well be a fruitless or misdirected critical activity. Lowell's remark seems another case of one poet damning another with faint praise, but he genuinely admired Bishop's work, as his dedication of 'Skunk Hour' to her attests. The implication of his remark remains, however: surfaces are somehow inferior to depths, and represent thinner versions of the world than those revealed by the hermeneutic unfoldings of the veiled and self-sufficient attributes of 'deeper' works.

Lowell's identification of surfaces with observational accuracy points to an issue marking a critical fissure in modernist aesthetics, particularly as it relates to Bishop's literary forebears—Moore, Stevens, Ransom and Williams. Williams, particularly, developed a poetics that was primarily observational. He rejected the deep structures of Eliot and high modernism, the historical resonances, psychological labyrinths and symbolic systems, in favour of a bare, objective form of realism that threw the reader back onto the immediacy of language itself, rather than having language stand as a test of the reader's interpretive fortitude. From this fissure arose the language poets, such as Robert Creeley and Charles Olson, who fully explored the postmodernist embrace of language's quiddity, its sense of being just born into the world, and its potential to refer to nothing more than the processes of its own making.

Bishop admired Williams's objective language and his ability to make sharp use of his material rather than searching for something 'inside'. But she resisted his appropriation of realistic details as its own

justification and was uneasy about what she called his 'exploitation of loneliness', rather than its exploration. Lowell is therefore right to identify the same, observational element in Bishop's poetry and to align it with what became the postmodernist preoccupation with surfaces. For him, this element constituted Bishop's 'intense difference', but his comment also reveals his ambivalence towards the direction American poetry was taking.

Nothing in Lowell's ambivalence is surprising; it does little more, in this instance, than reveal tensions in his own deeply modernist aesthetic heritage which positioned deep structures as the guiding principle of most modernist literary and artistic production, and the most fundamental assumption of much modernist aesthetic discourse. Even amongst contemporary materialist critics such as Terry Eagleton, who in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* is derisive of the Romantic heritage of modernist aesthetics back to Kant, we find a reticence to confront the non-metaphysicality of surfaces directly. In his hyperbolic paraphrase of Nietzsche's attempts to shake the aesthetic free of the idealism of Romantic structure, Eagleton ironically says that 'Art instructs us in the profound truth of how to live superficially, to halt at the sensuous surface rather than to hunt the illusory essence beneath it. Perhaps superficiality is the true essence of life, and depth a mere veil thrown over the authentic banality of things'.²

Eagleton, caught like Nietzsche between old prejudices and new recognitions, cannot fully sound his own ironic comment that 'superficiality is the true essence of life', which leads to a reductive and ultimately limited aesthetic perspective, especially when applied to many postmodernist texts and artworks. As Lowell already understood, the effort to 'hunt the illusory essence beneath [surfaces]' may be, in many cases, wasted effort. More surprising is it, however, to hear Adrienne Rich, also an admirer of Bishop's 'powers of observation ... her wit, her intelligence', point to Bishop's 'impenetrability' and intellectual 'obliquity', especially in poems such as 'The Map'.³ Rich, aligned with an aesthetic sensibility similar to Eagleton's, wants to read Bishop as part of the feminist and lesbian tradition. She too is looking for the allegorical content in Bishop's work that deep structure enables, and emphasises that poems 'examining intimate relationships' in Bishop's work are almost entirely absent.⁴ Rich's reading agenda then is an ethical one: works amenable to allegorical readings are more accessible than those that are predominantly observational. As an ethical stance, impenetrability may be a source of feminist valour, but aesthetically, Rich's remark once more directs our attention to the

surfaces of Bishop's poetry where, in the profit and loss economy of much aesthetic discourse, it connotes loss rather than gain.

Similarly ambivalent tones are heard in discussions of Wallace Stevens's poetry; his work is frequently praised for 'consistency' and 'integrity' yet often condemned for 'monotony' and 'mannerisms'. In a remark strangely similar to Lowell's on Bishop, Randall Jarrell said in 1962 that Stevens's poems are merely 'improvisations preserved for us neither by good nor by bad, but by middle fortune'.⁵ The same balanced but unflattering symmetries operate in the commonly received picture of Stevens: an insurance lawyer whose ultimate value was the imagination; a rich man whose most familiar figure is poverty; an agnostic who willed belief in the fiction of an absolute; a poet frequently condemned for being too much of a philosopher and therefore reductive; a man whose appreciation of the particular and the physical found its best expression in highly abstract language. Jarrell's view was that Stevens was at his best when he *adds* what is 'superfluous, the excess of the spirit'. This profit and loss aesthetic is disturbed only when Stevens is 'reduced to philosophizing', when instead of particulars he draws on the abstract and so, like Bishop, exacerbates rather than fills a lack.

These postures towards surfaces are not restricted to a former critical age. We do not have to listen too hard in order to hear similar refrains. Many good contemporary readers of poetry fall into the same ontological impasse that Lowell and Jarrell imply: consolidating or deep structures in postmodernist works are sought out and valorised as unitary and universal. When they are absent, their lack is not simply noted but configured in such a way as to support fundamentally indeterminate readings. The absence of deep, consolidating structures, they claim, directs the focus of our attention towards the work's surface which, as the texts so frequently instruct us, cannot be penetrated. Marjorie Perloff, for example, embraces indeterminacy in the work of postmodernists such as Ashbery and Cage simply because 'totality' (which, she claims, is a consolidating, coherent symbolic structure) 'is absent'. 'Undecidability' therefore becomes for Perloff the criterion for indeterminacy, a hermeneutic tautology whose terms are, once posited, inevitably and always fulfilled.⁶ And in the fifteen pages of *Enlarging the Temple* that Charles Altieri devotes to the humorous poetry of Frank O'Hara, for example, what he privileges, what he thinks makes O'Hara 'so interesting a poet', is the 'pain potentially lurking in every moment'.⁷ The moment in O'Hara's poetry that Altieri seems to consider the 'peak' comes at the end of the poem, 'The

Day Lady Died': 'the climactic stoppages of life and breath ... The moment ... of absolute communication ... led them to a single ecstasy'.⁸ The unitary moment of this single ecstasy seems to be the experience Altieri is looking for as a reader of poetry. But much of O'Hara's poetry is a casual running commentary that builds into plateaux—often based on pain, certainly, but more often and more certainly on pleasure. Look, for example, at 'The Unfinished':

meanwhile, back at the Paris branch of contemporary depression, I am dropping through the famous blueness like a pearl diver, I am looking for Gregory who lives on Heart-Bed Street and I sit with Ashbery in the Flore because of his poem about himself in a flower-bed and we look for Gregory in the Deux Magot because I want to cry with him about a dear dead friend, it's always about dying, never about death I sometimes think it's the only reason that any of us love each other it is raining, Ashes helps me finish my gall and seltzer, and we go.⁹

Neither unalloyed pain nor unmitigated pleasure dominate this scene. Instead we are presented with a fragmented but powerful mix of emotional registers humorously disrupted by O'Hara's exaggerated pathos. The comic multiplicity of this and other O'Hara poems is too often overlooked by those critics reading for the unifying nature of a summary experience, and too easily embraced by those positing indeterminacy as central to postmodernist aesthetics. Both positions depend upon either the presence or absence of deep structure. Instead, I would propose an aesthetic paradigm that is closer to the Deleuzian notion of plateaux—those contiguous regions of intensity whose development avoids any orientation towards a culmination, but which nevertheless carry significant affect. These regions, be they predominantly gestural, observational or intricately complex converge at what Massumi, in his Introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, calls a 'volatile juncture, but one that is sustained as an open equilibrium of moving parts each with its own trajectory'.¹⁰

As a way of avoiding the ontological pitfalls of surfaces and depths, plateaux may be a far more satisfying way of reading both Bishop and Stevens. We are then no longer backhandedly belittling Bishop's qualities of 'observation' by aligning them with the negative valencies of 'surface', nor are we as inclined to see Stevens's 'philosophising' as an essentially reductive process, or as Harold Bloom once claimed, 'a totally dead subject'.¹¹ Instead, we trace the surfaces of a poem's internal differences and tensions by focusing upon the way the words work together on the page rather than articulating the hard edged distinctions between its meaning and a set of external and pre-existing

ethical implications. The issue is then between phenomenological and cognitive ways of knowing the world or, for those who consider Stevens a neo-Platonist, between Stevens's abstracted representation of the Idea and its unsteady negotiation with the details of the sensuous world. I do not believe Stevens is, as is often claimed, purely a poet of mind, but very much the pragmatist absorbed by this delicate balance between reflexive ways of knowing the world and purely cognitive ones. Reading the surfaces then simply picks up the way that the absence of formal presuppositions and 'deep structure' in Stevens's and Bishop's philosophical poems points to what I will loosely call a 'system' of pragmatic play between Idea and thing which reveals the complex relation between logical judgement and perceptual experience.

Such an approach is invited by one of Stevens's later and finest poems, 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome' by the conditional figure of 'As if' in the second to last line.

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
The immensiest theatre, the pillared porch,
The book and candle in your ambered room,

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized.¹²

In its final figure of the dying philosopher George Santayana, the poem *seems* to conflate the binary life and death, poetry and philosophy distinction by 'living in two worlds, impenitent As to one, and, as to one, most penitent'. Penitence here marks the crossing point, the point Merleau-Ponty terms a 'chiasma', where 'The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome' are coincident, perhaps even becoming 'alike in the make of the mind'. For Stevens to be truly a 'poet of mind', the sensuous Rome and the 'more merciful Rome' would need to conflate at this point. The metaphysical would then assume the sensuous and the literal the anagogical. But do they ever conflate, and is their apparent likeness ever more than a psychic mimesis of surfaces? Or does penitence function more precisely as a *différend* holding one world in suspension while allowing us to fully indulge in the other?¹³ If so, the final lines of the poem seem less a conflation than a

celebration of total grandeur in which the integrity of discrete structures is preserved. The 'Inquisitor of structures ... stops upon this threshold, As if the design of his words takes form And frame from thinking and is realized'. The two planes, the physical, sensuous Rome and the aesthetic (philosophical) Rome are demonstrated, at the moment of penitence, to be co-extensive, and, as if laminated, co-ordinate.

While it may be true that the two are alike in the 'make of the mind', the 'As if' confirms their identities as actually different; sensuous experience, 'The life of the city [which] never lets go, nor do you Ever want it to', literally crosses the metaphysical domain of Santayana's mental world, but never fully identifies with it, as if to deflate his own rather grandiose conception that thought can only grasp what it has itself created. These lines hold 'things' and the 'idea of things' in a delicate balance, never letting one fall into the other, but suggesting the possibility that one could nearly will them so. The laminate construction of Stevens's poem then effectively directs our attention to criss-crossing surfaces, and to where they intersect, in a sort of sensuous pragmatism often overlooked by critics more inclined to read him as consummate 'self-consciousness' or metaphoric intelligence, as the 'poet-philosopher' or as 'intelligence in craft'. A play of concepts and images that do not add up to an architecture of propositions or beliefs that one either accepts or rejects, this pragmatism negotiates the continually changing nature of the dynamic relation between logical judgement and sensuous experience without ever resorting to absolute truths and holds the potential for what Wittgenstein terms 'knowing our way around the world'. Stevens's poetry is not dialectically synthetic—it does not overcome polarities as 'philosophical' poetry normally would but reinvents them as a psychic mimesis of surfaces by holding them in a delicate balance.

It may now be more useful to see Stevens striving for what could be loosely termed 'system' rather than balance—a 'system' to universalise a form of rationalism that he reflectively recognises to be incapable of fulfilment other than fictionally or poetically. We can now see why it is important to read his poetry along the surfaces rather than mining for deep structures. For only by tracing these trajectories can we see the intersecting tensions of his poems, those geometric points defining the means by which poetic objects are created out of the formal presuppositions of objectivity in general. For Stevens, especially in poems like 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome', the important question is always: are the empirical facts, the sensuous details, taken as 'given' or can this 'givenness' be dissolved into further rational forms; in what

ways can 'givenness' be cast as a product of our reason? Stevens's poetry therefore is and is not philosophical: it is philosophical in the 'critical' or Kantian sense because, proceeding by no rules, it searches for a rule or a set of rules to articulate a 'system' reconciling 'things' with the 'idea of things', and it is not philosophical because the ontological structures philosophy normally depends upon are absent. Kant himself repeatedly emphasises that reason fails in its attempt to make the final leap towards the synthetic definition of objects because its 'conceptions are ... mere ideas, and do not relate to any object in any kind of experience ... They are purely problematical in their nature, and, as aids to the heuristic exercise of the faculties, form the basis of the regulative principles for the systematic employment of the understanding in the field of possible experience'.¹⁴ And the third *Critique* emphasises that aesthetic perception is therefore distinguished from theoretical understanding by its not conforming to the rule that every intuition be brought under an adequate or corresponding concept. It is precisely the incommensurable nature of perception that sets it apart from theory and all epistemological critique and makes the laws regulating and relating to it the central problem of systematisation.

I do not want to make Stevens Kant, but to show how the complexity and fragility of his attempt to work the sensuousness of the 'structure of things' against the more abstract 'structure of ideas'—a dichotomy whose power depends upon the tension between idealism and phenomenology—is more Kantian in its dependence upon reflection than it is Platonic. The conflicting demands of this task are exemplified most fully in the volitional power of 'Adagia' where Stevens claims 'The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly'.¹⁵ In those final fragile moments of 'The Old Philosopher in Rome' it is then consistent that Santayana stands before the 'Total grandeur of a total edifice, Chosen by an inquisitor of structures For himself'. In the same unrecuperated movement, the poet 'beholds himself in the philosopher' just as, many years before, in 'The Snow Man', the listener, aware of his own emptiness, 'beholds Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is' (54).

Belief itself is, however, labile, its ontological instability reflected most strongly in 'As You Leave the Room' where Stevens wonders whether he has unwittingly committed himself to philosophy, thereby tipping the balance to '[living] a skeleton's life, As a disbeliever in

reality'. These misgivings seem an inevitable consequence of Stevens's earlier worry in 'Esthétique du Mal' that

The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world, to feel that one's desire

Is too difficult to tell from despair. Perhaps
After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe
The green corn gleaming and experience
The minor of what we feel.¹⁶

The majors of this polarity are, once more, the 'metaphysicals' that 'Lie sprawling in ... August heat' and their intersection with the minors ('what we feel') constitutes the planar co-ordinates, the abscissa and the ordinate, defining the strangeness and paradoxes of the world. Here the structure of things and the structure of ideas intersect, and it is the tracing of these disparate trajectories with the mind's eye that gives Stevens's critical poems their palpability. The mind becomes a finger; metaphysics becomes phenomenology.

The mobility of these structures becomes in Stevens's hands an unequalled power to slip down through the mind's strata, but the orientations of their geometry are not constant; they change according to the ambient space in which the metaphysical traverses the actual. Stratification for Stevens is then the representation of logic imposed upon a world of chaos—it is a constant, renewed creation. The poet here is not God, but we do see in Stevens's poetry something analogous to the organising power of the classical artist who makes the world by organising forms and substances, codes and rhythms, in such a way that the abstract never directly opposes the figurative. Thinking the 'structure of things' against the 'structure of ideas' seems then a satisfying way of balancing the demands of the outer life—Stevens's concern with history, politics and science—with the inner life of play, and of becoming a truly comprehensive poet who in the eyes of Stevens's subject, Santayana, can appropriate the diverse talents of Lucretius, Dante and Goethe (exemplars of materialism, Thomism and Romanticism). Stevens knows, as far back as 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction', that 'Two things of opposite natures seem to depend On one another, as a man depends On a woman, day on night, the imagined On the real',¹⁷ and that the earth which reveals itself 'in difference' is, in the final revelation of the imagination, apprehended. Even though Stevens, in some moments, may have desired to surpass oppositions and become the master of theory, he knew full well that 'one is always

writing two things at the same time in poetry and it is this that produces the tension characteristic of poetry. One is the true subject and the other is the poetry of the subject'.¹⁸

If we now return to 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome', it is easy to see, on the simplest level, that the true subject is Santayana and that the poetry of the subject is the life of the imagination, the desire to comprehend dissonances in a moment of theoretical insight. But my claim is that these two elements are held forever apart by the final closure of the poem. Here, for the first time shifting from second to third person, Stevens writes, 'He stops upon his threshold, As if the design of all his words takes form And frame from thinking and is realized'. These lines are generally read as the philosopher's triumph over difference, as if he wholly realises his philosophy in death and demonstrates that philosophy is indeed a preparation for death (rather than something dead or deadly). According to this reading, Santayana not only remains the master of his own texts but also, and more poignantly, becomes their master *only* in death: he realises all he has written; thought is translated into reality; intention and text coincide ultimately. But in a second, stronger reading, one hears the more powerful murmurings of the 'as if' suggesting that this concurrence of thing and its idea cannot be synthesised, only held in balance. In this new pathos, the design of the philosopher's words does indeed take form and frame from thinking: it removes itself from thought, separates itself from his intention as a tone 'defines itself and separates' and is realised at his death as a textual pattern only. The first reading moves predictably from cause to effect, casting the philosopher as active, his words as passive. The second reading, however, regards the philosopher's end as a consequence of the words' active design in the same way that 'It is poverty's speech that *seeks* us out the most'.

Elizabeth Bishop's work follows similar directions to Stevens's though they are, I think, less complex. Her work is, like Stevens's, concerned with the divided, unreconciled singleness of our experience, but it is less likely to inhabit those nodal points where the metaphysical crosses the sensuous, opting instead for a more deflected, displaced sort of self-examination. She exists in a self-imposed state of objectivity, split between exacting observational skills and a reluctance or inability to use them fully or to direct them towards herself. Balance is therefore no longer an issue for Bishop, who instead invests heavily in the power of finely wrought observational detail in order to articulate a 'system' revealing the peculiarity of images. Looking at Bishop looking at the 'The Man-Moth', for example, we see the textures of sensuous details

slip into the soluble, viscous milieu of surrealist illusion:

If you catch him,
Hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil,
an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens
as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids
one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips.
Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention
he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over,
cool as from the underground springs and pure enough to drink.¹⁹

David Kalstone links this image to Bishop's notebook entry of a dead woman observed in the New York subway, a move that, he claims, allows Bishop 'simultaneously to be a keen observer—the figure who "tells" the poems scrutinizes every detail to extract her meaning—and to identify with figures absent'.²⁰ But such a close alignment between observation and identification seems altogether too neatly analogical. Like Stevens's figure in 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome', who seems to offer the promise of a deep structure reconciling things with the idea of things, Bishop's lines 'Then from the lids one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips' also seem to offer the promise of a deep, consolidating structure—the humanistic notion that what is most important to each of us is what we have in common with others. In this moment of lachrymal pathos is the empathetic identification with another being, a more natural and universal experience defining the resting point of the other linear, more dissociative descriptive trajectories in the poem.

The unitary moment of this scene is quickly shattered by the succeeding lines which split the apparent identification into two incompatible intentions, both directed towards acts of consumption. This fracture is signalled grammatically by the presence of the conditional 'if' for the first time in the poem which functions, like the 'As if' in Stevens's 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome', as a kind of *différend* separating the instability of sensuous observation from the security of metaphysical structure: 'Slyly he palms it, and *if* you're not paying attention he'll swallow it. However, *if* you watch, he'll hand it over, cold as from underground springs and pure enough to drink'. Although drolly surrealist, these lines achieve more than a dreamy, quasi-Freudian critique of unitary structures. Instead, they point to whimsical intentional states of being or to the confrontation of highly subjective, largely unconscious, inner tensions that always have the potential to express themselves inconsonantly and inconsequentially. We are then able to feel the pragmatic force of the man-moth's

recurrent dreams without needing to explain the relation of the 'third rail' to the 'unbroken draught of poison' or why he must therefore 'keep his hands in his pockets'. These dissonant observations do not constitute a coherent history or psychology, but neither are they simply indeterminate. Instead, they powerfully represent the unsettling effect of physically enacted incongruous mental states where unmotivated behaviours displace endings or borders and logomachy replaces understanding.

Unlike Stevens, who strove to balance the idea of things with the structure of things, Bishop opposes balance, but, like Stevens, she still strives for a geometry that allows her observational surfaces to represent the dissonance of experience as heterogeneous linguistic dispositions. If we now return to 'The Map', we can see the reasons for Rich's discomfort with Bishop's surfaces. Every line is pure observation, but observation itself is predicated upon an interrogative consciousness. These constructions simply never reproduce the sort of ethical depths valorised and sought out by Rich; semantic resistance cannot always become a platform for political agency. Rather, 'The Map' constructs a sort of unconscious in all its connectability, reversibility and susceptibility to constant modification. Like the aqueous environment of Ashbery's 'These Lacustrine Cities', 'The Map' inhabits an interstitial space between liquid and solid, mental image and objective reality. Look at the first stanza:

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
drawing it unperturbed around itself?
Along the fine tan sandy shelf
is the land tugging at the sea from under? (p.3)

Shadows become shallows, edges ledges and blues turn green. The land first leans down to 'lift the sea from under' then its position seems reversed so it is 'tugging at the sea from under'. The historical precedence of land or water has nothing to do with the aesthetics of the map itself—a mere surface flattened beneath a piece of glass. The map which purports to guide us to a location is, from an aesthetic perspective, a neutral flattened surface where we lose rather than gain our way. Bishop has taken an object known primarily for its utility in guiding us from one point to another, and restored to it an existence purged of history.

In the process, the aesthetic preference of 'character' or 'native waters' is sacrificed to the choices of the mapmaker. Then, neither land nor water lends shape, but rather the map as artifice constructed by the cartographer. Obsessed with geographical boundaries, and the precise trajectories of latitude and longitude, the printer nonetheless allows 'the names of seashore towns [to] run out to sea'. Bishop's words, whether on maps or in poems, always exceed the objects to which they point, always flirt with a discursive chaos that unsettles narrative and leaves endings unspecified.

This map is autotelic—it traces nothing other than its own making, which is precisely what makes it so difficult for Rich and others to read. Tracing involves an alleged competence, some *a priori* existence or deep structure permitting the tracing to exist and against which it can be read. Instead, 'The Map' is all to do with performance, with the shifting back and forth between a brittle but dynamic interrogative subjectivity and the reciprocally related object of perception, between reality and the constructive mind. Both sensual and noetic, these trajectories dissolve boundaries between physical substances, taking them, through the act of observation, up onto a second surface constituted by the criss-crossed trajectories of the map itself and its mimetic mental representation, where they are more properly read as a pragmatic play of concepts and images. In a sense then, Bishop reverses Stevens's phenomenological process: the finger now becomes a mind, phenomenology becomes cartography. And her emphasis on these shifting surfaces becomes an untelling of what is most important, a preservation of the truth as lived experience by preserving the force of observation.

While both Bishop's and Stevens's work resist all attempts at allegorisation (we are unable to ever read any of their works *as* something else), we can now see Bishop's as a modified Stevensian project. Earlier I claimed his project took up the Kantian challenge to reconcile the Idea with its sensible presentation by replacing the philosophical with a literary absolute—the willed belief in fiction. This was a pragmatic philosophy-in-practice whose conjoining of speculation and textuality has strong affinities with the claims of theory exemplified in 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome'. But in his unwillingness to conflate the thing and its Idea, Stevens paradoxically achieves the absolute as (im)possibility because speculation can never offer itself as simply a fiction. Even though the formal verbal expressions may be fictitious, the creative force of the poet's words and the foundations from which the poetically fabulous springs have

a firm basis in truth. Only then can he represent the Idea not as something transcendent, but as the very process of self-reflexive production, which is why I call Stevens a 'critical' rather than 'philosophical' poet.

Bishop modifies this project by employing the different tendencies of a predominantly observational disposition to deflect our attention from the transcendent qualities of the Idea or from the conditions of deep structure towards the emergence of the Idea from the textures and details of sensuous observation. Following on from Stevens, she constantly asks how value is developed from individual and unamplified details. How does the observer's apparent lack of insistence, devoid of rhetorical pressure, rise to significance? 'The Map' really does then become noetic, existing as a textured act of constructive mind transposed onto the flat surface of a physical document. The reality of the map is not only what it is, but also its double—its mimetic mental surface or image. Both are irreducible to each other, yet indistinct at their boundaries. The real is thus emptied of a singularly objective status as it approaches the edges of communicable perception and the map itself is interiorised at the moment of perception, then re-objectified in its re-presentation. Observation is thus rolled back into experience, imbuing the real with a power far greater than the details of its own facticity:

Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?
—What suits the characters or the native waters best.
Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West,
More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors
(p.3)

Amongst later poets, the work of Robert Creeley was clearly foreshadowed by both Stevens and Bishop. Creeley takes the investigation of surfaces one step further by completely breaking the tenuous relationship between subject and field of experience they had so delicately articulated. For Creeley, subject *is* field of experience so, rather than discussing the trajectories of antithetical or contingent surfaces in a poem we can now talk about only one—the straight line from nowhere to nothing, the gap between Creeley's idea of humanness and the world which it must negotiate. Look, for example, at 'The Rhyme':

There is the sign of
the flower—
to borrow the theme.

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But what or where to recover
what is not love
too simply

I saw her
and behind her there were
flowers, and behind them
nothing.²¹

The tension here results from the ambiguities of a present world in which everything exists in name only, so that one sees the signs entirely subtracted from the possibility of anything existing behind them.

The world of signs is the representation of an entirely visual world, a world without depth. When Creeley tries to discover some deeper structure for the sign, to recover 'what is not love too simply' he discovers a void ('behind them nothing'), a simple surface, mocking his desire to search in the first place. The texture created by the play of Stevens's and Bishop's system of intersecting surfaces has now gone, and we are left with only language to fill the gap between concept and image, between perceptual experience and reflexive consciousness. What in Stevens and Bishop was a dynamic relationship between experience and interrogative consciousness has been turned by Creeley into the static isolation of sensitive despair—the primary experience of increasing distance, of a consciousness that is withdrawing from the sorts of phenomenological interplay so skillfully engaged by both Stevens and Bishop.

Notes

- 1 Robert Lowell, 'Thomas, Bishop and Williams', in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, Ann Arbor, 1983, p.186.
- 2 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford, 1990, p.258. Further references to Eagleton will be from this edition.
- 3 Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985*, New York, 1986, pp.125–6.
- 4 *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, p.130.
- 5 Randall Jarrell, 'The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens', *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller, Jr., Philadelphia, 1962, pp.185–86.
- 6 See Marjorie Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, Princeton, N. J., 1981.
- 7 Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple*, Lewisburg, 1979, p.112.
- 8 *Enlarging the Temple*, p.122

- 9 *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen, Berkeley, 1995, p.318.
- 10 G. Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, 1987, p.xiv.
- 11 Robert Moynihan, 'An Interview with Harold Bloom', *Diacritics*, Fall, 1983, p.67.
- 12 Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, ed. Holly Stevens, New York, 1990, p.373.
- 13 I am using the term *différend* in the same sense as Lyotard when he says that a *différend* marks a 'conflict between (at least) two parties that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments'. See Jean-Francois Lyotard *The Différend*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis, p.xi.
- 14 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn, New York, 1947, p.433.
- 15 Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, New York, 1989, p.189.
- 16 Stevens, *Palm at the End of the Mind*, p.262.
- 17 Stevens, *Palm at the End of the Mind*, p.218.
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