Being-Sent: Maternal Correspondence in Marcel Proust, Elizabeth Bishop, and Marianne Moore

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the role that maternal correspondence plays in the work of Marcel Proust, Elizabeth Bishop, and Marianne Moore. "Part One: Proust's Envelope" examines thirdness and metonymical strategies of the letter; in *In Search for Lost Time*, Proust's envelope appears as a dynamic rhetorical figure that turns writing inside out. By tapping into the maternal currents of correspondence via scenes of letter-writing and appearances of the posthumous letter in the *Search*, as well as actual letters between Proust and his mother, the essay investigates how maternal rêvenance forms a power-line to writing. Proust stages an epistolary play of ventriloquism and maternal lineage; this haunted and haunting geneaology reverberates with the sublimity of the letter that continues after the death of its sender. We trace these echoes in order to

better understand how maternal correspondence speaks to alterity and the work of the book.

"Part Two: Eminence" looks at the mentorship of Marianne Moore to Elizabeth Bishop in order to gloss a relation that approaches mother-daughter, master-disciple, but remains apart from its absolute rigor. While it may be tempting to argue that Moore filled the gap left by the death of Bishop's mother, their correspondence plays on a field of thirdness that displaces surrogate thinking. As such, the logic of the surrogate-as-replacement, and the maternal as a singular figure, cease to be productive modes of understanding. The maternal instead acts as a propelling and interpellative force, the voltage that powers language, and the system that monitors its effects.

I point to Bishop's description of Moore's eminence in "Efforts of Affection," in which the MM of Moore's monogram appears as an index to a maternal breeding ground. A play of intimacy and criticism unfolds in which there are multiple mothers afoot: the house of Moore becomes a department of corrections whose codes of grammar and propriety are established and breached in correspondence.

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Part One: Proust's Envelope

Proust kept no journal; his letters to Mother take up the slack. In his maternal correspondence, the reader is rewarded with a diaristic immediacy to be found nowhere else in Proust's oeuvre, an interpellative strategy specific to the letter. The image of Proust as a writer embedded in the solitude of a room lined with cork, avoiding the social world by writing at night and sleeping during daylight, would seem to suggest the kind of writer at home in the auto-erotic circularity of the journal. And yet, the self-reflexive silence of the journal was not in Proust's purview. Proust's drive to recount his days found its element instead in a maternal epistolarity, the current between mother and son, two "people...constantly linked by a kind of wireless telegraphy."[1]

The pulse of the maternal correspondence is the rhythm of the daily: the letters to Maman seem to fulfill a need to manipulate ordinary time, as if each letter were a time capsule which, once written, sent, or swallowed, could alleviate the strain of the every-day. "Life being so unchronological, so anachronistic in its disordering of our days," (II, 231), Proust found solace from the straits of linear time in the intermittencies of the letter; testament

[1] In a letter written to his mother shortly after his father's death, Proust describes mother and son as "people...constantly linked by a kind of wireless telegraphy." Proust, *Marcel Proust: Letters to His Mother,* 182.

to what Avital Ronell identifies as a "need to ensure a temporality of addiction," the non-contemporaneity of correspondence becomes a strategy to deal with the inconsistencies between the linear and his time-sense, the workings of memory and its bearing on the present. After the death of *Proust-mère*, her absence inspires a temporal shift that ends in the inversion of "normal time," sleeping during daylight and writing at night.[2] Arguably, the correspondence with Mother was so necessary a ritual that, once death sealed off the correspondence, an entirely new literary form was necessary to bridge the gap – *In Search of Lost Time,* the elegiac epic of the intermittencies of the heart. [3]

[2] Julia Kristeva suggests that the interval between the correspondence and the writing of the *Search* is where Proust's notions of sado-masochism and the profanation of the mother take shape, and that the death of Proust's mother signaled the start of a new "time-scale and way of life." See Kristeva, *Proust and the Sense of Time*, 10-13.

[3] Francois Compagnon reminds us that the original title of *In Search for Lost Time* was *The Intermittencies of the Heart*, underscoring the importance of intermittence to the ethos of the work. While often overshadowed by the prominence of memory, intermittence is fundamental. Compagnon argues that intermittence is more important than the idea of the madeleine, or paving stones, since, as the sign of catastrophe, it cannot be theoretically tamed. See Compagnon, *Proust: Between Two Centuries*, 123-4.

Proust's envelope

As Anne Carson has taught us, the erotic charge of correspondence is a matter of thirdness and triangulation. Traveling on a transversal that cuts between plane A and plane B, the mediation of the letter between lovers sustains the desire that passes between them on a relay course; thirdness is the term that both separates and unites them. Its logic is that of the interstice, and of paradox. Proust's image of the steeples of Martinville, which inspires Marcel's first rush of writerly inspiration—— occurring, significantly, *in motion*, while writing in a carriage——offers a visual schema of how thirdness comes into play, and gives birth to writing by means of a disjunctive unity:

> At the bend of a road I suddenly experienced that special pleasure which was unlike any other, when I saw the two steeples of Martinville, shining in the setting sun and appearing to change position with the motion of our carriage and the windings of the road, and then the steeple of Vieuxvicq, which though separated from them by a hill and a valley and situated on a higher plateau in the distance, seemed to be right next to them.
>
> As I observed, as I noted the shape of their spires, the shifting of their lines, the sunlight on their surfaces, I felt that I was not reaching the full depth of my impression, that something was behind that motion, that brightness,

> something which they seemed at once to contain and conceal.[4]

Once one goes looking for triangles, they seem to be everywhere: at first the Vieuvicq steeple triangulates the Martinville spires, then we realize that the motion of the carriage that animates the steeples cuts across Marcel and the steeples, and that Marcel as an observer forms the point of another triangle. Finally, and perhaps most important, comes the paragraph Marcel writes in order to find what is hidden behind "that motion," which, as it happens, takes thirdness, and illumination, as its subjects: Proust invokes thirdness not only by describing triangles on a landscape, but (as usual) by drawing attention to the act of interpretation as a kind of correspondence. "At times one of them would draw aside so that the other two could glimpse us again for an instant; but the road changed direction, they swung round in the light like three golden pivots and disappeared from my gaze…after some awkward stumbling of their noble silhouettes, [I saw them] press against one another, slip behind one another, now forming, against the still pink sky, no more than a single black shape, charming and

[4] Proust, *The Way By Swann's,* 180.

resigned."[5] The passage works as an allegory for the correspondent paradox, a traveling play of impressions that can unhinge monoliths as it brings them into sublime communication with each other.

As if on a golden pivot, the postcard is animated by forces which retard linear motion and logic. Neither here nor there, neither out nor in, the postcard (as Derrida reminds us) contains a "necessary kink, so that despite the absolute authority of its usual sequences (like the absolute authority of alphabetical order)... it contains the subversion and reversal of its own progression."[6] Introducing a third term into love's couple that "makes suddenly visible the difference between what is and what could be," letters project the "ideal on the screen of the actual,"[7] a palimpsest that obsessed Proust, and became for him an incessant ontological and literary negotiation. Postal hermaphrodite par excellence, Proust was driven to draw out the colors and sounds of the synaesthetic of ideal and actual that he called being, and if his novel can be said to be "about" anything, it is perhaps about this in-visibility, the currents that run a course between the ideal and actual, over which the letter and the postcard travel. Proust breathed the anti-logic of correspondence

[5] Proust, 182.
[6] Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond,* xii.
[7] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet,* 92.

more easily than he did air, and his nightly exhalations of letters strung into words strung into sentences strung into paragraphs that became the *Search for Lost Time* accumulated themselves according to correspondence's anti-gravity, orbited around its center which is not one. Thirdness pulls the rug out from under here, there, everywhere. So does Proust.

By harnessing the dynamism of correspondence's third term, Proust is able to unhinge our most cherished notions of duality, including what it means to be inside, or outside, at any given moment: what it means to inhabit a room, a book, a body. Our disorientation as readers of Proust is due largely to a rhetorical strategy that turns the envelope into a mobius strip. DeMan describes the process as "enveloppé becoming enveloppant," "the metonymy by which the covered-up entity becomes its own cover… a more or less hidden system of relays which allows [initially static polarities] to enter into substitutions, exchanges, and crossings that appear to reconcile the incompatibilities of the inner with the outer world."[8] In the DeManian scenario, the envelope acts as a rhetorical agent on a kind of Mission Impossible, towing the line between inside and outside, past and present. Content is turned inside out to suffuse its own surface: this is why

[8] DeMan, *Allegories of Reading*, 60.

any apparently opaque container — a body, a name, an envelope — is immediately suspect in Proust. We know that before long, any apparent wholeness will but upended and inverted to reveal fissured, multiplicitous, and non-contemporaneous realities. The site of the inversion — of liminality — becomes the only reliable horizon. That this liminality becomes known by way of the envelope, either here as a rhetorical action, or elsewhere, where we see metaphors of envelopes perform analogous actions in establishing modes of identity, bears greatly on our understanding of Proustian correspondence, and of the elusive notion of being-sent.

Walter Benjamin also notes the primacy of the envelope's rhetorical turn in his essay, "The Image of Proust," which argues that as an oneiric symbol of thirdness, the container that turns itself out is at the heart of Proust's creative drives. The kinetic, somersaulting envelope is the site of great regenerative powers, aligned with the nightwork of sleep and dream: "Children know a symbol of [the dream world]: the stocking which has the structure of [the] dream world when, rolled up in the laundry hamper, it is a 'bag' and a 'present' at the same time. And just as children do not tire of quickly changing the bag and its contents into a third thing -

namely, a stocking - Proust could not get his fill of emptying the dummy, his self, at one stroke in order to keep garnering that third thing, the image which satisfied his curiosity- indeed, assuaged his homesickness."[9] Benjamin rightly isolates the liminality of the envelope that turns itself out as the proliferative vertigo of sleep and dream, the interval chronicled in the opening pages of *Combray*, with the envelope taking shape as Proust's self. But what are we to make of the homesickness to which Benjamin alludes? It suggests that the play of inversion performs a reparative function, a gap that needs filling. Any letter invokes the missing link of the interlocutor: if you were here, I wouldn't be writing you. And it is nothing new to point to the primacy of Mother's absence in the writing of the *Search*, although perhaps we need reminding. In case it slipped our minds, remember that the Search began in earnest only after the death of Proust's mother, when all epistolary relations with chère Maman came to a close. Enter the envelope's convolutions, her endless powers of regeneration. It is she that turns Marcel into a literary superhero, able to construct the death-defying, self-propelling architecture of the Search that turns not on a dime, but on an envoi.

In *Proust and Signs*, Gilles Deleuze identifies two

[9] Benjamin, *Illuminations,* 205.

fundamental figures in the Search: the first "encases, envelops, implies," while the second "complicates."[10] The first, enveloping figure is somewhat surprisingly a means of explication, not by way of the linear, but by unfolding, invagination, blossom. Arguing against the idea of the Search's antecedent unity, Deleuze attests that envelope operations enact "the disparity, the incommensurability, the disintegration of the parts of the Search, with the breaks, lacunae, intermittencies that guarantee its ultimate diversity." The second figure of complication, apposite to the logic of the first, makes this plain, and links the work of the envelope to the postal principle. This second, complicating figure "involves the coexistence of asymmetric and non-communicating parts, either because they are organized as quite separate halves or because they are oriented as opposing 'aspects' or ways or because they begin to revolve, to whirl like a lottery wheel that shifts and even mixes the fixed prizes." Deleuze's lecture leads us towards the relation of the gift of correspondence with the maternal: the gift of birth, the umbilical circuitry of guilt and longing, the present of the letter. It seems the interlocutor is himself a kind of prize, albeit a haunted and haunting one. "The narrator's activity then consists in electing and choosing; at least this is his apparent

[10] Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 116

activity, for many various forces, themselves complicated within him, are at work to determine his pseudo-will, to make him select part of the complex composition, a certain aspect of the unstable opposition, a certain prize in the shadows."[11]

Deleuze, too, reminds us of the primacy of a *"transversal dimension"* in Proust's oeuvre, which, for our purposes, must be understood as the dimension in which the postal principle operates. Deleuze stresses how transversality permits us to bring non-communicating elements into conversation with each other without unifying or totalizing them, "without suppressing their difference or distance."[12] (Think of a diagonal cutting across two parallel lines.) Transversality brings the steeples of Martinville into communication with each other from Marcel's viewpoint in the moving car, a correspondence that gives rise to the narrator's first rush of writing; transversality "establishes the profanations and is obsessed by the bumblebee, the transversal insect which causes the partitioned sexes to communicate."[13] In the *Search,* transversality is not only a theme (as in the cross-pollinating, inter-sexed bumble bee), but a syntax: "the formal structure of the work is therefore

[11] Deleuze, 117.
[12] Deleuze, 168.
[13] Deleuze, 168.

transversality, which passes through the entire sentence, which proceeds from one sentence to another in the entire book, and which even unites Proust's book to those he preferred."[14] Transversality unites the Proustian sentence to the *envoi*, too, for it is its route and medium, the pipeline of correspondence: it is the syntax of the postal. In Proust's correspondence with his mother, we discover the opiate seeds of the transversals, fantasias, and profanations of *In Search of Lost Time*.

It seems we have been led astray. We were talking about the envelope, unwrapping its present. Where are its gifts to be found? Somewhere between novel and author, object and subject, think of Proust's envelope, that third thing, as a movement that underlies the very foundations of Proustian productivity, its seamy underbelly of écriture. We need not only search in scenes of letter-writing for its effects; as Paul DeMan writes of reading scenes in the Search, "we cannot a priori be certain to gain access to whatever Proust may have to say about reading by way of such a reading of a scene of reading. The question is precisely whether a literary text is about that which is states."[15] This nonconvergence, or disconnect, between

[14] Deleuze, 168.
[15] DeMan, *Allegories of Reading*, 57.

reading and understanding - how about is always a bout - is structurally analogous to the modal rifts and fissures of correspondence, the "circular difficulty" whose noncontemporaneity between self and other governs what we understand (or do not understand) as communication, as Being-there. Think of Proust's envelope as a kinetic structure, less noun than verb, that skates electrified across inversion's third rail. As a kind of kinetic seal, the envelope's paradox of simultaneous enclosure and opening towards the outside resonates with the "closet drama" performed by the Search, which, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, is a continuing saga: "still in performance through its sustained and changing mobilizations of closural and disclosural rage, excitement, resistance, pleasure, need, projection, and exclusion."[16] The performances of the envelope in Proust are not limited to its "actual" appearances in the novel (scenes which, not surprisingly , displace content for surface, linearity for a visceral and multiplicitous ontology); the envelope is first and foremost a dynamic rhetorical figure that turns writing inside out, giving new meaning to our understanding of Proust as the quintessential invert.

[16] Sedgwick, *Epistemologies of the Closet,* 213.

Third rail

In Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "The Man-Moth," the image of an otherworldly, underground "third rail" points to the volatility of correspondent energies, and of thirdness' power to skid out from under the linear if not properly contained. Where in the actual subway system, the third rail poses the danger of electrocution, in the Man-Moth's case the rail is full of an unspecified poison that carries the train and its passengers forwards. As a transit system not unlike the post (especially, the pneumatic post with which Proust was especially familiar, where missives shuttled through underground, pressurized tubes), the subway is its own correspondence system. Bishop's take on the third rail that is the source of its power reminds us that thirdness' voltage comes with its own set of risks.

If *that third thing* is the rail that fuels the fire of Proust's literary production, he has much in common with Bishop's man-moth: both travel by night and are possessed by dark dreamscapes, dreams that form their own third rail inside the head. "Just as the ties recur beneath his train, these underlie/his rushing brain."[17] Like Proust, the Man-Moth's hallmark is inversion: traveling only to

[17] Bishop, *The Collected Poems*, 15.

the surface of the city at night, standing on his moonshadow he "makes an inverted pin"; while riding the subway, he always faces "the wrong way."[18] Little has been written about the threads that connect Proust to Bishop, in work or in life: their breathing problems, their open closets, or their positions on either side of literary production's spectrum. Proust's logorrhea is matched by Bishop's selective vocabulary and her slim volumes; their opposing strategies achieve parallel prismatic effects. The Man-Moth, sympathetic alien, exemplifies the correspondent current that travels between them unnoticed, and the third rail — sometimes poison, sometimes nectar — that carried their work along.

[18] Bishop, *The Collected Poems*, 15.

Swann's envelope

When Swann is introduced in the opening scenes of Combray, Proust uses figures of the envelope to construct a theory of alterity that is at once prismatic and entirely mobile, casting identity as a circular traffic of ideas, senses and sounds. Swann's body is an envelope: Proust writes, "The corporeal envelope of our friend had been so well stuffed with all this, as well as with a few memories relating to his parents, that this particular Swann had become a complete and living being, and I have the impression of leaving one person to go to another distinct from him, when, in my memory, I pass from the Swann I knew later with accuracy to that first Swann."[19] The "all this" with which Swann's body is stuffed, is comprised of ideas and associations of a specific time and place; we only "know" another person because we have sent them, and because they have been returned to sender.

> Even the very simple act that we call 'seeing a person we know' is in part an intellectual act. We fill the physical appearance of the individual we see with all the notions we have about him, and in the total picture that we form for ourselves, these notions certainly have the greater part. In the end they swell his cheeks so perfectly, follow the line of his nose in an -adherence so exact, they do so well at nuancing

[19] Proust, *The Way By Swann's*, 23.

> the sonority of his voice as though the latter were only a transparent envelope that each time we see this face and hear this voice, it is these notions that we encounter again, that we hear.[20]

In this scenario of the voice as transparent envelope, connaissance is a matter of projection, literally, of being sent. The other is both a screen and a container for these notions that, like drugs, one projects and injects into the other. His hallucination comes back to you, through the ear, in vocal strains. *That third thing.* After Marcel projects his notions of Swann onto his face, swelling out his cheeks and imbuing them with meaning, his ideas bounce back to him, carried by the voice's envelope. Proust's model for being-sent is a flight plan for alterity that is non-essentialist and transient, becoming realized only through the checkpoints of sending and receiving. It's a circular traffic. Swann's envelope is the transparent container for an identity that travels, wherein faces and bodies are sites of transmission, post offices at which one delivers and picks up the mail of what constitutes a self. This self is only temporary — constantly being replenished and emptied out by the traffic of notions.

When Proust says "notions," it brings up visions of sewing circles and the notions counter, where the needles

[20] Proust, 22-23.

and buttons that accessorize and fasten; notions are both necessary and adjacent to the work: not the fabric itself, but the implements and objects with which the garment is constructed, and ultimately hangs together. Webster's defines sewing notions as "small personal articles," a phrase which dovetails nicely with Marcel's notions of identity. Text, textile: like the novel itself, Proustian identity is a bespoke dress tailor-made for, and by, the other.

"Notions" are by nature capricious, whimsical, and changeable, underscoring being-sent's mercurial nature. "Notions" also always seems to go with "preconceived," as if anteriority were a part of its inherent structure. Still, its temporality is uncertain, perhaps because it cannot stay still. Replication comes with the territory of kinesis: just as there is no one Swann in this scenario, only multiple personalities between which the narrator passes, there is more than one envelope at play here. Proust speaks first of the envelope of the voice, and then describes the corporeal envelope, Swann's body, filled with "the residue of idle hours spent together."[21] Envelope-trope #3: when Swann's ties to the demi-monde pass under the family's radar, they are signaled instead to the reader by an imaginary, and hidden, letter of transit:. Proust

[21] Proust, 23.

writes that Swann "perhaps had a letter from Twickenham [the residence of the exiled Comte de Paris] in his pocket, "[22] a first-class ticket to high society. Like the transparent envelope of Swann's voice, this imaginary letter is undoubtedly full of notions that the Comte de Paris holds of Swann, written out in ink on the envelope's front. Here, though, an "actual" letter is the index to a secret identity that stands invisibly alongside the one the family projects upon Swann, although the letter may not even exist. Pocketed, out of plain sight, the letter is somewhere between object and trope, its very being hinging on a perhaps, *peut-être*. Perhaps the envelope exists, perhaps not: either way, it performs its function, to suggest a second self that goes unnoticed by the narrator's family, a secret life of aristocratic connections. *Perhaps* is part of envelope-alterity's genetic code, tied to speculation, fantasy, and dreams of what is possible. Identities become like Russian dolls hidden one inside the other, and envelopes spontaneously generate. Patti White identifies this mutating effect of the postal principle as one of many: "Like an actual postal system, the postal principle both sends and diverts the mail; in psychoanalytic terms, repetition moves toward recognition but doubles back and strays into elaboration; in

[22] Proust, 22.

grammatical terms, the verb stalls in an intransitive construction before exploding into substitution; in rhetorical terms, the effect is diffused by confusion or distraction; in genetic terms, mutation occurs."[23] Different manifestations of correspondence, different strata of society, different shades of selves: with the model of being-sent that envelope-alterity provides, correspondence is a breeding ground.

[23] Patti White, "Delivering the Mail in Richard Powers' *The Gold Bug Variations*." Available from http://www.bsu.edu/classes/white4/goldbug.html.

Mother's envelope (*There is no answer*)

While the madeleine may be the most famous of the *Search's* tropes, and the one most widely identified as the essence of all things Proustian, it is perhaps less representative of Proustian desire than the scene of Marcel's *drame à coucher*, in which the nightly kiss from Maman is denied. The thingliness of the madeleine — something you can touch, hold, taste - lends itself perfectly to its identification as *the* Proustian sign, ready to soak up the substance of involuntary memory and, once tasted, to open the floodgates to the past. In mother's kiss, we discover a darker kind of sign, the negative to the madeleine's positive, whose productivity is fueled by refusal and inversion, predicated on absence and withdrawal. The kiss engenders a far more difficult primal scene, in which the sublimity and anguish of unrequited longing, the ripening and silencing of writing, the effects and limitations of the letter (as projectile, reparative, deliverer, intrusion, body proxy, plea) are tied inextricably to the law-of-the-mother.

The scene begins with the displacement of the habitual kiss goodnight usually bestowed by Maman in Marcel's bedroom: when Swann comes to dinner, the kiss is forced to

travel, and it does not travel well. Postal metaphors are at work even before an actual letter to Mom is put into play: Marcel describes his work as that of a courier entrusted with fragile cargo. "The precious and fragile kiss that Mama usually entrusted to me in my bed at the moment I was going to sleep I would have to convey from the dining-room to my bedroom and protect during the whole time I undressed, so that its sweetness would not shatter, so that its volatile essence would not spread and evaporate..."[24]. The boundaries of the kiss are as delicate as crystal; its elements appear to be entirely unstable. What's more, its security system has been breached: the kiss, site-specific, depends on the intimacy of the bedroom for its glue to stick, the glue that holds it all together, sending off the boy and day to the nightwork of sleep and dream. Swann's arrival enacts a rupture in this daily ceremony that sets in motion a series of postal relays and ruptures that will come to define a seminal strain of Proustian desire, weaving anguish and sublimity into an "exquisite" correspondence defined by the intermittences of the heart, and of writing.

When the kiss required to seal off the day is denied him, Marcel sends a sibling seal that projects him secretly into the realm of the dinner party, and his mother's hand.

[24] Proust, *The Way By Swann's*, 34.

Marcel invents a strategy of the letter to coax Mother away from the dinner table and into the bedroom, a dangerous plan borne from a "fit of rebelliousness," and writing it puts him at risk: to get the letter delivered, Marcel lies outright to Françoise, (who, doubtless, sees through his plan), and is fully aware that by pursuing Maman, the most severe punishment awaits him. His crime is less a matter of bad social form than of "yielding to a nervous impulse," assuming a position: "I knew that of all possible positions the one I was now placing myself in was the one that could provoke the gravest consequences for me... in my upbringing, the order of misdeeds was not the same as that in other children, and I had become accustomed to placing before all others...those whose common characteristic I now understand was that you give in to them by yielding to a nervous impulse... I knew that the one I had just committed was in the same family as others from which I had been severely punished, though infinitely graver."[25] The position of writer, of mama's boy, of one-that-desires, takes shape as an identity for which punishment is the inevitable result; the frisson of danger, combined with the subterfuges that the letter requires, enact an intoxicating simultaneity of enclosure and disclosure, the unbeatable high of a missive that goes both ways. "It was now no

[25] Proust, 36.

longer, as it had been a moment ago, until tomorrow that I had left my mother, since my little note, though it would no doubt annoy her, would allow me, invisible and enraptured, at least to enter the same room, would whisper about like a fruit that has turned sweet and bursts its skin, was about to propel, to project, all the way into my intoxicated heart, Mama's attention while she read my lines."[26]

The envoi, a double agent, sends Marcel into Maman's inviolate sphere, offers him a taste of the forbidden fruit. Rupturing thresholds and boundaries in voluptuous, edible metaphors ("a fruit that has turned sweet and bursts its skin"), the letter invokes a ripening, or coming-to-fruition that breaks open the body, a *petit-mort.* The note animates a redoubled and simultaneous haunting, of mother in son and son in mother; Maman's readerly attentions are enough to infuse Marcel's heart with her presence. From a traumatic break in Marcel's daily scheme, mother's absence is turned inside out, giving birth to an intoxicating fantasia.

That is, at least, until she answers back. When a response to Marcel's note does arrive, it takes the form of a particularly stark refusal, the effects of which further complicate the place of the envoi in Proust's relation to

[26] Proust, 33.

the maternal. Mother responds by not-responding: "My mother did not come, and with no consideration for my pride asked Françoise to say these words to me: 'There is no answer," words I have so often since then heard the doormen in grand hotels or the footmen in bawdy-houses bring back to some poor girl who exclaims is surprise: 'What, he said nothing? Why, that's impossible! Did you really give him my note? All right, I'll go on waiting.'"[27] In a supreme act of non-compliance, Maman trumps writing with speech, refusing to engage in Marcel's entretien. What kind of utterance is this, what kind of response? Complete silence, the lack of an answer, would reverberate differently than *there is no answer*; the silence of the interval between sender and recipient is the oxygen that allows Marcel's fantasia to breathe. *There is no answer* signifies differently, exhibits the cruelty of speech: adopting the law-of-the-father, Mother refuses, at least for the moment, to take up Marcel's thread, to write, engage in the play of being-sent. Marcel goes on waiting, invents a different strategy, but for the time being, ceases to pick up his pen. *There is no answer* suggests that while *chère Maman* may inspire the ripest letter-pleasures, she also has the power to stop writing in its tracks.

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[27] Proust, 33.

And yet, the letter continues. The displaced kiss for which Marcel tries so valiantly to find a boundary, whose absent presence he writes out in the envoi to Maman, is echoed throughout Proust's oeuvre in scenes of letter-writing and epistolarity. Look closely, and traces of the envoi-as-kiss begin to appear: we need look no further than Proust's letters to his mother to find an example of it, just above his signature. Proust often signed his letters, *milles tenders baisers*, a signing off that not only aligns the letter with the inaugural kiss of Combray, but begs the question of mother-as-origin, the relation of Maman's death to the writing of the Search. If we read *milles tenders baisers* according to the postal principle's logic of infinite repetition, Marcel's signature as the absent kiss turned inside out, doubled and redoubled as it travels back towards Mother, we must also recognize that her death is inevitably bound up in such an address. Postal rêvenance engenders her haunting; Marcel's signature bears the mark of her finitude. But we must be wary of reading the effects of the letters and those of the novel as a before-and-after scenario, a timeline broken in two by the death of Jeanne Proust. This is not to deny that her death was *the* galvanizing force in the writing of the

Search: as Julia Kristeva has written, the death of Proust's mother effected a change in his daily life that enabled the writing of a novel, a point that suggests a shift between the temporalities of the letter (Marcel's correspondence with Jeanne) and the temporalities of the novel (Marcel's correspondence with her absence, with himself). And yet, the catalyst of mother's absence reaches further, and in more directions, than such a linear reading would allow. Maman signals multiple points of origin; her absence opens out onto a field of infinite repetition, the beyond-origin.

Ghostwriting, Gilberte

In Volume II of the *Search*, while fantasizing about Gilberte, Marcel partakes in a kind of ghostwriting. He composes a letter in Gilberte's voice in which she tells him everything he wants to hear: "Every evening I liked to imagine this letter, I believed I was reading it, I recited each sentence of it to myself."[28] When there is no answer, ghostwriting enables a simultaneity of reading and writing without the actualization of either: silent recitation and repetition, the postal principle at work. On writing's threshold, Marcel dwells in silent speech, revels in its perfect circles. And yet, before too long, he silences himself, beats a hasty retreat from desire's ideal horizon: "I realized that if I were to receive a letter from Gilberte, it could not be that one anyway since I was the one who had just written it. And from then on, I forced myself to turn my thoughts away from the words I would have liked her to write to me, for fear that by articulating them, I would exclude precisely those - the dearest, the most desired - from the field of all possible compositions."[29]

[28] Proust, 412.
[29] Proust, 412.

The narrator's logic echoes the Orpheus myth and the turn "by which possibility is only ever a function of prior impossibility, and an object [is] only ever grasped at the moment of its ineradicable loss..."[30] To articulate the words he would most like to hear, would, like Orpheus' turn towards Eurydice, destroy both the work and the other. Marcel must turn away from writing, interrupt the ventriloquizing correspondence with the other in order to preserve the possibility of an answer. By ghostwriting Gilberte, Proust not only writes out his desire for her in a silent and autoerotic epistolarity; he makes audible the silence left by Maman when, on that first night in Combray, she left his note unanswered. In order to preserve this potential, he mustn't articulate the words he desires: desires to write, to read, to hear. He forces himself to withdraw from both reading and writing, from correspondence, and from the imaginary altogether. To write——and to receive——the ideal letter would be to murder it, a dead soldier on the field of the possible. By turning away, he doubles that rupture, envelops her silence with his own.

One wonders, though, if a letter from Gilberte did arrive, how the thrill would compare to the fantasy. A basic logic of Proustian desire is that once the beloved

[30] Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary,* 60.

finally comes around to reciprocating the lover's affections, the one-who-loves no longer cares; correspondent erotics, while not nullifying that equation, complicate the scenario considerably. The elusiveness of the post, the secrecy of the envelope, and the frisson of the written word fuel desire, primarily because *the beloved isn't there*: the letter traces a body in ink, paper (and in Gilberte's case, perfume) that, like the imaginary letter, doubles for a "real" body. In fact, when a letter does arrive from Gilberte, its effects are intoxicating: the field of the imaginary, of "all possible compositions," is superimposed on the real, a palimpsest that throws Marcel into "some other mode of existence quite different from the one known to me, at variance with it but more real than it."[31]

[31] Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, 75.

Broken Correspondence: Image

In a letter to his mother, Proust thanks her for furnishing details of her surroundings and writes, "Now I can 'see' you better."[32] Her image, a kind of sight, is a comfort. What kind of vision does the letter provide? The seeing afforded by letters is always in quotation marks, a metaphor of vision that propels love forward:

> All the time I was away from Gilberte, I needed to see her because, constantly trying to form a picture of her for myself, in the end I could not do it, and no longer knew precisely what the thing was to which my love corresponded.[33]

It's curious that this scene is cast as a problem of correspondence rather than memory, which goes unmentioned in this passage's erotic economy of vision, knowledge, and correspondence. Our narrator does not write that, when Gilberte is out of his sight, he can't remember what she looks like; instead, he writes that he cannot imagine what she looks like. The scene is cast as a problem of a fissured correspondence due to actual distance, Gilberte's being out of view, which boils down to a problem of representation (Proust uses the reflexive verb, *se*

[32] Proust, *Letters To His Mother*, 59.
[33] Proust, *The Way By Swann's*, 403.

répresenter, literally, to represent something to oneself). The narrator's failure to represent Gilberte's image results in metonymical breakdown: he can no longer know his desire, no longer know how to correspond. He looks to image to pick up the broken thread: a search for sight, and for site – the site of the beloved, of desire itself.

When a letter from Gilberte does arrive, the problem of image-representation uncannily disappears, replaced by a new system of signs. Marcel's focus shifts towards the representative system of the tangible letter, metaphors inspired by texture, color, and the grafts of handwriting. Image is rendered obsolete when an actual envoi gives birth to a working model of desire which is animated by Gilberte's signature.

Impossible signatures: Gilberte's hand

When we question the relation between the materiality of texts and "the materiality that comprises the subjects of writing and reading practices," we are obliquely referring to the relation of the maternal to writing and reading subjects, whether we know it or not. Derrida's theory of the signature hypothesizes that "the drama that activates and constructs every signature is [an] insistent, unwearying, potentially infinite repetition of something that remains, every time, irreplaceable"; [34] Proustian signatures -- both theoretical and actual, within and around his texts -- suggest that *chère Maman* is at the origin of this irreplaceablity, that the maternal relation inspires a drama of correspondence and rupture that shapes how we read and write, how we love. Signatures of the novel, signatures of the letter seek, incessantly, to describe it, in flourishes of longing.

What fascinates us about letters is in part the visibility and texture of an actual signature drawn in ink, a sibling to Derrida's theoretical signature that is "neither quite outside the text nor at home within it... a trace resonating and disseminating the textual exterior

[34] Derrida, *Signeponge/Signsponge*, 20.

with its interior."[35] Ink flows. So do other, vital fluids. In a letter from Gilberte, we see how the written signature effects a dissociative and visceral force powerful enough to discombobulate time-sense, perception, and the real:

> One day, when the postman had just been, my mother laid a letter on my bed. I opened it, my mind elsewhere, as it could not possibly contain the only signature which would have made me happy, that of Gilberte Swann, because I never had any contact with her away from the Champs-Elysées. Yet, there at the bottom of the page...at the end of a letter in an expansive hand, which seemed to have underlined nearly all the sentences, because the cross-bar of every *t* was dashed above the letter and not through it, thus scratching a line under the corresponding word in the line above, the signature I read was Gilberte's! However, because I knew this signature to be impossible in a letter addressed to me, the sight of it, unaccompanied as it was by any belief in it, brought me no happiness. For a moment, all it did was cast an unreal light on everything around me. At dizzying speed, the improbable signature jumbled the things in my room, the bed, the fireplace, the walls. Everything I looked at was wobbling, as though I had had a fall from a horse; and I wondered whether there might not be some other mode of existence quite different from the one known to me, at variance with it but more real than it, which in the glimpse I had just caught of it had filled me with the hesitancy which sculptors depicting the Last Judgement show on the faces of the awakened dead, who stand already on the threshold of the Other World. [36]

Gilberte's letter introduces a series of simultaneous

[35] Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion,* 13.
[36] Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, 74-75.

realities that are at once connected and disrupted by the signature-as-transversal, hearkening back to the opening scene of Combray, where Marcel finds himself caught between the worlds of sleep and dream. The "improbable" signature shares the dizzying effects of sleep, but is tied more explicitly here to desire's perceptual exploits, how love makes everything reel. Style eclipses content: the letter's signature is itself unrecognizable at first, due to Gilberte's expansive handwriting which refuses linearity and the boundaries of line-spacing; her t's, uncrossed, act retroactively on the phrase she has just written, giving impertinent and accidental emphasis. The death drive is in effect; Gilberte's scrawl that doubles back on itself rouses M from the sleep of the interior to greet what Derrida calls the third modality of the signature, "the necessary and irreducible trace of one in the other, the implication of the text's outside with its inside, its fundamentally folded, invaginated character."[37] Mother is at the heart of this fold. "Doubtless, in this return to itself there may be, as we have demonstrated, the strict implication of being haunted by something *totally othe*r."[38]

Or, something totally Mother. Wary of the improbable signature, Marcel suspects that the miracle of

[37] Grosz, 20.
[38] Derrida, *The Post Card,* 293.

the letter may be traced back to Maman, "who, for seeing that for some time past I had lost all pleasure in living, had perhaps had a message transmitted to Gilberte."[39] He recounts an allegory in which Maman is the purveyor of miracles, orchestrator of secrets, and the wizard behind desire's curtain. "She would, unknown to me, to make me enjoy swimming under water, which I hated, as it prevented me from breathing, give wonderful boxes covered in sea-shells and branches of coral to my swimming instructor, so that when I came upon them lying on the sea-bed, I could believe they were my own discoveries."[40] This palimpsest is at the heart of Proustian discovery (read *desire),* the under-the-sea-dance of *perhaps*: always, the possibility that Mother is to thank or to blame. In the end, Marcel attests that the origin, or authorship, of his desire is better left unquestioned, or more precisely, its "whys and wherefores"[41] lie outside of our grasp. Still, while causality is forever abandoned, the hazy possibility remains that if magic exists, its charms have been carefully hidden in Mother's jewelry-case.

[39] Proust, 76.
[40] Proust, 76.
[41] Proust, 76.

Petit bleu: the pneumatic post

> Another time, still preoccupied by the desire to hear La Berma in a classical play, I had asked [Gilberte] if she happened to own a little book in which Bergotte talked about Racine, and which one could no longer find. She had asked me to remind her of its exact title and that evening I had addressed an express letter to her, writing on the envelope that name, Gilberte Swann, which I had so often copied out my notebooks. The next day she brought me a packet tied up in mauve ribbons and sealed with white wax, containing the little book, a copy of which she had asked someone to locate for her. 'You see? It really is the one you asked for,' she said, taking from her muff the letter I had sent her. But on the address of this pneumatique - which, only yesterday, was nothing, was merely a petit bleu which I had written, and which, now that a telegraph boy had delivered it to Gilberte's concierge and a servant had carried it to her room, had become this priceless thing, one of the petits bleus she had received that day - it was hard for me to recognize the insignificant, solitary lines of my handwriting under the printed circles apposed to it by the post office, under the inscriptions added in pencil by one of the telegraph messengers, signs of actual realization, stamps from the outside world, violet bands symbolizing life, which for the first time came to espouse, sustain, uplift, delight my dream. [42]

[42] Proust, *The Way By Swann's*, 406.

The pneumatique post of Europe in the late 19th century, a system of pressurized, underground tubes through which cards were catapulted at top speed, was born from a problem of time-lag and economics. The introduction of the electric telegraph had accelerated the transfer of information to an unprecedented rate, which bode well for merchants on the stock exchange, for whom advance information could mean making a killing, but crucial minutes were lost, and potential cash flows staunched, in the gap between telegraph office and stock exchange. And so the pneumatic post was born: first in London in 1853, where a 220 yard long tube connected the London Stock Exchange with the Central Station of the Electric Telegraph Company. Paris followed suit in 1866 with a line between the telegraph office of Place de la Hotel and Place de la Bourse, which soon after was extended into a hexagonal network that connected numerous telegraph offices with the Bourse. [43]

In 1879 the pneumatic post was opened to the public, and by the mid 1880s the tubal system covered the entire city: Proust was intimately involved with the poetics of this highly eroticized respiratory system that resembled at

[43] Information on the pneumatique post is culled from Mark Hayhurst's website, which includes information on Paris' pigeon post: http://www.cix.co.uk/~mhayhurst/jdhayhurst/pneumatic/book1.html.

once umbilicus, digestive tract, and lungs. What kind of form was created here, on cards propelled by air? Affectionately referred to as the *petit bleu*, a little blue, the pneumatique was imbued with an urgency, quickness, and brevity that resembled the telegram, cast in a markedly different hue. The warning yellow light of the telegram, its truncated, dictated sentences encode a traumatics of bad news that the petit bleu neatly escaped. Sky blue, baby blue: redolent of baby boydom, the petit bleu's infantile sweetness was sealed by the urgency of a more naïve yearning. Hand-written and addressed on postal stationery, the pneumatique was a kinder correspondence that fit snugly in the hand.

The scene of Marcel's petit bleu narrates a kind of postal transubstantiation: Marcel asks Gilberte for a lost work, a book "one can no longer find." His petit bleu thus gives rise to an act of recovery, writing's rebirth. But it is not only Bergotte's writing that is resuscitated by the petit bleu: The inscriptive traffic of the pneumatique post performs an analogous operation on the petit bleu itself, wherein Marcel's writing is reborn, and the "nothingness" of the note is endowed with an exquisite kind of value. What is the nature of this shift in valence, based on nothing: what

renders writing's nothingness priceless? What does it mean to be out of circulation, and what does it take to breathe life into out-of-print's death sentence?

The new life of the petit bleu is due in part to a giving up of possession inherent in sending that abdicates both ownership and responsibility, relying on a host of anonymous hands: first, the mediating hands of the telegraph boy, concierge, and servant who pass the envelope around. Their strange touch magnetizes what had been merely a circular relation between Marcel and his own script; once sealed, the letter's secret only accrues erotic energy from the contact high of the mail boys. It's out of Marcel's hands. What will ultimately render the envoi priceless is its relation to the exterior: the first step of this transvaluating journey occurs during this shift from the autoerotics of writing to the promiscuity of the post.

As per usual in Proust, our understanding of what constitutes interior and exterior encounters a shift that ends up decentering both concepts. Outside means outside Marcel: his petit bleu most probably never saw the actual light of day, traveling as it did through a system of pneumatic tubes underneath the streets of Paris before arriving safely in Gilberte's bedroom. The birth, or

coming-to-being, of the petit bleu, exists in a series of passages that cannot be condensed into one emergent moment. The first inscribes the petit bleu with metonymical value, the violet bands whose circles symbolize living and the real, "which for the first time c[o]me to espouse, sustain, uplift, delight" Marcel's dream of Gilberte and his desire for her. These violet signs brand the *pneu* with proof of passage, "stamps from the outside world" that fuel the fire of dream. Violet appears to be the signature color of this paradox of interior and exterior, real and dream: the circles of life imprinted by the p.o. as marks of the exterior have their echoes in the Parma violets that will later signify the interior erotic life of Gilberte's mother, Odette Swann. Her violets, a "private pastime... seem to hint that one should apologize for an indiscretion, as one might on inadvertently glimpsing the title of a book lying open and divulging the secret of what she had just read... But the flowers were more alive than a book...They suggested long hours of her life that one knew nothing of... looking as though just left there by her, after sharing intimate moments with her which would come again soon, secret moments which one was loath to disturb, but which one yearned to be privy to, as one gazed at the wanton mauves, moist and faded, of her Parma violets."[44]

[44] Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower,* 170.

The currency of violet, shared between the desires of mother and daughter, paints the paradox of simultaneous enclosure and disclosure, the play of the fold. Deleuze writes that the fold is a mark of "internal individuation... an internalization of the outside, an invagination of the outside... Folding-unfolding [means] enveloping-developing, involution-evolution. "[45] The individuating marks of the exterior point to this dynamic action, reminding us that every *pneu* contained a crease: in order to fit in the capsule that would propel it through its underground umbilicus (a capsule that looks remarkably like a bullet), each card was folded, and arrived with a slight curvature to its spine. The letter arrives tattooed, broken: for writing, and desire, to become real, it must bear the marks of the fold's strain.

During the second stage of the *petit bleu's* travels, the letter keeps company amongst Gilberte's other pieces of correspondence, which, paradoxically, give it a kind of individuality. The petit bleu becomes significant, real, because Gilberte possesses it, because it has reached its destination as a communiqué meant only for her to read, touch, consume. By mingling with her other, girlish letters, the perfume of G's belongings seeps in. Amongst

[45] Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque,* 8.

her things, Marcel's writing discovers a home.

But the final stage proves to be the most significant and transformative, when the letter is returned to Marcel's sphere of influence. When Gilberte brings the petit bleu back into Marcel's field of vision, she engages in an ersatz performance of return-to-sender in which the envoi remains in Gilberte's hands (or more precisely, her muff). The letter becomes real, like so many other instances in Proust, only when Marcel interprets its signs. Almost unrecognizable ("it was hard for me to recognize the insignificant, solitary lines of my handwriting under the printed circles apposed to it by the p.o."), it bears the foreign, official, and valuating (in the most utilitarian sense of the word — the card has been paid for) marks of the exterior. Like the stamp of metaphor through which so much else comes to mean in Proust, it is the reading of these marks that ends by rendering the real.

And yet, there is no mention here of Gilberte reading the letter; the effect of attention so vibrantly described in the scene where Maman reads Marcel's letter, propelling herself into his heart, has no place, here. The effect of Gilberte's attention is less at issue than the letter's proof of circulation, the hands and eyes of the official

intermediaries in charge of delivery. Why this ellipse of Gilberte's scene of reading? Perhaps because writing, and the interior, is so undervalued in the equation. His handwriting is "insignificant" because it is solitary - the internal is eclipsed by "signs of actual realization," "stamps from the outside world." Writing, "like so many objects and so many moments in Proust's novel...has to turn itself out and become the outer enveloping surface."[46] What strikes us on this surface is the dollop of white wax that seals Gilberte's packet, reminding us of envelope-licking, the residue left on correspondence by the body, the secretions required to close off a secret. Gilberte's seal bears the mark of jouissance, and its milky substance is strong enough to hold together the package of a novel.

[46] DeMan, *Allegories of Reading*, 79.

Post-script, *fort-da*

We have already mentioned Proust's favorite method of signing-off to his mother — *milles tendres baisers* — he was also fond of signing his letters with an ever-expanding embrace , *je t'embrasse infiniment.* Anticipating the letter's end, this embrace invokes the infinite, refuses closure as it echoes the infinite irreplaceablilty of the signature, the severance of the maternal cord narrativized by the Freudian *fort-da*. Over and over, over again: "One more fort:: da for nothing, a repetitive, redundant review in the shape of a comet's tail... the rhythm of a step which always *comes back*, which again has just left."[47]

No surprise, then, that Proust's letters to his mother are full of post-scripts, *p.s. I love yous,* oh and by-the-ways. These addenda to the body of the letter, in their marginality, suggest that the message *hors-texte* is perhaps the most significant, like the precious jewels left for Marcel to discover at the bottom of the sea. There is something adorable about the p.s, as if the deferral of closure allows for a space for play that the body of the letter can ill afford. Proust can't bear to sign off. The p.s. is a turnabout, a maybe/maybe not, as in the following caveat: *I'm adding just a word after my fumigation because*

[47] Derrida, *The Post Card,* 387, 405.

I'm afraid all this may upset you, and then all my remorses become one big remorse. I'd rather not have written this letter and perhaps I shan't send it. [48] This particular *perhaps* displays the inverse of the dead-letter office, the possibility of non-arrival that Derrida argues infuses every piece of correspondence. All of Proust's letters contain the possibility not only of not arriving but of not even leaving the ground. What does a letter that isn't sent signify? What does it mean to address an envelope, and withold the stamp? The post-script re-animates the always-already animated bait-and-switch of the *fort: da* that infuses any letter (I'm here, I'm gone, I'm back), combating the breach of the signature with the *pas au-dela*.

[48] Proust, *Letters to His Mother*, 72.

The Sevignéan seam

An epistolary current sears through the *Search for Lost Time* in the language of Mme de Sevigné, a discourse of quotation and mourning that establishes epistolarity as *the* grammar of the maternal. For the narrator, mother, and grandmother, "Sevigné is the gospel of motherhood:"[49] the narrator's grandmother carries a copy of Sevigné's love letters to her daughter with her wherever she travels, quotes chapter and verse as others would scripture. After the grandmother's death, the narrator's mother slowly morphs into her likeness via Sevigné, quoting lines from the letters as her mother did. "Proust's narrator witnesses these epistolary expressions of mother-daughter fidelity only because he becomes, in the grandmother's absence, their recipient by proxy,"[50] which places the narrator in the difficult position of being at once an interlocutor of and a witness to a wholly maternal discourse. By mourning (and mothering) through Sevigné, the narrator's mother enters into a doubled-over correspondence that ghostwrites the grandmother as it both engages and alienates the son.

[49] Ladenson, *Proust's Lesbianism,* 112.
[50] Ladenson, 115.

In *Proust's Lesbianism*, Elisabeth Ladenson interprets Sevigné as the key to Proust's fascination with Gomorrah, and explores the triangulated relationship between the *Search's* narrator, mother, and grandmother erected and sustained by the circulation of Sevignéan language. She writes that the grandmother/mother relation, read through Sevigné, forms a double-sided coin of purity and profanation, "simultaneously all that is untouchably pure in the novel and, by implication, an incestuous precursor of Gomorrah... Idealization of the parent is inseparable from sexuality and from the desire to desecrate. The depiction of the grandmother as desexualized mother – and therefore of the mother as desexualized by her identification with the grandmother – entails its own seamy underside, which manifests itself through references to Mme de Sevigné."[51] Epistolarity is the current between purity and profanation, a secret, gomorrhic code.

The simultaneous prohibition and access of the son to the Sevignéan language that passes between mother and daughter along this seam is at the very root of Proust's erotic epistemology. The narrator makes a home of this threshold that at times becomes a transversal, in inspired moments of writerly vision; most of the time, the house seems haunted. Quotation will do that: Proust writes that

[51] Ladenson, 123, 113.

the narrator's mother "quoted Mme de Sevigné to [him] as though those letters had been written not by her to [him] but by my grandmother to her, "[52] a ghostly redoubling of interlocutors. Addressee by proxy, the narrator walks along the edge of this otherworldly seam between mother and daughter, the dead and the living, listening attentively, staying silent:, and waiting for the threshold of correspondence to shift, giving rise to transversality, and to writing.

Elizabeth Richardson Viti writes that the "mother-daughter couple makes the symmetry Marcel seeks and fails to find possible among women,"[53] a formulation I find to be deeply problematic. Viti falters by assuming that the mother-daughter relationship is symmetrical and without fissure. While dissymmetry may structure Marcel's relationships with lovers, borne in part from his *ex-stasis* arising from the mother-daughter bond, it is non-contemporaneity with the other which "dooms" Marcel's desire, his love of, and for, the impossible. Loving the impossible has everything to do with the seam, but not with the symmetrical. Viti's theory is sadly deaf to the proliferative force of assymetrical, the non-contemporaneous, the gulf from which Proust's language

[52] Ladenson, *Proust's Lesbianism*, 114.
[53] Viti, 234.

gushes: in short, the postal principle. We must remember that the Sevignéan seam is not a simple split. The narrator's relationship to maternal lineage, read through the ghostwritten work of Sevigné, follows a theory of simultaneous connect and disconnect that may best be broached under the rubric of intermittence, the *fort: da* and its interlacings: "the scene of writing and of inheritance played out in ellipsis, the abyss of its 'overlapping,' the commutation of places, the skipping of generations, the dissymmetry of contracts, in sum everything that *sends itself is sent* in a graphics of repetition which dislocates the summary 'triangle."[54]

[54] Derrida, *The Post Card,* 340.

A few words on the profanation of the mother

In *Sodom and Gomorrah*, Proust offers up a tantalizing ellipse concerning the profanation of the mother:

> Sons not always taking after their fathers, even if they are not inverts and go in pursuit of women, they may consummate the profanation of their mothers in their faces… But let us here leave what would merit a chapter on its own: the profanation of mothers.[55]

Of course, no such chapter is to follow. Pregnant with silence, Proust's unwritten chapter is the ultimate tease: we long for an explicit theory of maternal profanation in Proust's interminable grammar. Here he cuts us off, leaving us poised at the edge of profanation's cliff. We must look elsewhere for traces of this silent theory that seems to scribble on the back of content's mirror, on fiction's threshold.

1. Violence (Fiction)

An early short story from *Les Plaisirs et Jours* entitled, "Violante, or Worldly Vanities," was "initially drafted on the back of a note from [Proust's] mother in which she complained of his not writing to her enough while he was away from home."[56] In it, our heroine, a meditative

[55] Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 307
[56] Lacoursiere, "Proust and Parricide,"189.

child named Violante, sits down to write a letter to her beloved Honoré, believing that by "taking up her pen," she could erase all boundaries between them, that "between her unspoken tendernesses — her perpetual interior romance—and real things, there were avenues of communication along which she would hasten toward the impossible which, in creating, she would make viable." Believing in the transversality of correspondence, the current between invisible and visible, the make-believe interior and the "real" exterior, she assigns herself the superhuman power to *make something happen.* Ultimately, her letter fails: Honoré sails off to sea for four years, and promptly disappears from the story. The tale then lays out the *Search's* central epistemology of desire: that "love [makes one] suffer, which is the only way one ever comes to know it."[57]

The flip-side origins of this story may seem trivial at first glance, but in fact, Proust's turning over of the letter to give birth to fiction is an act that plunges deep into the roots of correspondence's sublime promise, which often turns out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. The letter approaches the impossible, a simultaneity of time and space that unites interlocutors and lovers; in certain moments, as in the narrator's vision

[57] Proust, *Pleasures and Regrets*, 92.

of the steeples at Martinville, one may experience a vision of transversal unity. But the letter may also be a space of accusation, bitterness, and regret. The mother chastises the son for not producing and addressing her enough; the son retaliates by composing a story of a truncated correspondence and unfulfilled desire. Filial energies turn themselves inside out, inscribe a fictional arc on the letter's broken back.

2. Deferral (Letter)

On the 19th of September, 1896, Proust writes to his mother, "The very day when I would have had the most affectionate things to say to you, everything has conspired to delay the moment till so late, that fearing you may get nothing at all if I put it off any more or prolong my letter, I'm confining myself to this tiny note."[58] When the day conspires against him, Proust resorts to the conditional past, *I would have had*. The expiration date of the letter that could have been has passed; there was no time, or space for it to breathe. Proust displaces affection with a note that can only point to what couldn't be written, and punishes himself for his trespasses (not writing, silencing his affections) by confining himself to

[58] Proust, *Letters to His Mother,* 66.

a smaller page, as if a note were a cell versus the freedom of the open letter).

The weirdness of mentioning the deferral (hence death) of the affectionate letter in a notably terse, brittle note echoes with Proust's clipped sentence in *Sodom and Gomorrah* on the profanation of mothers. *Let us here leave what would merit a chapter on its own.* Approach these silences with a mixture of deep respect and sympathetic suspicion: these swerves away from explication are silent essays on the unspeakable, the conditional and unconditional tenses of filial devotion.

Filial Sentiments of a Parricide

Proust's mother died on September 6, 1905; Proust's "Filial Sentiments of a Parricide" appeared in *The Figaro* on February 1st, 1907. The essay, marking a turning point in Proust's mourning of his mother, was the first piece of his to appear in print since her death. In a letter to Lucien Daudet in February of 1907, Proust claims that, apart from letters, he hadn't written "a word" for the year and a half after his mother's death;[59] Jean-Yves Tadié writes that the essay "represented a brutal purging of his entire past, a liberation from his private torments and from the feeling that he had brought about his mother's death because of the anxiety he had caused her on account of his illness or the life he had led,"[60] euphemistically invoking homosexuality, onanism, neurasthenia, and guilt as the etiology of matricide. Proust argues that piety is at the core of the crime. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that "Filial Sentiments" invokes and depends on epistolarity to tell its story, a deeply bizarre manifesto of filial devotion bound up in a ghostly correspondence

[59] Lacoursiere, 183.
[60] Tadié, *Marcel Proust: A Life*, 478.

with the maternal, the "seamy underside" of filial piety" to which Elisabeth Ladenson refers.

On January 24, 1907, Henri von Blarenberghe, whose father had died the previous year, stabbed and shot his mother, killing her and then himself. Because Henri had been an acquaintance of Proust's (in fact, the von Blarenberghes were distant relatives of the Prousts), the editor of the *Figaro* engaged Proust to write a response to the crime, hoping he could lend some specific insight. [61] The two were by no means close: Marcel and Henri and had only met several times in the houses of friends, and it was only after the death of von Blarenberghe's father that a correspondence had blossomed between them, letters "eloquent of filial affection"[62] that concerned themselves largely with the work of mourning. Acting as episto-pathologist, Proust cites the correspondence in its entirety to dissect the matricidal body, a corpse that circulates between sons.

Proust initiates the correspondence with von Blarenberghe after hearing of the death of his father, and in it, he animates the dead by ventriloquizing his mother's voice: "Though I have not turned my back on my own friends, I very much prefer to cultivate theirs, and the

[61] Tadié, 479.
[62] Proust, *Pleasures and Days and Other Writings,* 294.

letters which I write now are, for the most part, those I think they would have written, those they can no longer write.. I write, in their stead, letters of congratulation, letters, especially, of condolence, addressed to friends of theirs whom I scarcely know... It was to [von Blarenberghe] that I wrote, but in the name, so to speak, of my vanished parents rather than in my own."[63] Adopting the voice of the vanished, the name-of-the-mother now gone, Proust sends off a sympathy letter that speaks von Blarenberghe's language. Bouncing off this relative stranger are the strains of mother-love, a doubled-over palimpsest that exudes the maternal by infusing both subject and object with her memory and voice. Von Blarenberghe understands these sounds of silence, and replies in kind, admiring the "delicacy and sensibility on your part thus to convey to me a message from beyond the grave."[64] And so MP begins a cacophonous correspondence with van Blarenberghe, a man he barely knows, but with whom he feels a kinship rooted in filial devotion and loss, a link which resembles more than a little the "wireless telegraphy" which bound Proust to Proust-mère: "So closely linked are nervous temperaments with the furthest points

[63] Proust, 284.
[64] Proust, 295.

upon the earth's surface by bonds whose strength they must often wish was less compulsive."[65]

Webster's fourth definition of sympathy: "the correlation existing between bodies capable of communicating their vibrational energy to one another through some medium." The medium of correspondence acts here as a medium to summon the other via a lost parentage, and the voice accumulates in postal strains. Hear *symphony* in *sympathy*, palimpsests of identifications and cadences streaming out from the filial pen. Sympathy confuses who gives and who receives; here *who speaks* is bafflingly indeterminate. The essay enfolds letters within letters, subjects within subjects, layers voices over voices in proliferative enclosures that will come to define the posthumous letter as something one must guard against as one would a biohazard. In the *Search*, the narrator receives a posthumous letter from Charlus that is triply closeted, kept safe in three envelopes and held in a strong-box for a decade before it is received by Marcel. Marked by post-mortem multiplication, Albertine's posthumous letter splits into two pieces and arrives in separate envelopes after her death.[66]

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[65] Proust, 298.

[66] Proust writes, "The second was dated the following day. (In fact she must have written them both within a few minutes of one another, perhaps at the same time, and must have predated the first.)" Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol. V*, 644.

The von Blarenberghe drama, too, hinges on a posthumous letter from Henri to Proust. Marcel has put aside Henri's last letter, and on the very morning he is inspired to respond to it "within reach of [his] hand, waiting to be answered…" he picks up the Figaro to find the headline, "Drama of a Lunatic" above the news story of von Blarenberghe's parricide. The murder takes place In the lag between reading and responding to Henri's epistle, Henri has murdered his mother and killed himself: the final line of the letter reads, "I should like you to know how deeply I sympathize with you."[67]

Proust presents the following thesis, a theory on the nobility of parricide:

> I want to bring into the room of the crime pure...religious atmosphere of moral beauty [in which] this explosion of blood and madness could occur and bespatter without soiling. I want to bring into the room of the crime something of the breath of heaven, to show that what this newspaper paragraph recorded was precisely one of those Greek dramas, the performance of which was almost a sacred ceremony; that the poor parricide was no criminal brute, no moral leper beyond the pale of humanity, but a noble example, a tender and a loving son whom an ineluctable fate—or, let us say, pathological, and so speak the language of today—had driven to crime, and to its expiation, in a manner that should forever be illustrious.[68]

[67] Proust, *Pleasures and Days*, 298.
[68] Proust, 302.

Proust reads parricide as moral, beautiful, illustrious—a shocking, telling claim—then draws our attention to the "proof" of its nobility: von Blarenberghe's *handwriting*. While easily overshadowed by the bombast of infusing "blood and madness" with "the breath of heaven," handwriting's relation to the crime is at the very core of Proust's theory of the morally pure parricider: "Often, when a mind has been brought low, it is the main limbs of the tree, its top, that live on, when all the tangle of its lower branches has been eaten away by disease. In the present case, the spiritual core was left intact. How very much I should have liked to be able to make my readers realize the extreme delicacy, nay, more — the quite incredible firmness of the hand which much have been needed to produce such neat and exquisite calligraphy."[69] The hand that murders is the same hand that writes in firm, lilting strokes, and Proust is there to read it with requisite sympathy. He has already told us that understanding von Blarenberghe requires a like-minded sensibility, an interpretation as delicate as his handwriting; Proust's ear ventriloquizes the vanished voice, traces the bodies of the dead.

Proust falls short of convincing his audience that parricide is a noble performance, but in doing so, he

[69] Proust, 304.

furnishes us with the script of a haunted correspondence animated by a filial devotion strong enough to kill. "Filial Sentiments of a Parricide" ends up being less of an argument for the purity of the parricide than an exegesis of the straits of guilt and mourning, the sadomasochistic seam of maternal correspondence. We all, and especially the most devoted of sons, "kill the heart that loves us by reason of the cares we lay upon it, by reason of that uneasy tenderness that we inspire and keep forever stretched upon the rack. Could we but see in the beloved body the slow work of destruction that is the product of the painful tenderness which is the mainspring of its being...we should recoil before the horror of our lives, and seize the nearest gun. "[70]

[70] Proust, 304.

Part Two: Eminence

Boomer

Who was Elizabeth Bishop's mother? Few details are known about Gertrude Boomer Bishop, apart from the fact that she suffered a series of mental breakdowns after the death of her husband, and was institutionalized from 1916 until her death in 1934. To describe her, Bishop's biographer, Brett C. Millier, relies mostly on information gathered from Bishop's poems and prose pieces about her childhood ("In the Village," "First Death in Nova Scotia," and "The Country Mouse," particularly), pieces that do more to construct theories of trauma, memory, and loss than to provide us with portraiture. We long to know more about Gertrude Bishop, to glean some visceral hint as to what kind of woman she was, what her voice sounded like, her presence in a room. These kinds of facts elude us; as a result, absence, and the experience of elusivity and slippage, define her.

The most substantive sentence about Gertrude Boomer in Millier's biography states that she was "a complex and intelligent young woman and a talented ice skater."[71] Not much to go on, although the image of skating over the surface will prove to be a potent one in her daughter's work: tears, in particular, and their relationship to

[71] Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It,* 3.

surfaces, will become one of Bishop's most productive and volatile tropes. In poems like "The Man-Moth" and "Sestina", Bishop makes a study of both the tear ("tier") that slips and skates over surfaces and the tear ("tare") that ruptures them. The perfect word to schematize trauma's inscrutable houses, Bishop's "tears" are pregnant with both the liquid rush of cathartic mourning and the ripping apart of superficial continuity, a split-performance which, as it happens, also played itself out in her mother's body during her mental breakdown.

A brief narrative from *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop,* Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau's oral history of Bishop: "Gertrude suffered her first recorded mental attack in 1914, when Elizabeth was three. The following year Gertrude and Elizabeth went to live with the Boomers in Great Village, where Gertrude became uncontrollable… When Gertrude became violent in the spring of 1916, the Boomers committed her to the Nova Scotia Hospital in Dartmouth."[72] Unfortunately, no formal psychiatric diagnosis appears to have survived that includes any medical details as to what her "mental attacks" were all about. Most accounts of Gertrude's deterioration take the form of the timeline, lists of the dates she appeared and disappeared from Elizabeth's view. Facts of her body and mind are shadowy;

[72] Fountain and Brazeau, *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography,* 3.

dates displace the substance of trauma, attempt to repair an experience of rupture and discontinuity with an illusion of the linear. In this case, especially, the use of dates merely highlights the gaps between events that demarcate madness' absence of tenable information, and erase a body of evidence.

Only one lucid description of Gertrude's experience survives in the written statement prepared by her sister Grace as a part of the commitment papers. Elizabeth is not mentioned within its pages. Grace Boomer describes episodes of delusions and mania wherein Gertrude

> imagined she saw people she knew & that she was being watched as a criminal. There at times she would be greatly excited and talk about the war, equality of labor, Catholicism, being hanged, burnt as a witch or electrocuted. [She] has always been afraid someone was going to take her child away from her.
>
> All winter [1915-16], during her menstrual periods she was very much upset. [Her] memory is excellent [and she demonstrated no] defects in judgment, confusion or self-accusation until [recently]. Lately she complains of not hearing very well, nervous chills, and very weak spells. Now she imagines she is being given electricity or is being mesmerized and hypnotized and that all medicines given her contain poisons. At times [she] wonders why she has to suffer so, and there again thinks she is doing it for someone else."[73]

Correspondence had a hand in her madness: the final, violent episode which forced her family to commit Gertrude

[73] Fountain & Brazeau, 4.

was instigated by the receipt of a letter, something to do with the business affairs of her late husband. After receiving the letter, Gertrude tried to hang herself with a bed sheet, and "caught her mother [Elizabeth's grandmother] about the throat."[74] Not surprisingly, the letter has been lost, and its actual contents remain a mystery; the one thing that's clear is that Boomer Bishop fell prey to the darker side of postal rêvenance, the letter's ghostly return. An effect of the *unheimlich* and the *beyond* of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, such postal rêvenance "produces effects of ventriloquism without origin, without emission, and without addressee. It is only posted, the post in its "pure" state, a kind of mailman without destination. Tele—without telos…It no longer obeys the subject whom it persecutes with its return."[75] Possessed by postal demons, Gertrude no longer knows her own strength, nor can she control the effects teeming through her system, translations of the violence of the beyond. Her madness manifests as symptoms of a body whose circulatory systems are out-of-whack (chills, weak spells), or invaded by outside contaminants (electricity, poison). Before the letter arrives, the violence is somewhat contained within her own body (the Boomers did complain

[74] Fountain & Brazeau, 4.
[75] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 341-2.

about having to deal with her voice, “all the noise from her screaming”), but after, the fury of the “pure post” projects itself outwards, obeying neither subject nor object, throttling Mother and returning back to strangle herself. Case closed: Gertrude, sealed up in a straitjacket envelope, was shipped off to the loony bin, for good. After she was committed in the spring of 1916, even though her doctors believed she would recuperate, her mental health failed to improve. She remained in Nova Scotia Hospital for the next 18 years, until her death in 1934. Elizabeth was sent off to Boston, never to see her again.

A vexed relationship to passages defines Gertrude Boomer Bishop: two years after the death of her husband, she was unable to transition back into normal life, stuck stranded in madness’ corridor. Once institutionalized, she was denied any right of return — there was to be no trip back into a free and sane society, no return to motherhood. As a result, Elizabeth’s experience of the maternal took shape in and around the compromised passage, in a yin-yang of aporetic suspension and postal rêvenance. Derrida’s definition of the aporia fits nicely to the Bulmer Bishop strait, the field in which Elizabeth matured: “a matter of the nonpassage,” the aporetic is “the

experience of what happens and is fascinating in this nonpassage, paralyzing us in this separation in a way that is not necessarily negative: before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or the approach of the other as such."[76] Maurice Blanchot, in his *The Space of Literature*, attests that aporetic fascination is foundational to *any* maternal relation,[77] but in Bishop's case, the stakes were raised by her mother's actual absence, and by how her insanity, as a result of its invisibility and silence, masqueraded as death. Invisible, mad, and incarcerated across the border, Gertrude spent her days in a state of suspended animation, a madhouse version of the living dead. Indeed, throughout her childhood and adolescence, Elizabeth told classmates and friends that her mother *was* dead. In a letter written to her close friend Frani Blough, dated June 4, 1934, Bishop wrote, "I guess I should tell you that Mother died a week ago today. After eighteen years, of course, it is the happiest thing that could have happened." (One Art, 24) The announcement was

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[76] Derrida, *Aporias*, 12.

[77] "If our childhood fascinates us, this happens because childhood is the moment of fascination, is itself fascinated. And this golden age seems bathed in a light which is splendid because unrevealed. But it is only that this light is foreign to revelation, has nothing to reveal, is pure reflection, a ray which is still only the gleam of an image. Perhaps the force of the maternal figure receives its intensity from the very force of fascination, and one might say then, that if the mother exerts this fascinating attraction it is because, appearing when the child lives altogether in fascination's gaze, she concentrates in herself all the powers of enchantment. It is because the child is fascinated that the mother is fascinating, and that is also why all the impressions of early childhood have a kind of fixity which comes from fascination." Blanchot, *The Space of Literature,* 33.

the first time Blough had ever heard Bishop mention her mother's name. Frank Bidart writes that Elizabeth "never saw her mother in the hospital because her family didn't want her to, and by the time she was old enough, [she] was afraid to."[78] Criticism suggests that after her institutionalization, Gertrude's name was rarely even mentioned around Elizabeth: while this gaping omission was ostensibly performed to protect the daughter from further trauma, its denial not only of her mother's illness, but her very existence, must have done damage. Not only was there the deep, impenetrable shame of mental instability for Elizabeth to contend with, but the space left by her mother's absence was filled by the terror of unapproachable silence, the absent presence of non-knowledge.

Her silence sounded a lot like death, but reverberated differently, in the echo of a scream. During the last year before she was committed, "The Boomers did talk about not being able to control Gertrude and all the noise from her screaming," and Bishop traces her mother through the memory of her booming cries. In her story, "In the Village," "all the noise" of madness is crystallized in a silent, traumatic cry, and the memory of it reverberates in-between sound and silence, suspended over the town of her childhood:

[78] Fountain and Brazeau, 5.

> A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies…something darkening over the woods and waters as well as the sky. The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory — in the past, in the present, and those years between. It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came there to live, forever — not loud, just alive forever.[79]

The eternal, haunting scream of the story is first voiced during a fitting for the first dress the narrator's mother would wear "out of the black" of mourning, when the transition from black's absolute to a spectrum of color proves too much for her. From the transition between the worlds of the living and the dead, the scream emerges, from the folds of the skirt "she kept lifting…still unpinned and dragging on the floor around her, in her thin white hands."[80] Color's questions are too complicated for Mother to answer: she asks, "Is it a good shade for me? Is it too bright? I don't know. I haven't worn colors for so long now… How long?"[81] Unable to come out into color's spectrum, to deal with its chameleon vibrations that shift in hue and shade, she shuts down its machine with a blood-curdling scream. A paradoxical relationship to transitional states emerges. She is most at home in the gulf of mourning, the

[79] Bishop, *The Complete Prose*, 251.
[80] Bishop, 252.
[81] Bishop, 252.

shifty space between past and present, death's closet; oscillations of color and choice provoke sensory overload. The scream closes all circuits, opening up an otherworld of haunting and absence: after it sounds, "the child vanishes" along with the mother.

Bishop couples the sound of the maternal scream of with the clanging ring of the blacksmith's forge that also echoes throughout the village: the cry of maternal trauma is thus wedded to the "pure note" of the blacksmith, and of poetic craftsmanship. These two sounds join to form a chord that resonates in the body of the young narrator and forever changes her. As Andre Furlani has noted in "Elizabeth Bishop's Stories of Childhood: Writing the Disaster," there has been much critical ballyhoo over how to read the relation of clang to scream: how one interacts with the other, and what both have to do with the writing of poetry. As opposed to other arguments that try to simplify the relation of trauma to poetry by adopting a dialectic of one to other, Furlani's theory recognizes thirdness in lieu of simple substitutions: in parsing out the relation of poetic voice and craftsmanship to the traumatic cry, Furlani argues that, "like Blake's blacksmith, Bishop forges out of clang and scream a fearful symmetry… in no enduring sense is the scream subsumed by

the anvil. Their relation is perhaps more accurately one of parataxis, like two elements qualifying or glossing a fugitive third that both strive in contrary but related ways to articulate."[82] What Furlani calls "a fugitive third" is in fact the correspondence between clang and scream, between trauma and poetry. As we see reflected in Bishop's disdain for confessional poetry, explicit narration of traumatic experience was not something she considered appropriate. And yet, the echo of trauma, and of maternal loss, becomes the subject of inquiry not only in "In the Village" but in many of her poems ("In the Waiting Room," "Sestina," "The Man-Moth"). The "fugitive third" of the lost mother, and the correspondences she inspires, establish Bishop's poetic field.

Tropes of thirdness bleed out from the structural elements of Bishop's voluminous, voluptuous correspondence into her poetry: as I mentioned earlier, *North and South's* "The Man-Moth" describes an oneiric "third rail" that runs alongside the poem's hero during his nightly travels through the subway, "dreaming recurrent dreams." Fugitive correspondent, the rail "underlie[s] his rushing brain:"

> He does not dare look out the window,
> for the third rail, the unbroken draught of
> poison,

[82] Furlani, "Elizabeth Bishop's Stories of Childhood: Writing the Disaster," 157.

> runs there beside him. He regards it as a disease he has inherited the susceptibility to.[83]

"Poison" lacks specificity, leading us to wonder exactly what toxins the third rail contains. Is its poison venom, electricity, liquor, pharmaceuticals, smoke? Are the third rail's contents liquid, or gaseous? One thing that's certain, the draught houses an unstable element, something in eternal motion. Like Gertrude herself, its essence must be reined in, blocked out, contained. Unpredictable, contaminating motility is its most dangerous asset, which must be forced into obeying linear channels.

Once harnessed, its power becomes productive, making the dream-trains go. Bishop suggests that third-rail productivity powers writing, too: "draught's" homonymic relation to "drafts" of poems and prose makes the third rail over as a poetic allegory. The terror and power of the third rail align themselves with the unstable, rebellious elements that alternately propel, and are harnessed by, the writing process. Bishop, by alluding to disease and inheritance, suggests that the stuff of the third rail is the trauma-residue of madness, an inherited susceptibility. And yet, the plurality and motility of the third-rail's "poison" resists simple, cause-and-effect

[83] Bishop, *The Collected Poems*, 15.

interpretations of trauma's relation to writing. Its unpredictability refuses subject-object causality: moving, like so many of Bishop's landscapes, between liquid, solid, and atmospheric states, the stuff inside the rail only holds together because it travels in a potential state, paradoxically and eternally unbroken.

If the rail were to break, the poison, like secrets, would escape by seepage, or evaporation; hence its power, and the Man-Moth's fear of looking straight at it, as if just looking could break the safety glass. Bishop loves to look: David Kalstone notes that the Man-Moth was created from notebook observances Bishop made of a "deadened" woman on the subway, and optics are the anchoring trope of this poem, connecting vision to trauma, danger, productivity, and the curative powers of tears. Kalstone argues that the transformation of the "deadened woman" into the Man-Moth gleans from the figure "a glimpse of residual purity and spirit," and that the "observer's curiosity and effort is rewarded by extracted signs of life."[84] While the Man-Moth's spirit is haunted by the proximity of the third rail, and its terrifying yet necessary fuel, his tears actualize a purity that provides nourishment, "cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink."[85] As potent

[84] Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet,* 20.
[85] Bishop, *The Complete Poems,* 15.

as the draught of poison, the tear serves as an antidote, or at least a counterpoint, to the trauma-rail that courses unbroken beside him.

Before she is sent away for good, the narrator's mother's mysterious comings and goings from and to various hospitals as described in "In the Village" register as postal experiences: mother disappears, then returns, then disappears again. Finally, there is no return. The scream itself then steps in to fill the gap, a kind of trauma post card stranded between presence and non-return. Elizabeth keeps anticipating it, terrified, throughout the story. "We are waiting for a scream. But it is not screamed again, and the red sun sets in silence."(260) "Wait. Wait. No one is going to scream."(270) "And everything except the river holds its breath." Elsewhere, real postcards made out of paper stop up waiting's cracks. Elizabeth pores over a "big bundle" of postcards while her grandmother and aunt unpack her mother's mourning clothes.

> A big bundle of postcards. The curdled elastic around them breaks. I gather them together on the floor. The stamps have been torn off many of them. Some are plain, or photographs, but some have lines of metallic crystals on them—how beautiful! —silver, gold, red, and green, or all four mixed together, crumbling off, sticking in the lines on my palms. All the cards like this I

> spread on the floor to study…Some cards, instead of lines around the buildings, have words written in their skies with the same stuff, crumbling, dazzling and crumbling, raining down a little on little people who sometimes stand about below…Postcards come from another world, the world of the grandparents who send things, the world of sad brown perfume, and morning.[86]

When Bishop unpacks her mother's postcards, the elastic breaks; disintegration becomes her course of study, correspondence's dazzling reign. The sparkling, crumbling borderline of metallic crystals is equated with a language that ceases to hold fast but remains beautiful, entering into the atmosphere of the pictorial scene as weather. Language entrances us, a silvery ruin from another world — being-sent. Its other-worldliness is determined here by three elements: homophony in Elizabeth's confusion of the words, "mourning" and "morning," the memory-scent of the "sad perfume" that has leaked through her mother's things, and the elsewhereness of the postcards' cities of origin. Being-sent hinges on the strange: of the perfume, Bishop writes, "Oh marvelous scent, from somewhere else! It doesn't smell like that here; but there, somewhere, it does, still."[87] The postcards sold in the village store hold none of the entrancing qualities of her post-card's

[86] Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 255.
[87] Bishop, 255.

other world, “so unilluminating that they scarcely count. After all, one steps outside and immediately sees the same thing.”[88] Nothing lost, nothing gained: the gap between here and there, then and now is the requisite foundation for post-card fascination.

Bishop reminds us that being-sent leaves its metallic and gorgeous residue all over our hands, and that its dazzle emerges from homophony and fissure, cracks in language’s pavement. Her understanding of mourning, and of mother, is based on a fundamental misreading. When her grandmother says, “here’s a mourning hat,” or a “mourning coat,” she hears “morning,” and the mistake bleeds into the ink of her mother’s postcards, and the study she makes of them. The slippage sometimes manifests in flight, as in the fluttering of her mother’s handkerchiefs (“In bright sunlight, over breakfast tables, they flutter”) or in the animation of the crumbling border that, in its decay, refuses to stay still. The effect will reappear years later in “The Map,” where the vertigo of being-sent makes itself known in a landscape whose “names of seashore towns run out to sea, / the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains / — the printer here experiencing the same excitement as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.”[89]

[88] Bishop, 255.
[89] Bishop, 3.

Indeed, when David Kalstone reminds us that “Bishop was to remark that she always liked to *feel* exactly where she was on the map,"[90] we remember the postcard scene in “In the Village” as a correspondent primer, laying the groundwork for Bishop’s travels and poetic studies of the strange that pass between mourning and morning.

[90] Kalstone, *Becoming A Poet*, 22.

The Map

> *Does one pass through this aporia? Or is one immobilized before the threshold, to the point of having to turn around and seek out another way, the way without method or outlet of a* Holzweg *or a turning (*Kehre*) that could turn the aporia — all such possibilities of wandering? What we are apprehending here concerning what takes place also touches upon the event as that which arrives at the river's shore, approaches the shore, or passes the edge.*[91]

Bishop's maternal aporias find space to breathe in the time lag of correspondence, the inherent possibility of "non-return, of loss, embedded in the postmark";[92] an incident recounted in "In the Village" illustrates this postal pregnancy almost exactly. The narrator takes a care package addressed to her mother to the post office each week: "Every Monday afternoon I go past the blacksmith's shop with the package under my arm, hiding the address of the sanatorium with my arm and my other hand…The address of the sanatorium is in my grandmother's handwriting, in purple indelible pencil, on smoothed-out wrapping paper. It will never come off."[93] Grandmother's purple handwriting

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[91] Derrida, *Aporias*, 33.
[92] Derrida, *Archive Fever, 17.*
[93] Bishop, *The Collected Prose,* 272.

reminds us of Proust's transcendental *petit bleu*, stamped with violent bands, "printed circles apposed to it by the post office,"[94] bruises from the exterior world required to guide the package towards its destination. Violet is the color that passes seamlessly between inside and outside: the private pastime of Odette's Parma violets, and the mandala-like circles of the postmark. But while Proust's "stamps from the outside world" signify vitality and mutable, magical stuff, the purple address of "In the Village" symbolizes the containment of traffic between interior and exterior: the silence and immutability of the asylum. It marks a gulf, something other than life, in its arrest of writing's hand.

The village post office is a decaying old shack that "tilts a little," like Mr. Mealy's shop, and inside it looks as chewed as a horse's manger."[95] Amidst the decaying architecture of the P.O., the weekly ambulatory habit of the errand, and the pregnant waiting for the scream that hangs over the entire town, the purple indelible pencil (itself an apparent oxymoron) seems to stand out in boldface. Its absolute, iron-clad indelibility stands alone in the story as a monolith of permanence, surrounded as it is by Mother's decadent, crumbling postcard

[94] Proust, *The Way By Swann's*, 406.
[95] Bishop, 272.

collection, the shaky post office, and the evanescent voices of relatives that whisper behind closed doors. *It will never come off*, a parceled tattoo. (In Bishop's very first letter to Marianne Moore, she expresses an interest in tattooing, and asks if Moore shares her fancy.[96]) The purpled indelibility of the address— the gravity of its sentence — assures us, despite the question marks of the postal system, that the package will not be returned. Neither will its recipient.

The indelibility of Mother's address, the displacement, absence, and non-return embedded in the postmark, complicate not only our reading of Bishop's letters, but inevitably her poems as well, especially their questions of travel that, most often, deal with the erosion of foundations and of address. Not only the address of where one lives, but that from which one writes and speaks, the notion of address is allied in the work with sea change, ports of call, and alien, questionable landscapes. Usually, the apparent solidity and balance of these addresses fall apart under scrutiny. Poems such as "The Map" and "Arrival at Santos" deal with the foundations of a shoreline, and how one approaches such a boundaries; Derrida's writings on the nature of aporia suggest that such attentions point towards a negotiation of a maternal

[96] Bishop, *One Art*, 20.

aporetic that has everything to do with the motherland. Anne Stevenson has argued that, far from being traditional travel narratives, Bishop's travel poems "have much more to do with re-establishing the poet's own sense of place,"[97] an argument with which David Kalstone agrees. I would argue that, if anything, the fact of what re-establishing a sense of place means here may be a bit taken for granted. Bishop's attempts to establish address through letter-writing and poem-crafting live within the paradox that one can only feel at home when one is uprooted, and that one can only feel truly alive when experiencing that "uneasy heightening of sensation that is essential to travel."[98] Its intoxication may be the same as the centrifugal force of the turn away from aporetic suspension, falling off the round turning world.

One such study of the foundation that ultimately betrays itself is most directly undertaken in "The Map," whose land lies:

> 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?[99]

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[97] Kalstone, 22.
[98] Bishop, 108.
[99] Bishop, *The Complete Poems*, 3.

Land's falsehoods, colored green, take the form of shadows; the metaphor then doubles over, collapsing in on itself when "shallows" disputes shadow's reign. To further complicate matters, the slant rhyme and aural misprision of the two words resembles the work of shadowing, while they steal away the shadow's power to determine the water's depth. Adjectives ("shadowed" and "weeded" in lines 1 and 3) turn to nouns in their following lines, inexact repetitions that shift like tectonic plates against their former selves. While the rhyme of "edges" and "ledges" is fixed (as precipices from which words and ideas may drop, their boundaries are the only clear demarcations to be found), the stanza is powered by askew pairings, the weird rhyming of the same word against itself ("green" and "green" in lines 1 and 4, "under" and "under" in lines 5 and 8). These words shift with each rendering, uncannily twinned. According to the rule of law, the rhymes don't count. The only other true rhyme here—"shelf" and "itself"— underscores, on the one hand, language's precipice, and the other, the reflexivity to which Bishop is forced to return in her attempts to score the relation of land to sea. Her words, prone to betrayal, refer back only to shades of themselves. Tautologies abound in this motherland.

Fissures come along with them. Derrida describes a similar coastline in The *Post Card*, in a reverie on textual drift and the athetic that has always uncannily reminded me of "the Map":

> I have abused this word, it hardly satisfies me. *Drifting* designates too continuous a movement: or rather too undifferentiated, too homogenous a movement that appears to travel away without saccade from a supposed origin, from a shore, a border, a coast with an indivisible outline. Now the shore is divided in its very outline, and there are effects of anchoring, collapses of the coastline, strategies of approach and overflow, strictures of attachment or of mooring, places of reversion, strangulation, or *double bind.* These are constitutive of the very process of the athesis, and must be accounted for, if at least there is here something in such an event to be read and to be reckoned with.[100]

Supposed origins: in the shoreline speculations of "The Map's" first stanza, the narrator questions the primacy of land versus sea. Like the confusion of position and inheritance fostered by the postcard's recto/verso inversions, the relation of land and sea becomes a chicken-and-egg puzzle of which came first, which element grounds us. Is the substratum that ultimately determines the course of our travels fluid or unchanging? Are our foundations essentially liquid or solid? Getting to the bottom of the shoreline ends by questions that disorient us, and her queries convince us that we must at least entertain the

[100] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 261.

possibility that the origin from which we drift was only ever a fiction. Taking aim at drift's assumption — that what one drifts from, namely an origin, is indivisible, fixed, tenable — Derrida keys in on the strait of the map, and the stuff of her poetry. His reading of the divided shore, when applied to "The Map," is perhaps the most cogent analysis we have at our disposal, articulating as it does the textual effects of anchoring and collapse, strategies of approach and overflow, and incidences of reversion and double bind that characterize Bishop's sea and its shore: effects. They are remarkably similar to the effects of "In the Village's" violet postmark, tracing the double bind of institutionalization that immobilizes both mother and daughter on either side of the aporetic threshold. "Does one pass through this aporia? Or is one immobilized before the threshold, to the point of having to turn around and seek out another way… What we are apprehending here concerning what takes place also touches upon the event as that which arrives at the river's shore, approaches the shore, or passes the edge.[101] When Bishop asks if land, or ocean, is our support, she seeks another way to score the motherland; she wonders if a plumb-line exists.

[101] Derrida, *Aporias*, 33.

When, in "The Map," Bishop sketches out the relation of sea to shore, her somersaulting foundations reflected in slant rhyme signal that writing may be a strategy for negotiating the maternal threshold, and the aporias of absence. As early as 1934, Bishop describes the action of "tugging at the sea from under" as a writerly tactic, and the dredging of material as the key to crafting poetry. The ideal here is a spiritual poetry, how to bridge "the gap between the observed world and the unknown." She relates her strategy to Moore's work, and finds the two models somewhat at odds with each other. In the privacy of her notebooks, Bishop writes:

> It's a question of using the poet's proper material, with which he's equipped by nature, i.e., immediate intense physical reactions, a sense of metaphor and decoration in everything—to express something not of them—something, I suppose, spiritual. But it proceeds from the material, the material eaten out with acid, pulled down from underneath, made to perform and always kept in order, in its place…Miss Moore does this—but occasionally, I think, the super-material content of the poems is too easy for the material involved—it could have meant more.[102]

As in "The Map," the work of pulling down the material from underneath engages the maternal body; like the slant rhymes that people "The Map," I can't help but hear *maternal* echo in any discussion of *material*, especially

[102] Kalstone, 15.

when it deals with one's mother tongue. Perhaps all poems are a reordering of that body, revealing its material from the inside out, making it perform an imagined approximation of itself. It's even more interesting, then, that Bishop voices disapproval with Moore's work here. The proximity is significant: in the clandestine circularity of a journal entry, still quite young, and just at the beginning of her relationship with Moore, Bishop feels free to criticize Moore's maternal material, an event that will be quite rare in her career. She suggests that poetry should strike a rawer chord: while remaining wedded to order, and attentive to metaphor and decoration, "immediate intense physical reactions" should transform the material by burning away its worldliness from the inside. The violence of "the material eaten out with acid" gives one pause——writing's engagement with the maternal is cast as a necessarily caustic affair (don't all births involve a necessary violence?). One could get burned. Bishop keeps her distance, and refrains from explicitly calling her "Mother"; at the same time, in evaluating Moore's work in such close proximity to her quasi-manifesto of corrosion and poetic craftsmanship, she engages Moore's material as the master-text, and reveals her desire to burn through her pages.

Eminence (MM)

In the final paragraph of Bishop's memoir of Marianne Moore, "Efforts of Affection," the author bumps up against the insufficiencies of summary and conclusion, the traditional tools for wrapping up a piece of writing (in this case, a life). The end of the essay marks one of several closures to her correspondence with Moore — one ending occurs when Elizabeth signs the last letter she would write to Moore; another occurs at Moore's death, when the possibility of receiving another letter in her hand is laid to rest. By writing a memoir of Moore, EB opens up a secondary line of correspondence, letters of reminiscence, past-tense. It's no wonder, then, that she finds herself resisting the clean, simple ending, and straying from literary techniques that demand strict adherence to the linear. Refusing to come to a point and to finish Moore off for good, Bishop instead wanders off on a bookish rhapsody that begins where conclusions end, opening the impossible "point" out into the infinite repetitions of a letter. She meditations on Moore's monogram, twin Ms that stand in for the proper name, and displace cold, hard "understanding" for prismatic reverie and rhyme. Dialing M

for Moore, Bishop brings us to the very heart of being-sent's hallucinatory throb:

> I find it impossible to draw conclusions or even to summarize. When I try to, I become foolishly bemused. I have a sort of subliminal glimpse of the capital letter M multiplying. I am turning the pages of an illuminated manuscript and seeing that initial letter again and again: Marianne's monogram; mother; manners; morals; and I catch myself murmuring, "Manners and morals; manners as morals? Or is it morals as manners?" Since, like Alice, "in a dreamy sort of way," I can't answer either question, it doesn't much matter which way I put it; it seems to be making sense. [103]

Summary and conclusion's clean-and-jerk is a fool's errand. High on M, EB abandons the project of shutting herself and MM up in the easy ending for the dreamy pleasures of tripping out on the monogram. She ends up authoring its theory, a breeding, breathing thing that takes the form of multiplication and elliptical fugue. It writes itself, in an illuminated manuscript: as either a manuscript with illustrations, or a book that is actually lit from inside, throwing off a beatific aura, Moore's monogram appears as the index to an almost mystical experience, a paradoxical key. The letter-M opens up like a lotus flower whose alliterative petals fold under and over each other: *mother, manners, morals,* and Bishop, through the looking-glass, dreams up a theory of the

[103] Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 156.

maternal whose rhythms channel the PP's deferral of finitude, and echo the reverberations of the *pas au-dela*. Rooted in the uncanny, and operating, under the radar of the liminal, Moore's monogram is one serious twin.

Let's provisionally name its aura *Eminence*, like a fine perfume: a theory of Ms that breed. "Meaning" with a capital M loses its anchor, there. And yet, "it seems to be making sense": Bishop identifies a triangle of the three key elements of all things Moore, but the effect is less of a fixed figure than a mobile, kinetic sculpture whose relationality remains in question. The terms of *mother, manners, morals*, while foundational, remain out of the reach of a subject-predicate-object scenario. Not exactly circular reasoning, the monogram's method of making-sense allows for multiples to simultaneously breathe. It may be why Bishop leaves "meaning" out of her litany of alliterative em-words, opting instead for "sense" as an interpellative force. Instead of a signifying chain, eminence fosters a chord of tones struck together that vibrate off each other's echo, "the limitlessness of signifiance, which deterritorializes the sign."[104]

Displacing the logic of the proper name, the monogram re-works strategies of initialization. A typical, straight monogram, sister to the family crest, will invoke the

[104] Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 118.

anteriority of family trees and lineages; in Moore's case, the uncanniness of eminence overthrows the flowchart of genealogy, like the old joke of "Who's on first?" (Remember, in Moore's, as well as Bishop's, family, Father wasn't around). It's a correspondent effect witnessed in Derrida's *Post Card*: "one does not know what is in front or what is in back…reversibility unleashes itself, goes mad" in somersaults of recto and verso.[105] Derrida's study of the *envoi* investigates such questions of inheritance, specifically in the relation of teacher to student, and we wonder how the Bishop-Moore correspondence plays off of his theory of a master-disciple relationship whose names have been reversed. Of course, Derrida isn't dealing in matriarchal economies, but rather with *"Plato* getting an erection in *Socrates'* back...the insane hubris of his prick..." and we are, double-dealing, double-dipping into straddling theories to better gloss a relation that approaches master-disciple, but remains apart from its absolute rigor. It might help to refer to one of *The Post Card's* master-texts, Maurice Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation*, wherein papa Maurice lays out a roadmap to the master-disciple relation, "a certain anomaly affecting what one might call interrelational space:"

[105] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 13.

> The master represents a region of space and time that is absolutely other. This means that, by his presence, there is a dissymmetry in the relations of communication…the distance from student to master is not the same as the distance from master to student…there is a separation, a kind of abyss between the point occupied by the master, point A, and the point occupied by the disciple, point B…the presence of A introduces for B, but consequently also for A, a *relation of infinity* between all things, and above all in the very speech that assumes this relation.[106]

The distance between point A and point B is *not equal to* the distance between point B and point A; according to Blanchot, the master/disciple relation cannot be graphed by any linear means, but is rather "liable to open upon a fundamental rupture."[107] In Bishop's vision of the multiplying monogram, we eavesdrop on her experience of this infinite conversation, and a glimpse of a manuscript composed in "the very speech that assumes this relation." Read in this context, Moore is the master who invokes the spatiotemporality of absolute otherness. The postal correspondence between them, which was, especially in the first half of their relationship, a tutelary one, only intensifies the relation's dizzy spells. The dissymmetry of master/disciple that Blanchot articulates also speaks to the non-contemporaneity of postal schematics: "the relations of A to B will never be direct, symmetrical, or

[106] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation,* 5-6.
[107] Blanchot, 8.

reversible, will not form a whole, and will not take place in a same time; they will be, then, neither contemporaneous nor commensurable."[108] The master-disciple relation, like any postal correspondence, is based in non-contemporaneity, and the impossibility of simultaneity; what the master-disciple brings to the table, according to Blanchot, is a spatial dissymmetry that goes a step further to establish a seemingly impossible trompe-d'oeuil.

With her vision of the illuminated manuscript, Bishop taps into this relation of infinite replication and absolute otherness: in that her correspondence with Moore invokes both master-disciple and maternal economies, we wonder how Blanchot's take on these asymmetrical relations may dovetail with the maternal. The maternal relation may be seen as the offspring of a different kind of spatial anomaly, not one of the distance between two points, but of inside and outside, the mind-blowing predicament of one body enclosing another, nascent body. One body, almost complete, grows inside another, and becomes whole only once it emerges, and is severed from, Mom. Once the cord is cut, and only because of that breach, independent life begins, and from this "fundamental rupture," correspondence emerges as an absolute necessity. We suspect that an "index of curvature" relative to that of the master-

[108] Blanchot, 6.

disciple relation also governs maternal correspondence; its very relationality of differentiation depends on the breach of a contemporaneity that defies the linear from the get-go, based as it is in pregnancy's enclosure. After birth, the relation between mother and child will never again be "direct, symmetrical, or irreversible, will not form a whole, and will not take place in a same time," [109] to the same, pure extent as they did in the womb. Correspondence, by enacting its own trompe-l'oeuil of proximity based on distance, seeks to repair the fundamental rupture of birth. As such, it is *the* form in which the maternal and master-disciple relation may unfold, and play off of each other.

Remember that, in typography, the M is a unit of measure of a breach or a gap: the em-dash, the em-space. Moore's monogram twins this interval: abyssal, connective tissue. When Bishop "has a sort of subliminal glimpse of the capital letter M multiplying," [110] the breach manifests itself visually; a glimpse isn't sight, exactly, but its abbreviation, a flash of light. The monogram opens and closes, fast, revealing the essence of the in-between. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes calls such a flash

[109] Blanchot, 6.
[110] Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 156.

"the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance," [111] which is just another way of saying *fort-da*, of making Mother vanish and return with a quick yank of the linguistic chain. Turned on its side, MM resembles a Slinky-esque spring, *fort-da's* cord all wound up: infinite repetitions of Mother's appearance-as-disappearance, presence-as-absence, spring from its coil.

[111] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of The Text*, 10.

BORDEN (I): Going Postal

Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop were first introduced by Lizzie Borden's niece, Fanny. Fanny Borden, a librarian at Vassar, was a family friend of the Moores, and had known Marianne since she was a small girl. In "Efforts of Affection," Bishop describes Borden in detail for the reader because, as she says, "she seems like such an appropriate person to have introduced [her] to Marianne Moore."[112] *Fascinating.* Bishop leaves the interpretation of this stunner of a sentence to her reader, and so it is up to us to consider the ramifications of Fanny Borden's role as matchmaker to the Bishop/Moore correspondence, and how her parricidal legacy plays into the mother-of-all poetic introductions. The legend of matricide acts as a kind of harmonic that hovers above the chord of Moore-Borden-Bishop: just as in Proust, where matricide is deemed familial to an expression of filial piety, and elemental to postal correspondence, we are faced with the question, what currency does matricide have in the Bishop-Moore correspondence, and in the poetry created in its wake?

We know that every postcard, every address invokes a polysemous and rhetorical death: "the addressees are dead,

[112] Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 121.

the destination is death: no, not in the sense of S[ocrates] or p[lato]'s predication, according to which we would be destined to die, no, not in the sense in which to arrive at our destination, for us mortals, is to end by dying. No, the very idea of destination includes analytically the idea of death, like a predicate (p) included in the subject (S) of destination, the addressee or the addressor."[113] Addressing mother, then, must inherently stuff the envelope with the idea of matricide. Bishop's matricidal tendencies emerge in the negative space of address, as if, unable to send a letter to her mother, she must rhetorically kill her through refusing to speak about her, or by telling her friends her mother had died. By the time she reached Vassar, the silence of her mother's institutionalization had matured into a false truth of death, an ossified absence. Bishop's correspondence with Moore began on the cusp of Gertrude Bishop's rhetorical and actual deaths: Gertrude died on May 28, 1934, and Elizabeth's first letter to Marianne was dated May 19th. While it may be tempting to argue that Moore, as mother-figure, "filled the gap" left by Gertrude's death, the rhetorical deaths and ghosts embedded and exhumed by correspondence impel us to displace the mother-surrogate as a matrix of reading Bishop's relationship with Moore. To

[113] Derrida, *The Post Card,* 33.

begin with, Gertrude's death and absence was far from simple – how then, can we apply a simple, binary theory of replacement to absence's pluralisms? Correspondence relies on an epistemological field of thirdness that displaces surrogate thinking: as such, it is up to us to gloss the peacock's tail of roles played by Bishop and Moore in their correspondence, and how the maternal threads itself through, hovers over, or is buried under, their lines.

Bishop and Moore occupied opposite poles of filial experience, which may have something to do with their attraction to each other. Where Bishop's mother was missing in action, presumed dead, Moore's mother, Mary Warner Moore, lived with Marianne for the bulk of her adulthood, and played a seminal role in her domestic and professional life. There is a kind of symmetry to these two poles; in that the maternal acts as an especially potent anchor, and catalyst, to writing. In the case of Bishop, "anchor" may seem like a paradoxical term – Bishop, of all people, seems unusually *un*-tethered, to home, city, or country. But just as Moore was anchored by the continuity of her mother's presence, Bishop was placed and defined by her mother's vanishing, by the years she spent exiled, invisible, and silent. There was a continuity in her institutionalization, and absoluteness that must have

only been strengthened by her total inaccessibility to Bishop: this, terribly, anchored Elizabeth to presence-as-absence, disassociation in a way that is difficult to fully understand.

The more one meditates on the phrase, "Because Miss Borden seems such an appropriate person to have introduced me to Marianne Moore," the more perversely appropriate it seems, and yet, any attempt to reduce the "appropriateness" of Borden's current between Moore and Bishop slips devilishly out from under our grasp. Bishop turns playful when she recounts the story of Borden's link and facilitation to their friendship, slipping in that pesky, freaky word, *appropriate* to describe her seminal role. Some would argue that her refusal to elucidate the use of the word is a prime example of her reticence, but for this reader, Borden's appropriateness resonates as a shared understanding of unspeakable knowledge that feels deeply intimate, as if Elizabeth were looking us straight in the eye and nudging, "*You* know Marianne…" Bishop's sense of humor is overlooked too often; those who brand her with the scarlet letter of "reticence" just might not get the joke.

As if such a stage weren't dressed peculiarly enough for the scene of Bishop and Moore's first rendezvous, the book that sparked the correspondence wasn't even in the

Vassar library. Their story begins when Bishop, looking for a copy of Moore's *Observations*, comes up empty-handed. Bishop went in search of Borden, with whom physical contact was apparently rare: "once in a long while, in search of a book, one would be sent into Miss Borden's office, cave-like, shadowy, with books piled everywhere."[114] On this occasion, EB "got up her courage" to ask Borden why there was no copy of *Observations* in the library. Why was the book, and Moore by proxy, out of circulation? It seems that Borden was not a fan of Marianne's work: unfortunately, we don't know exactly why she didn't consider Moore's *Observations* worthy enough to merit a place in Vassar's poetic pantheon (perhaps her eye and ear were too eccentric for Fanny's taste). Curiouser still, while the Vassar library was without a copy, Borden had her own, private copy of *Observations*, complete with clippings of newspaper reviews of the book tucked in the back jacket. She lent this copy from her personal library out into Bishop's eager, wiser hands. Elizabeth later purchased her own copy from a second-hand bookseller outside of Macy's, on 34th street.

As a young Vassar coed, Bishop was clearly fascinated by Fanny Borden. The description offered in "Efforts of

[114] Bishop, 122.

Affection" exudes the zeal with which she observed and imagined her:

> …At college the rumor was that Lizzie Borden's lurid career had had a permanently subduing effect on Miss Fanny Borden's personality. She was extremely shy and reserved and spoke in such a soft voice it was hard to hear her at all. She was tall and thin; she always dressed in browns and grays, old-fashioned, muted, and distinguished-looking. She also rode a chainless bicycle. I remember watching her ride slowly up to the library, seated very high and straight on this curiosity…Once, after she had gone inside, I examined the bicycle, which was indeed chainless, to see if I could figure out how it worked. I couldn't.[115]

It's tough not to see certain shades of Moore's style in this portrait of Borden; while Moore's fashion sense may have been more sophisticated and ingenious than Borden's, both conjure images of the spinster, the bookish, odd girl out. Moore's eccentricities were a matter of writerly mechanics; Fanny's on the other hand, appeared to be a matter of locomotion, how she traveled from point A to point B. Her bicycle transcended the laws of physics: the mystery of its invisible chain drew Elizabeth to it in an attempt to figure out how Borden's vehicle worked, what made her go. Stand-in for the narrative flights of fancy that emerge from Borden's heritage, her mysterious bicycle steers us towards the myth of Lizzie Borden, and how a matricidal legacy sets its subjects in motion. Like the

[115] Bishop, 122.

bicycle's invisible chain, it is as if Borden's inheritance, the "undecipherable excess" of matricide, mysteriously propels her forward, keeping the exchange of books circulating in an orderly and timely fashion.

Borden's post as librarian is (we can only assume) a major element of her "appropriateness" as a matchmaker to Bishop and Moore. As we are in the territory of queer legacies here, a note should be made on the legacy of the librarian, the spinster whose life is spent organizing, reading, and guarding books, monitoring the rooms in which they are kept, and disciplining readers. The lending library, perennial home to alternative genealogies, acts as an orphanage for lost, bookish souls; it is the librarian's job to facilitate the matching up of these orphans with the appropriate literary masters to guide them along in their travels. In this way, lineages of authorship and readership are cultivated; by facilitating the open access to the family trees of literary history, bookish seeds are sown. Books are fostered like children, lent out to appropriate guardians; the librarian in fact parents both the reader and the read, molding and remolding the forms of both. Either way, literary lineage trumps that of biology: the spinsterly librarian forsakes the patriarchal imperative to produce appropriate heirs to safeguard and

similarly promulgate the rhizomatic bloodlines of Literature.

The curiosity of Fanny's chainless bicycle echoes such mysterious circulations that take place *within* the library, which, Derrida asserts, is just another "post, site of passage or of relay among others, stases, moments of or effects of *restance*."[116] Even before letters are exchanged between Bishop and Moore, we've entered into a postal economy: along with the books in Borden's library, residual effects of trauma continue to trade. *Restance*, the unspeakable, undecideable residue of literature and trauma both, is the surface tension that holds our postal story together, that makes Fanny's bicycle, Moore and Bishop's correspondence, go. And its relation *as remainder to* economies of exchange and identity ultimately determines their delivery routes.

It is perhaps *restance* as trauma-remainder — the Borden legacy, for example — that makes a life of literary exchange, of letters and of books so appealing, that makes the library a haven, safe refuge from crueler, solidified economies. As an economy that functions *without* currency, requiring cash only when the due date is breached, the library's walls institute a safe space outside of the strictures of capitalism. Funny, then, that, Moore and

[116] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 261

Bishop's first meeting took place in the mother of all libraries, the NYPL at 42nd street. While Marianne Moore usually preferred to meet admiring coeds interested in her work at Grand Central Station, presumably in order to make a quick getaway if possible, she and Elizabeth met for the first time on a bench outside the reading room at the New York Public Library. The symmetry of the two options — both posts, both stations of departure — was not lost on Bishop, whose literary life to follow would be devoted to poetry's questions of travel, and would define itself according to and against Moore's model in letters. Its model is more appropriate to the Borden legacy than one might think.

A life devoted to poetry offers a playing field in which one may appropriately sublimate traumatic cuts into one's body of work — the line break acting as an acceptable metric continuation of Borden's impulse to slice-and-dice. Avital Ronell, in her essay on Valerie Solanas, identifies the impulse as part of a larger "cutting machine" that ruptures, however momentarily, patriarchal economies:

> Most enemies, if they are women, are detained, tagged, put under house arrest, stung in ways that keep them working on the signifying chain gang of the patriarchal order, serving the Man. Valerie broke out momentarily…but her momentary flash opened the lens on what they always

> suspected, whether she was part of the girl gang of Ovid's *Heroides* or her name was Medusa, Medea, Antigone, Lizzie Borden, Lorena Bobbitt, Aileen Wuornos, Christine and Lea Papin, Solanas: A terrible cutting machine was set in gear.[117]

Marianne Moore was no stranger to the cutting machine of words and ideas. Its propellers, she knew, spun on a diet of grammar corrections and ideals, an always-fluctuating economy of determining excess and hacking it away. Snip snip snip went the scissors of her ear. The most notorious example of such brush-clearing came in the 1967 edition of her "complete" poems, which contained the now-famous epigram, "Omissions are not accidents." Moore left out many previously published works, and altered the structure of certain poems, some of which had been subject to years of revision.[118] The most drastic cut-backs were made to the definitive poem, "Poetry," which was reduced from 5 stanzas to three lines: "I, too, dislike it. / Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in / it after all, a place for the genuine." [119] Three lines were enough: the rest of it, Moore claimed, was padding. Contemptuous of excess word-baggage, Moore finds the genuine in cutting up, excising the fat from Poetry's body. By admitting contempt for poetry (and

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[117] Avital Ronell, "Cutting Remarks." *Artforum* 11.1 (Spring 2004), 32.
[118] Grace Schulman, *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, xx.
[119] Marianne Moore, *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore,* 36.

Poetry with a capital P), Moore admits contempt for the system that sustains her, the order of language that, for her, was always a maternal one. By hacking away dead language, she breathes air into works deemed lifeless, C.P.R. with a knife: Moore's editorial cuttings trace the arc of Lizzie Borden's axe towards poetic sublimity.

Department of Corrections

Take note: both Gertrude Boomer Bishop and Mary Warner Moore were, at one time, English teachers. Their daughters also spent some time teaching, Marianne Moore in her early years when she was just out of college, and Elizabeth Bishop in her later ones. Teaching was for them a necessity, a bread-winning enterprise whose importance was secondary to the work of a writing life. At the same time, pedagogies of grammar, rules of usage, and classroom discipline form the backbone of both Moore and Bishop's work. The grammar correction looms over and threads itself through their letters and their poetry; it would be wise to recognize its rule of law ("Neatness of finish! Neatness of finish!"[120]). The imperative of adhering to grammatical codes makes itself known in both Bishop and Moore's work as an entirely maternal affair, the sphere of influence of a woman of authority for whom propriety is traceable to the placement of a letter.

As Grace Schulman attests, Moore's eminence as a poet is inextricable from her "value-system" of morals and propriety: "her moral stature...is inseparable from the poetry's aesthetic triumph."[121] So too, is her metric system, a syllabics whose queerness is not simply

[120] Marianne Moore, "An Octopus," in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, 71.
[121] Moore, *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, xxix.

compatible with the assumptions ascribed to her values. Moore's work is the marriage of eccentricity and conservatism, both currents that run deep, and it is Mary Warner Moore, Marianne's mother, who makes such a marriage, and such excellence, possible. She is the ballast against which her propriety and queerness find their equilibrium, the weight against which both are measured. She is the schoolmarm against whom all exercises in grammar are checked. She is the third term that triangulates the couple.

Even after Mary Warner Moore stopped teaching English formally, she forever remained *the* keeper of grammatical codes for her children and, by extension, any writer who came into her orbit. One need only look towards the round-robin letters between Marianne, her brother Warner, and Mary Warner Moore during Marianne's young adulthood to get a glimpse of her significantly pedagogical bent. Correspondence with Mary, no matter how full of love, gossip, and jocularity it may have been, was a tutelary affair. The family's epistolary circle established a system of measurement where one was not only taught the proper codes of articulation and behavior, but where one learned to measure one's self against the highest possible codes of a grammar of being. Charles Molesworth, Moore's

biographer, writes that "intermixed with [Mary Warner Moore's] spiritual uplift and attention to mundane detail was a constant guidance in matters of personal behavior," of which grammar and language are of course an index. A story involving Marianne's brother, Warner, illustrates the connection well. In it, the epistolary functions as an epistemological proving ground:

> Mary Warner Moore had warned him, in the summer before college, not to adopt a pose of high self-regard. In the same letter which she tells him how to make his bed, she suggests that his behavior with young women amounted to secrecy, bordering on deception…His mother even provided Warner with a model letter in October of his first year, when, dissatisfied with his correspondence, she felt he needed to be told how to answer her queries and how best to relate his situation."[122]

In Mary's letters to Warner, a lesson on bed-making has implications that extend way past the mechanics of hospital corners. The task of making his bed is aligned with his dealings with women, romantic performances and deceptions that Mary disapproves of; she instructs him on the correct and incorrect way to behave. When she feels his knowledge and practice are lacking, she provides him with a model of correct performance, and it is this that separates her from the tired old stereotype of the nagging

[122] Molesworth, *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life*, 21

mother, and renders her a true grammarian, teacher to the end.

The apex of her instruction is reached in the *model letter* sent to Warner during his first year away from home. The industry standard for proper correspondence (most importantly, correspondence with Mom), the model letter is the ideal of self-expression towards which her children must consistently strive. As a bridge between internal and external worlds, the letter runs interference with Warner's self-regard (high though it may be); how he writes about his life when separated from Mary reflects how he lives it, how he makes his bed. In Mother's scheme of things, there is always a rule of thumb: correctness, and correction, is her department.

For the grammarian, the rules of language radiate out from the page into all aspects of life, becoming an ontology. The absolute law of grammar extends by its very nature into spheres of performance, expression and appearance: how one is perceived, and how one *thinks* she is perceived, by the rest of the world. Moore's biographer, Charles Molesworth, connects Marianne's perpetual self-consciousness to Mary Warner Moore's position as teacher in the same school Marianne attended: "It is only

speculation, but [Marianne's] lifelong habit of being self-conscious of her social presentation might be traced back to this situation."[123] The "situation" of having a publicly pedagogical mother results in over-attentiveness to the face Marianne wears to the rest of the world; the rules that apply to the words so carefully formed by her mouth apply as well to the coiffures and fashions that frame it. Sloppiness, in word or garment choice, was distinctly verboten in the Moore philosophy. Just think of the grammar of looking, and sounding like Marianne Moore: the sharp, black edges of her tricorne hat reflect the ethos of her syllabics, the eviction of any beat deemed superfluous. As usual, the disciplines of language fold over those of the body.

In Moore's case, poetic discipline and fashion choices——included a stress on how *clean* one appears——are especially imbricated. Bishop tells a story of the first time she ever met with a publisher to discuss her poetry: "I reported the next day by telephone and Marianne's first question was, 'What did you *wear*, Elizabeth?"[124] (Efforts, 133) Another anecdote, intended to illustrate Moore's talent for damning with faint praise "to an almost supersonic degree," also sheds light on the threads that

[123] Molesworth, 18.
[124] Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 133.

weave fashion and writing together according to the Moore's pattern of what one deems appropriate. The Moore code of silence is in effect, and as always, omissions are not accidents:

> She developed the strategy of damning with faint praise to an almost supersonic degree. One writer whom I rather disliked, and I suspect she did too, was praised several times for her "beautifully laundered shirtwaist." One day when I was meeting her in New York, she said she had just run into Djuna Barnes again, after many years, on the steps of the Public Library. I was curious and asked her what Djuna Barnes was "like." There was rather a long pause before Marianne said, thoughtfully, "Well…she looked very smart, and her shoes were *beautifully* polished."[125]

I want to resist the compulsion to argue that damning with faint praise is a maternal strategy——essentialist arguments can only defeat our purpose——and yet, Mother's motto of "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all" follows on the heels of a history of prohibited speech that has everything to do with being female. Damning with faint praise is the ultimate silent slam; by withholding the truth of what offends from the conversation, the technique hides a certain degree of cruelty under the mask of politesse. Not only does this silence empty out any value the praise may have held (honest, in its way, though the praise may be), the

[125] Bishop,143.

implication it leaves behind without saying a word appears to be more grave because it remains unspoken, and therefore unspeakable. As a strategy of inversion, the fact that the compliments Moore makes draw attention to the purity, cleanliness, and whiteness of the shirtwaist strengthen our assumption that what Moore objects to has something to do with vulgarity, dirty writing, a sloppy performance in either form or content. Fashion acts as a bypass of poetic criticism: praising the clean outfit of a fellow lady poet provides Moore a safety valve through which negativity is expelled, and unpleasantries clothed in a beautifully laundered blouse.

The attention Moore pays to Djuna Barnes' beautifully polished shoes is especially hilarious. While MM praises Barnes' early work (genuinely) in her letters, finding it "interesting", one can only image what Moore would have thought of her dark, voracious *Nightwood*, or the unabashedly bawdy *Ladies' Almanack* and its send-up of the sexual exploits of Left-Bank ladies. Barnes' prose, too dirty to be addressed, skids out into a tertiary discussion of Barnes' fashion sense, which was indeed impeccable. Even the word "smart" seems to offset the fleshliness of Barnes' prose with a sharpness that cuts off any mention of its largesse, or its lesbianism. To address what Djuna

Barnes was *really* like would be to open a can of worms that Moore would prefer not to examine, articulate, or address, at least vocally. (Moore had no problem criticizing other poets in print or in correspondence, as her stint as editrix of the *Dial* makes plain; faint praise evasiveness seems to be a matter of speech, not writing, of *saying something out loud*.) There would be no way to control such squirming creatures once the lid was off. Instead, she alludes to the perfectly polished shoe, the only element of Barnes' ontology that corresponds to Moore's own neatness of finish.

A needlework ritual shared by Marianne and Mary Warner sheds additional light on the marriage between the garment and the poem, in the means and ethic of construction and revision. Again, Bishop is our narrator and guide into the intimacies of "making-over" the outdated piece:

> Once, when I arrived at the Brooklyn apartment, Marianne and her mother were occupied with the old-fashioned bit of sewing called "making over." They were making a pair of drawers that Marianne had worn at Bryn Mawr in 1908 into a petticoat or slip. The drawers were a beautiful garment, fine white batiste, with very full legs that must have come to below the knee, edged with lace and set with rows of "insertion." These I didn't see again in their metamorphosed state, but I did see and was sometimes consulted about other such projects.[126]

[126] Bishop, 132-133

Responding to financial need, and a hatred of waste and idleness (perfectly good drawers gone unworn), the Moores use the closet as source material. "Making-over" may be first and foremost a technique of frugality, but it also has much to teach us about a philosophy of re-invention that wholly depends on the Moore's closet as a treasure-trove, a site of metamorphosis. As such, it speaks to Marianne's own closet mysteries, and the relationship of her silent sexuality to her poetry. Living with her mother, perennially uncoupled, Moore's sexuality remains secretive, hidden from public (and perhaps private) view; in a sense, the made-over petticoat is its reflection in fabric form, intimate apparel designed to be worn close to the body, delicately and laboriously worked-over. It's likely that such petticoats were the most beautiful pieces Marianne owned. Certainly, they were the most elaborate, if Bishop's anecdote is accurate. And there is something distinctly Moore-ean about the elaborate piece of underwear, the gorgeous, hand-crafted slip. As a bell-weather of propriety, it points towards the rows of embroidered insertion in her poetry, suggesting the undergarment-as-poem, or the even more tantalizing notion of the poem-as-undergarment. It speaks, as well, to

Moore's often radical revisions of her work; "making-over" translates into to the editorial strategy of which Marianne was especially fond.

To the reader, Moore's desires manifest as syntactic elaborations, fascinations, animal observations, crafted towards the eccentrically proper. The Moore paradox of how proper and eccentric find a common ground is founded on this closet drama, tied to the temporal conversion of the outdated piece into novelty item. It seems likely that whenever the Moores considered purchasing a new garment, the closet was consulted first: as a result, any new item in their wardrobe is linked to the closet in some way, casts a glance back towards the drawers of 1908, or the underwear of the nineteenth century. "Making-over" thus reflects the Moores' particular relationship not only the past, but to the contemporary, how they define the new and the now. Recycling the closet, and making-over intimates, summarizes the Moores' quixotic rendering of propriety and the contemporary, the means by which one establishes an eccentric code of the normal. Bishop, as Moore's younger friend and pupil, was a key link for her to the contemporary world, and she was often consulted when Marianne had a need to take the temperature of the outside world. Complications often ensued, as when Moore asks

Bishop(as she did several times over the years), "'E*liz*abeth, what do you have on under your dress?" We giggle when Marianne wonders what Bishop's got underneath her skirt, another moment when Marianne's grammar turns propriety inside out into a double-entendre, suggesting "the worst." Moore is, in fact, curious about the *number* of garments EB wears in comparison to herself and her mother; out-of-time again, she wonders, "'How much underwear do *you* wear?' I would enumerate my two or perhaps three undergarments, and Marianne would say, 'Well, I know that I [or, Mother and I] wear far too many."[127] By seeking a measure of the discrepancy between the layers of underwear required by 260 North Cumberland Street and those required by the rest of the world, Moore wonders about the secrets of the contemporary well-kept from the Moores, a fact which continues over time. Another intimate thread runs through this ongoing dialogue: the underwear conversation is a little secret that Marianne keeps from MWM. Marianne is conscious that her mother's spiderwebbing of propriety was excessive, outside of the norm, and although it's likely that she went on wearing "too many" items under her skirt, the question itself stages a little rebellion.

[127] Bishop, 133.

What was Elizabeth's part in this revisionist history? Consultant more than participant, she remained an observer, outside of the sewing circle yet tapped into its energies. Bishop understood the seriousness of the task at hand, the intensity to which the Moores applied themselves, and how at 260 North Cumberland, no element of life's work was unrelated. Plus, Elizabeth had learned about a disciplinary relationship to fashion and language way back in kindergarten, when she met her first English teacher, Miss Morash. Morash was a stern disciplinarian whose voice, like the scream of "In the Village," "had a certain fame in the village," and whose attitude struck fear into the heart of even the most obedient child. "Primer Class" documents Bishop's experience of learning her alphabet, and the discipline impressed upon her by Miss Morash (another MM), who lays down the law of the elements of style merely by standing there:

> To me she seemed very tall and stout, straight up and down, with a white starched shirtwaist, a dark straight skirt, and a tight, wide belt that she often pushed down, in front, with both hands. Everything, back and front, looked smooth and hard; maybe it was corsets. Miss Morash almost always carried her pointer. As she walked up and down the aisles, looking over shoulders at the scribblers or slates, rapping heads, or occasionally boxing an ear, she talked steadily, in a loud, clear voice. This voice had a certain fame in the village…Sometimes when my grandmother would tell me to stop shouting, or to speak more

> softly, she would add, "That Georgie!" I don't remember anything Miss Morash ever said.[128]

Morash's famous, contentless voice is a retrospective echo of Marianne Moore's own famous voice of a poetry for which "style really is substance": remember that Bishop doesn't remember anything Marianne Moore said, at their first meeting, either. A marker of poetic speech, the voice trumps its own language; in the case of Morash, the voice of discipline performs a similar feat, inculcating its listeners with amnesia. White, smooth, and starched flat, Miss Morash herself resembles a page, the disciplined body one must navigate to form words and sentences. Bishop places the description of her clean slate next to a scene of learning to write on a small black chalkboard, associating both with painful bodily rigors and the pleasures of words. She describes the pain of practicing handwriting the number 8 on the slate given by her grandmother: "the hardest part was to hit the bottom…and come up again, against the grain, that is, against the desire of one's painfully cramped fingers, and at the same time not make it a straight line, but a sort of upside down backwards S, and all this in *curves.*"[129] What does it mean to hit bottom, to identify the phrase with writing and

[128] Bishop, 7-8.
[129] Bishop, 5.

pedagogy? Bottoms guide this story; the pain of writing aligns itself with Teacher's hourglass figure, as Miss Morash's stout hips echo the bottom of the 8 Bishop draws. The 8 made the "worst noise on the slate," forcing Grandmother to send Elizabeth outside to work; Morash's famous voice, too, carried across town. How do these noises align with the maternal scream of "In the Village," the pitch that, alive forever, "would be the pitch of my village?"[130] Is that what hitting bottom sounds like: the "echo of a scream?" Fanny Borden's regime returns to mind, the filling out of her thin, librarian frame with the legacy of trauma and literature. Writing, for Bishop, seems inherently to contain this process of tracing trauma, repeatedly hitting bottom only to emerge to the surface once again. Hitting bottom: Bishop drank, and knew well the endless cycle (a figure eight?) of trying to stay sober, only to return once again to drinking. She understood the pain and satisfaction of tracing and repeating a form, a letter, a cycle.

Writing establishes itself in this dance: curve against line, Miss Morash's straight skirt against her stout hips. And from the beginning of Bishop's writing life, a staunch woman bearing some resemblance to Mother is responsible for introducing each new, pleasure-painful

[130] Bishop, 251.

step: first her grandmother, who teaches her the alphabet, providing her with slate and chalk and the order to practice, then Miss Morash, who, while prone to "rapping heads, or occasionally boxing an ear," wasn't entirely without compassion. Bishop tells the story of throwing herself on the mercy of Morash's skirts, upset over being late to class:

> I ran into the classroom and threw myself, howling, against Miss Morash's upright form…I clutched the teacher's long, stiff skirt and sobbed…Then she tried to calm me. She said in a very kindly way, not at all in her usual penetrating voice, that being only a few minutes late wasn't really worth tears, that everything was quite all right, and I must go into the classroom now and join in the usual morning songs. She wiped off my face with a folded, white handkerchief she kept tucked in her belt, patted my head, and even kissed me two or three times. I was overcome by all this, almost to the point of crying all over again, but keeping my eyes fixed firmly on her two large, impersonal, flour-white shoes, I managed not to give way."[131]

For Bishop, to be a student of writing, and later, a budding poet, often meant hitting bottom and coming up against the grain, against one's own desire; to aid in the struggle, she needed a fierce and compassionate guide, a Miss M to lead her through writing's field. Her early training with Miss Morash set an appropriate stage for Miss

[131] Bishop, 11.

Moore's entrance in 1934, when Bishop first makes her acquaintance as both an aspiring writer and an avid fan. With Moore, the voice of poetic speech and the voice of discipline found a perfect marriage, and Elizabeth's ear was already well primed for its register. There was no stauncher lady of letters than Miss Moore, no poet for whom word-choice was imbued with moral and ethical standards as well as aesthetic values. She inherited these standards from her mother, Mary Warner Moore, whose "manner toward Marianne was that of a kindly, self-controlled parent who felt that she had to take a firm line, that her daughter might be given to flightiness or —an equal sin, in her eyes — mistakes in grammar."[132]

In Moore's mentorship of and correspondence with Bishop, the North Star of instruction was not, or not only, Marianne; for questions of style, the compass of appropriate and effectual verse pointed firmly towards Mary Warner Moore. A letter addressed to Marianne was implicitly addressed to Mother as well; one get the sense that she was an auditor of most every piece of writing that passed through the Moore's mail slot. In Moore's letters, Mary Warner Moore's background oratory determines an authority of law that Marianne sometimes playfully chides,

[132] Bishop, 129.

but usually heeds. The effect often resembles a parlor version of the great and powerful Oz, except for the fact that Mary Warner is no joke. Her voice, while occasionally appearing in a post-script or quoted by Marianne in a penultimate paragraph, is sensed as a low hum in the background of Moore's prose, "the inexhaustible character of the murmur" of poetic speech.[133] Its relation to Moore's own poetic voice (and as a result, to Bishop's work) is of primary importance. Bishop describes Mary Warner Moore's voice with acuity, zoning in on its tonic foundations to Moore's own:

> Mrs. Moore had been an English teacher at a girls' school and spoke very slowly in "Johnsonian sentences." Bishop found her extreme precision enviable and though she could detect echoes of Marianne's own style in it: "the use of double or triple negatives, the lighter and wittier ironies — Mrs. Moore had provided a sort of *ground bass* for them." In letters to the two women she took care to point out some of the effects. She could hear Mrs. Moore saying the last sentence of "The Wood-Weasel." And "Propriety" has the effect of a dialogue, and "I think I hear a maternal note" at the end."[134] (italics mine)

The metaphor of Mrs. Moore's voice as "a sort of ground bass" to Marianne's poetry is profound, suggesting that Moore's presence was not only a necessary anchor to

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[133] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation,* 9.
[134] Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet,* 8.

Moore's art but a darker side to MM's intoxicating turns of phrase. The seriousness of her voice is exacerbated by the fact that *we can't hear it*: unpublished, unrecorded, and unknown to at least this reader's ear, its authority and depth seem limitless. At the same time, without our necessary attentions to its ground in Moore's poetry, warp to the weft of its fabric, it could disappear completely. We can only speculate about its cadences, its now entirely arcane and exhaustively precise grammatical constructions, and heed Bishop's description of the stresses and drops of her voice to provide an approximation of its sound. Gravity appears to be its central characteristic, to such a unique extent that Bishop must go underground to hear and describe it:

> The atmosphere of 260 Cumberland Street [the Moore's home in Brooklyn] was of course "old fashioned," but even more, otherworldly—as if one were living in a diving bell from a different world, let down through the crass atmosphere of the twentieth century…under all the subaqueous pressure at 260 Cumberland Street—admonitions, reserves, principles, simple stoicism—Marianne rose triumphant, or rather her voice did, in a lively, unceasing jet of shining bubbles.[135]

Bishop uses underwater metaphors to describe the liquid atmospheres of 260 North Cumberland Street, extending the image of Mary Warner Moore's "ground bass"

[135] Bishop, *The Collected Prose,* 137.

out into the texture of the environment in which she lived and reigned. As a result, Mary Warner Moore is significantly identified with her home address, which Bishop likes to repeat as often as possible. It pleases her, the location of the motherly ballast that allows for MM's voice to rise, the pressurized undercurrent of all poetic speech. One's mind turns to Bishop's poem, "The Man-Moth," whose trips above and below the surface jibe with her description of visiting 260 Cumberland Street, after which "one was apt to have a slight case of mental or moral bends." As the figure that travels between the worlds of the under- and above-ground, the Man-Moth (yet another addition to our kaleidoscopic gallery of MMs), is the quintessence of liminality and relay that emerges from cracks in the pavement. His name was inspired by a newspaper misprint — "man-moth" for "mammoth" — and I often misread "man-mother" for "man-moth," thinking about his eye, "all dark pupil, / an entire night itself," from which "one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips."[136] Is Bishop the dark pupil to the house of Moore? As Moore's pupil, Bishop perhaps sees a darker side than what the Moores would deem appropriate: arguably, Bishop kept from them her lesbianism, her drinking, her depression…or perhaps very little escaped the Moore's

[136] Bishop, "The Man-Moth," in *The Collected Poems*, 15.

collective eye. Perhaps we should read the dark pupil as the eye of the Moores, which engulfed everything in its field of vision. I imagine the dark pupil as encompassing both the expanding and contracting optic that Bishop honed in the craftwork of her poems, and the "habit of scrutiny," that distinguished the Moores. David Kalstone writes, "Bishop's commitment to the *illusion* of physical presence — her hallmark — was hard won… While [she] was commenting in poems and stories on her own sense of absence or half-presence in the world, she was in fact involving herself with a poet who was *all eye, all presence.*" (22) The dark pupil of the Man-Mother seems at once to represent the presence-as-absence of MWM's ground bass, the diving bell of fastidiousness, and the learning curve to which Bishop would soon become accustomed. 260 Cumberland Street doubled as a linguistic department of corrections for every line of poetry that passed through its mail slot; the address, double for Mother's body, signified for Bishop "a vanished sustaining maternal world transposed into another key; it nourished [her] writing life, yet could be contradicted with impunity."[137]

In the canon of Mary Warner Moore's laws of composition, suggestion is championed, and the explicit

[137] Kalstone, *Becoming A Poet*, 5.

deemed taboo. The broad strokes of this operating system affects not only how we read Bishop's poems, and the means by which they pass through the Moore's crucible, but how we read Moore's work, too; her voice, diction, vocabulary, and meter all serve to curtail the explicit while retaining a clarity and precision of language. In Moore's prose, especially, complex circuitries of sentence-making seem to be direct responses to MWM's credo of suggestion, armies fighting the good fight against plain, bald "statement." Moore passes the taboo on to Bishop in a letter dated December 17, 1936, in which she encloses a return copy of "The Sea and its Shore" with margin corrections and two pages of commentary. She writes,

> I should say, in candor, that most of the penciled interpolations on these two pages of suggestions were "contributed," and that Mother is a rabid advocate of the power of suggestion versus statement, and wishes you need not say just at the end that he was drunk. [138]

The suggestiveness of the quotation marks surrounding "contributed" are enough to imply Mother's critical presence; Marianne doesn't even need to say outright whose hand was responsible for the penciled commentary. Mother is the true author of poetic feedback, and the diction Marianne uses in attributing responsibility reflects

[138] Moore, *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, 372.

“suggestion versus statement”s" cardinal rule. Mother’s omnipresence is a given; she need only be gestured toward, a technique which applies to creative writing, as well. The coarseness of denotation displeases the cultured ear.

MWM is rabid with the red pen — plain, bald statements make her wild. “Statement” is a peskily broad term, encompassing not only explicitness in terms of the vulgar, but denotation. It’s not exactly clear if MWM objects to the explicit mention of drunkenness in “The Sea and its Shore”, or the superfluity of mentioning what the reader already understands. “Suggestion versus statement” sounds a lot like English Composition 101’s mantra of “show, don’t tell,” a basic technique that, in fact, has nothing to do with propriety, only good descriptive language, something the Moores carried in abundance. Bishop shared the gift, and was recognized as a descriptive maven not only in poems but also in letters, which afforded her a space to play with verbal illustration on macroscopic and microscopic levels. Describing the grandeur of one’s surroundings, or the delicacy of tiny oddities of nature, formed a bond between Bishop and Moore, and became a structural element of their correspondence — many, if not most, of Bishop’s letters to Moore include a section in the second half which describes an object or incident which

struck her fancy, usually something on a small scale upon which description elaborates and expands. The task was not always an easy, or pleasurable one, however, and both poets sometimes felt that the imperative to describe was burdensome. In a letter to Frani Blough on August 27, 1935 (dated in French, written from Douarnenez). EB lets off some steam regarding the work: "You don't know what a blessing it is to have you be one, *the* one, friend who has been here, so I don't feel dutybound to — or maybe, I can't possibly let myself — DESCRIBE everything."[139] Again, the imperative of suggestion versus statement rears its head, along with the burden of the extraordinary. The precision of the Moore's thematic imperative went hand in hand with an exacting adherence to a weighty code of excellence: the requirement that every word be exquisite, perfect, appropriate, alive.

When Bishop submits her poetry to the critical school of 260 North Cumberland Street, she knows the generosity with which the Moores' strictures of appropriate behavior are applied. All the same, the "admonitions, reserves, and principles" by which the Moores lived, wrote, and blue-penciled her poems could be not only stifling, but also difficult to anticipate, precisely because they were often

[139] Bishop, *One Art,* 34.

out-of-sync with the contemporary, and the outside world. The Moore system of governance, especially as the years passed, became more and more insular in its codes and proprieties, increasingly particular to Marianne and Mary Warner's relationship. The coil of intimacy formed there was fashioned from words and ideas, and the laws that applied to them were of a logic that an outsider could never completely understand. No one knows what went on at 260 North Cumberland when no one else was around; the conversations, rules and behaviors shared only between mother and daughter in their domestic life together remain entirely private. We overhear bits and pieces of eavesdropped conversations between the two in Marianne's letters to Elizabeth, in which Mary Warner Moore's voice appears in the background both as an audible contributor and a constant hum, but these dialogues are performances in their own right. Fit for public consumption, their appearances underscore how little we really know about the conversations voiced in private. Without question, the codes of literary conduct of which Moore later became famous were established there, in the fold of domestic intimacy between mother and daughter.

A major, critical flare-up occurs in 1940, when Bishop sends the Moores her poem, "Roosters," hoping for some useful feedback. She gets more than she bargained for: "Roosters" turns 260 North Cumberland Street upside-down in an "immediate flurry of criticism,"[140] and the ensuing critique marks a major turning point in the correspondence between Bishop and Moore. Their master/apprentice relationship essentially comes to a close after the critical rebellions "Roosters" inspires, and a rift opens between the poets that will never be fully repaired. The Moores' objections to the poem (at least the objections voiced explicitly) fall under the heading of vulgarity in word-choice, although it is clear that the urgency of their need to correct Bishop's perceived wrongs, and the degree to which they transformed the poem, suggest that something deeper was driving their rush to judgment. Upon reading "Roosters," Marianne and Mary Warner immediately sat down at the kitchen table to write their own revision, staying up later than usual to complete it, in order to send it in the next day's mail (Bishop receives it in the next postal delivery). In the process, they not only correct language they deem too crude or vulgar, but also rename the poem, and write according to a different meter that ignores

[140] Kalstone, 79.

Bishop's original form of triple-rhymed stanzas entirely.[141] Forgoing sleep in order to correct the rude word, the Moore seemed possessed by a zeal unmatched by the poem's supposed trespasses. "Roosters" is not a dirty, or even a crass, poem: Bishop's only real "war poem," it uses language to delineate war's cruelties, language which MM and MWM feel the need to erase. In their version,

> Adjectives and phrases that are emphatically violent or crude are canceled: the rooster's "cruel feet" and "stupid eyes"; "torn out, bloodied feathers." "A rooster gloats / over our beds" in Bishop's version is, in Moore's discharged of some of its private, erotic burden and joined to a more neutral line before it: "a senseless order floats / across fastidious beds." Moore even turns the tin rooster that tops a church into a gold one. The rewriting insistently purges the poem of a Bishop that Moore clearly doesn't recognize.[142]

Fastidious beds, indeed: even the suggestion of erotics in the most veiled terms is too much: too much that Bishop might use the possessive "our" in front of beds, that she might possess a sexuality, and trace it. In fact, Bishop is commonly criticized for *not* articulating her sexuality in poetry or prose, a silence that is not unrelated to the Moore's own bafflingly complex closets, so intricately constructed that it's impossible to even guess

[141] Kalstone, 79.
[142] Kalstone, 81.

at what's inside them. The wonder of the poetry that emerges from them almost renders the question obsolete, and the closet invisible — the urgent terror behind it rears its head in moments of criticism, like this one.

Moore, while an active participant, seems a bit caught in the fray, and clearly displays anxiety about her commentary. She signs the letter accompanying the revision, "Agitatedly, dear Elizabeth," and seals the letter with a teacherly silver star to buffet the enclosed blows. Perhaps she senses she has crossed a line. Why does "Roosters" provoke such an urgent response? Time is of the essence, but paradoxically, so many of the Moore's issues with "Roosters" seem out-of-sync with the contemporary. The Moores are unable to recognize Bishop in part because they are seemingly unable, or unwilling, to recognize contemporary speech. This is not entirely an act of refusal, of consciously rejecting the aberrant word. It comes down to naming, once again: finding "Roosters" too harsh a title, the Moores rename the poem "The Cock." Clearly, they haven't a clue as to "cock's" phallic intentions, a true vulgarity that would make their heads spin. "Cock" is way out of their league; the Moore's can't recognize, or perhaps even fathom, the trespasses of such a word.

And so, they "purge the poem of a Bishop that [the Moores] clearly [do not] recognize" – "The Cock" neatly regurgitates and flushes the strange Bishop, the poet the Moores cannot exactly see. What they can't visualize has something to do with the vulgar——Bishop's abandonment of Mary Warner's compositional credo that champions "suggestion over statement"——but it also has to do with Bishop coming into her own as a poet. Kalstone writes that "Roosters" was the most ambitious poem Bishop had written at that time, and it is perhaps this surge of ambition and individualistic drive that contributes to the Moore's critical frenzy. The irony of renaming Bishop's poem "The Cock" is even more intense in this context, as it calls out her newly phallic thirdness, her insistence that she call the shots. Bishop refuses to back down, and uses a vocabulary that denotes a violence the Moores have not yet seen, a vitality and baldness with which they are obviously uncomfortable. And yet, their critical performance effects a parallel violence on the poem itself. The attentions paid to the offensive word——"water-closet," for example, takes up ample space in the ensuing epistolary arguments between MM and EB——masks an underlying drive to reorganize the poem's very structure. When MM and MWM attack the body of Bishop's war poem, lines of battle are drawn and

crossed: they effectively destroy “Roosters’” body, and give birth to something they can recognize: a poem in the Moore family, with Elizabeth’s features noticeably lacking. Their corrective surgery, a making over of the poem’s very form, scheme, and name, breaches a boundary that hearkens back to countless mother-daughter fixes: the battle over where one body ends, and another begins.

Dedication (Gift)

> A giving which gives only its gift, but in the giving holds itself back and withdraws, such a giving we call *sending*. According to the meaning of giving which is to be thought in this way, Being — that which It gives — is what is sent. Each of its transformations remains destined in this manner. What is historical in the history of Being is determined by what is sent forth in destining, not by an indeterminately thought up occurrence. The history of Being means destiny of Being in whose *sendings* both the sending and the It which sends forth hold back with their self-manifestation.[143]

When Heidegger speaks of the "determination of Being as presencing which is binding for thinking," or that "Being—that which It gives — is what is sent," he is not speaking of mothers, but of a history of philosophy from which the maternal is largely, if not entirely absent. And yet, an often overlooked paean to Mary Warner Moore by Marianne points to the primacy of the maternal to being-sent, "a giving which gives only its gift, but in the giving holds itself back and withdraws…a giving we call sending," and to a maternal currency whose substance is responsible for the movement of thought. In the postscript to her *Selected Poems* of 1935 Marianne credits her mother with the ingenuity of her turns of phrase and the current of her thought-process: "Dedications imply giving, and we

[143] Heidegger, *On Time and Being,* p. 8-9, italics added.

do not care to make a gift of what is insufficient; but in my immediate family there is one who 'thinks in a particular way'; and I should like to add that where there is an effect of thought or pith in these pages, the thinking and often the actual phrases are hers."[144] Mother is not only responsible for Moore's vocabulary, but, it seems, for *thought itself*: Marianne in effect turns over authorship to her mother, disavowing her own "way of thinking" as the currency that defines her, illuminates and sets her apart. Mother-thought is the electricity that flows through the daughter's work, a kinetically charged version of the motherland, a homing device of poetry and intellectualism. Mary Warner, and thus the maternal, is announced as the voltage that powers language, the origin of a thinking that makes sense. Avital Ronell, in *The Telephone Book*, uses telephonic connections to illustrate this umbilical relation to thought and thinking, and reminds us that that which gives may taketh away: she who provides the current also holds the power to interrupt the circuit. Ronell calls it putting a subject on hold: "The force that puts the other on hold is 'die Mutter,' instituting a maternalizing call, the beginning of all heeding that we shall later come to identify with Ma Bell:

[144] Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 142.

'You just wait!' — obedience and listening — the kind of invisible line to thinking that the mother wires."[145]

Moore heeds the call, gives credit where credit is due. A sort of apology is not far behind: when Moore displaces the well-appointed dedication for the quieter, gentler post-script, she not only reminds us that any book is a letter to its audience, to Mom, but points to a filament of shame that glows through the work. The dedication to Mother is rejected on grounds of insufficiency ("we do not care to make a gift of what is insufficient"); the work, for some reason, is deemed not good enough to give to Mother. Still, Marianne can't leave it at that; the articulation of insufficiency is part and parcel of the ersatz dedication, which can only be "given" outside the confines of the actual work. This announcement of insufficiency around and about gift-giving will be repeated ad infinitum in the letters passed between Bishop and Moore, in the context both of writing and actual trinkets and objects, traceable to an originary maternal guilt and anxiety surrounding being: being-born, being-sent. Nothing, it seems, is ever good enough. Gift-anxiety also emerges as a problem of pleasure and propriety, as Bishop elaborates in "Efforts of Affection": "The Moore *chinoiserie* of manners made giving presents

[145] Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, 27.

complicated…One never knew what would succeed, but one learned that if a gift did not succeed it would be given back, unobtrusively, but somehow or other, a year or two later,"[146] return to sender. The postal is imbricated in this scenario, not only as a means of delivery for gift-exchange, but as a structuring logic and syntax of guilt, doubt, and lack, of ambivalent targets to which arrows always seem, at least to the sender, to fall short.

It was tough to know exactly what Marianne would like, what would please her; it was tough to give names to her pleasure, locate targets in field of desire. Her sexuality is a mystery, apart from the erotic material and residue of her poetry, which is substantial: the difficulty of pinpointing what turns her on is paralleled by the uniqueness of her poetic predilections, and while it is dangerous to argue that her poetics *were* in fact, her sexuality, it is clear that the bulk of her libidinal investments are to be found in her poetic architectures. They constitute a wholly individual, uncodifiable, queer set of pleasures and rules; her metric choices often obey an untraceable logic, particular only to her own senses. Bishop writes that she had "made up a completely unscientific theory that Marianne was possessed of a unique, involuntary sense of rhythm, therefore of meter,

[146] Bishop, 134.

quite unlike anyone else's. She looked like no one else; she talked like no one else; her poems showed a mind not much like anyone else's;" why not argue that "Marianne, from birth, physically, had been set going to a different rhythm?"[147] Its uniqueness is matched only by her inexhaustible, and unerringly precise, vocabulary. Her queer attunements to the delicacies of language, a *chinoiserie* of verse, are such that no one could ever choose a word for her. It's not surprising that choosing a gift for her to enjoy could be a daunting task, or that the gifts she received would often become subjects of poetic scrutiny.

Bishop's gifts to Moore tended towards the exotic, and were usually examples of local flora and fauna, specialties of Florida or Brazil. A short list includes swan feathers, shells, snake fangs, alligator teeth, sugar apples, papaya elixir, eggs, cake, and mangoes. Of the sugar-apples, she says that they are "the queerest, most Chinese, blue-gray-green fruit" she has ever seen; of the cake, "EAT THE CAKE."[148] The Moores needed prodding, exhibiting as they did a resistance to eating the treats sent by Bishop. It wasn't, or wasn't only, a question of saying no to dessert; it seems it was difficult to get the ladies to partake of

[147] Bishop, *The Collected Prose,* 139-140.
[148] Bishop, *One Art,* 103, 110.

any of the queer fruit of Bishop's gifts, at least by mouth. It wasn't that Bishop's edible gifts weren't cherished, enjoyed, or even exhausted by the two women, only that they were not digested in the traditional sense of the word. Sugar-apples and elixirs were instead hoarded, shared, passed around, scrutinized, mulled over, and fantasized upon. In 1942, Moore writes:

> Although the papaya is now eaten, all that you say is of absorbing interest. I could not get Mother to eat *more than a sliver*, so I divided (seeds), fruit and stem with the Padleys, our neighbors…It is most wonderful of you, Elizabeth, to offer to send us bottled juice, but we are still hoarding the special orange papaya elixir, for a worthy occasion and I am in very bad repute with Mother anyhow, for pursuing with childish curiosity as I do, every Robinson Crusoe-like thing the torrid zone can produce.[149]

The oral is sublimated by the visual: by "childish curiosity," Moore is referring to her perusal of the papaya seeds with a magnifying glass, "first of all by the distribution and amethyst color, and then by the necks, set so they stood up like seed-pearls on stiff silk. Fruit's seedlings connect to fashion, sumptuous silks, the tall necks of elegant ladies, and jewels. When she teases about being in bad repute with MWM, the anecdote resonates with another told by Bishop in "Efforts of Affection," when MWM

[149] Moore, *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, 423.

confides to her with a sigh, "I am so *glad*…that Marianne has *decided* to give the inhabitants of the *zoo*…a *rest*."[150] The umbrella of MWM's disdain, mock though it may be, provides shade for Marianne's furtive pleasures, the examination of seeds under glass that give rise to amethyst fantasies. These were treats that Mother couldn't always, or entirely, stomach: sinful fruit.

Moore's quixotic tastes, and Bishop's quest to please her with the perfect present, point to strains of erotic anxiety that are inherent in gift-exchange, and seminal to their correspondence. On Valentine's Day, 1938, Bishop reveals a vertiginous sense of inadequacy surrounding gift-giving in a letter to Marianne, identifying a "point" of being-sent: "I often become slightly confused at the very point of bestowal and feel that perhaps, after all, it is inadequate or unwanted."[151] In a post-script, she describes the gift she, nevertheless, has enclosed: "I've decided I can include a leaf called "Woman's Tongue" (the one that rattles). Also some castor-oil beans, which may be squashed, but are very pretty if they aren't." Bishop allows herself to enclose a rattling tongue, and a beautiful regurgitant, both eloquent allegories for poetic speech; with them, she acknowledges the eternal possibility

[150] Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 129.
[151] Bishop, *One Art*, 69.

of failure or ruin (the beans may always be squashed). The structure of the gift that is quite possibly ruined before it arrives, either by damage incurred on the journey or a miscalculation in its pleasure-value, is not unlike the post card that always contains the possibility of its non-arrival, whose destination always includes a metaphorical death: the possibility of reversal, and of nullification. Is the sense of inadequacy traceable back to an origin, and is it an essentially maternal paradigm? If so, is it possible to understand it outside of a discourse that blames, or pathologizes, the maternal relation, for a foundational lack?

In the theories of gift-exchange that we have at our disposal, like those of inheritance, there is "not a daughter in the landscape, apparently, not a word about her in any event."[152] And yet we still turn to them, hoping to glean some trace. Roland Barthes comes close in *A Lover's Discourse* in an entry entitled, "Dedication," which encircles the lack and slippage of the dedication, gift, and poetry: their erotic substance and consequences fold over each other, in a metonymical envelope which ends by enclosing the sender. "The amorous gift is a solemn one; swept away by the devouring metonymy which governs the life of the imagination, I transfer myself inside it

[152] Derrida, *The Post Card,* 61.

altogether."[153] Barthes follows with an explication of writing and amorous dedication, which he deems "impossible (I shall not be satisfied with a worldly or mundane signature, pretending to dedicate to you a work which escapes us both). The operation in which the other is to be engaged is not a signature. It is, more profoundly, an inscription: the other is inscribed, he inscribes himself within the text, he leaves there his (multiple traces)."[154] While Barthes zeroes in on the relation of the dedication and the gift to writing, his exegesis appears to fall outside of the specific realm of guilt and inadequacy that tints the exchanges of poetry and gifts between Bishop and Moore, and the "patterns of deference…exquisitely organized for advance or retreat"[155] that accompany them. And yet, it we look closer, the nature of trace and signature to which Barthes points may offer some clues. Its key is the debt-economy of gift exchange and the maternal, the dedication in which erotic and filial currents overlap, and what Barthes calls the "fatality" of writing.

When Moore shies away from dedicating her work "properly" to her mother, she does so with an air of deference, noting the insufficiency of the work and abdicating authorship itself to Mary Warner. The

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[153] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* 75.
[154] Barthes, 79.
[155] Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry,* 140

ambivalence that pervades her non-dedication may have to do with the power struggle inherent in the gift which goes unspoken, evidenced by Indian potlatches analyzed by Mauss (and mentioned by Barthes in "The Dedication"). In Indian potlatches, "the gift then reveals the test of strength of which it is the instrument: 'I'll give you more than you give me, and so I will dominate you'"[156]; "it is constituted by a considerable gift of riches, offered openly and with the goal of humiliating, defying, and *obligating* a rival. The exchange value of the gift results from the fact that the donee, in order to efface the humiliation and respond to the challenge, must satisfy the obligation to respond later with a more valuable gift, in other words, to return with interest."[157] Barthes, significantly, follows his description of potlatch with a family allegory, the model of "*look at the sacrifices we're making for you;* or again: *we gave you the gift of life (—But what the fuck do I care about life!* etc.)…an exchange economy (of sacrifice, competition, etc.); which stands opposed to silent expenditure."[158] Since Marianne is loath to instigate such power plays with Mary Warner, she turns her dedication into a post-script that points to the always-already maternally inscribed text. Mother's traces are identified as effects

[156] Barthes, 76.
[157] Bataille, *Visions of Excess,* 121.
[158] Barthes, 77.

of thought, thinking, or actual phrases, and by drawing our attention to mother as author, Moore attempts to steer clear of potlatch impositions. In the case of Moore and Bishop, however, the rivalry inherent in potlatch must be acknowledged as one force underlying others that fuel the correspondent fire.

The language of guilt and inadequacy is most simply a response to the obligation that both poets knew was part and parcel of exchanging poems and gifts; both were aware that to respond to writing was an imposition on time and energy, even if the work was done gladly and encouragingly. Still, the vigor and frequency of both Bishop and Moore's assertions of guilt, inadequacy, and imposition signal the collection of less appropriate motivations and energies under the wing of deference, namely, the strength-test of "I will give you more than you will give me, and so I will dominate you," and the erotic anxiety of the amorous gift. Barthes' words on the amorous gift echo in Bishop's copious descriptions of choosing the perfect gift for Moore in "Efforts of Affection," he writes, "Strenuously I calculate whether this object will give pleasure, whether it will disappoint, or whether, on the contrary, seeming too 'important,' it will in and of itself betray the delirium —

or the snare in which I am caught."[159] He points, too, to the fear of an "insidious defect" that will ruin the gift, a fear Bishop often identifies in gift-enclosures, as a result of eros: "I have this fear: that the given object may not function properly because of some insidious defect…for example, the latch doesn't work…is it *because I love* that the latch doesn't work?"[160] While the proprieties and reticence attributed to Moore and Bishop, respectively, have suspended critical inquiry into erotic pressures between the two, the anxieties of broken latches and the insidious defects of the gift betray (like Barthes' gift-objects), the "delirium" in which they are caught, a snare that enjoins currents of filial devotion, maternal love, and erotic energy.

For Barthes, the imposition of loving breaks the gift, opens up its erotic secret and, like Pandora's box, forbids containment of its infectious delirium. Bishop's concern that her castor oil beans for Moore could be squashed in transit by the post echoes Barthes' latch-anxiety, as does the confusion she describes surrounding the point of the gift's bestowal, a threshold of giving which exposes a flash of transparent desire. This flash serves as a point of departure for the deferential admissions of guilt both

[159] Barthes, 75.
[160] Barthes, 76.

Moore and Bishop exchange along with their gifts and poems: out of the vertigo comes a torrent of apologies to fill the breach.

Bishop's fears of delivering damaged goods, when read against the more explicit apologies that filter through her letters, also connect as the breach and imposition of birth to which Barthes refers while discussing potlatch: "the gift of life." The guilt of the impossibility of repaying such a gift aligns itself in Bishop's case with fears that her literary production is inadequate, assertions that Moore makes as well. Bishop writes to Moore that she doesn't write enough, that what she writes is insufficient, that her letters are themselves embarrassing. In July of 1938, Bishop ends a letter with the sentence, "This is not a letter."[161] Ceci n'est pas un pipe: in this case, she transforms her anxiety into a postmodern joke, turning nullification on its ear. But Bishop's repetitions that her letters aren't quite good enough becomes so reflexive that they seem to be required as a part of epistolary manners, an idea which may not be so far off the mark. For the letter is always in itself a little gift; it can only follow that latch-anxiety crops up there in abundance between two correspondents who are especially tuned into its frequencies. When they apologize for their writing,

[161] Bishop, *One Art*, 77.

each time breaking a small latch, Moore and Bishop betray not only their own desires, but the inherent structure of the gift, and the broken latches embedded in any correspondence.

BORDEN (II): Milk Factory

Bishop offers the following anecdote in "Efforts of Affection" as an example of Mary Warner Moore's zealous observance of "the proprieties." While useful as portraiture, the story also allegorizes an umbilical economy of exchange and delivery whose logic, in part, establishes the code by and against which Marianne Moore's meter makes itself audible. Bishop's oeuvre is its second generation.

> Mrs. Moore's sense of honesty, or honor, like her respect for the proprieties, was staggering. Marianne occasionally teased her mother about it, even in front of me. One story was about the time Mrs. Moore had decided that five empty milk bottles must be returned to the grocery store, and thence to the dairy. They were not STORE BOTTLES, as bottles then said right in the glass, nor the kind that were to be put out on the doorstep, but they all came from the same dairy. The grocer looked at them and pushed them back on the counter toward Mrs. Moore, saying, "You don't have to return these bottles, ma'am; just throw them away." Mrs. Moore pushed the bottles back again and told him quietly, "It *says* BORDEN on the bottles; they belong to the dairy." The grocer: "I know it does, ma'am, but it doesn't say STORE BOTTLES or RETURN. Just throw them away." Mrs. Moore spoke more slowly and more quietly, "But they don't belong to me. They are *their bottles*." "I know, ma'am, but they really don't want them back." The poor man had underestimated Mrs. Moore. She stood firm, clarifying for him yet again the only honorable line of action to be pursued in regard to the five bottles. Finally the grocer took them all

> in his arms and, saying weakly, "My *God*, ma'am!" carried them into the back of the store. [162]

While EB uses the above anecdote to illustrate Mary Warner Moore's sense of honor, it is not only about propriety; the story of the Borden milk bottles posits even larger questions about the maternal's relation to obsolescence, debt and ownership, within its realm of circulatory systems and production-machines. To whom does the empty vessel belong? Is the milk bottle the smoking gun of being-nourished, or the smoking gun of cutting the cord? When does the circulatory economy of motherhood become obsolete? Even after a child is weaned, umbilical transference is sublimated and channeled into other means of communication: language's empty vessel. Does the stamp embedded in its transparent carriage trace a primal matricide that no refusal of ownership could ever erase?

Think of milk as language for a moment, and the empty bottles as vessels of writing, poetry's formal structures, or perhaps the grammar that allows meaning to be contained. The archaic, then becoming-obsolete circulatory system of the milkman, returnable bottles, and daily delivery is directly analogous to the language system of the Moores, and the poetic and critical factory of 260 North Cumberland Street. David Kalstone writes that "Moore herself had

[162] Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 131-132.

insisted on the connections between the odd self-enclosed, self-nourishing speech of her family and the language of her poems,"[163] and it is clear that the circulatory system of the returnable milk bottle that Mary Warner Moore was so loath to sever played twin to the family's self-enclosed and self-nourishing language to which the extraordinary grammar of Marianne Moore's poetry and prose can only hint. We can read its singular, exquisite word-play in the exchange of family letters
of which they were so fond, and that, when the family was separated, sustained them singularly and as a whole. Father's absence, and Mary Warner Moore's role as vigilant keeper of the correspondent flame, only deepens the epistolary bond between herself, Marianne, and brother Warner. When a young Marianne attended Bryn Mawr College, and brother Warner was at Yale, "the Moore family sent their letters round-robin, each adding to the letters they received, with Mary Warner Moore collecting all letters in Carlisle [Pennsylvania] once they had gone full circle." Guarding the circle from the very beginning, Mary Warner was deeply invested in keeping her family letter-nourished, and Marianne contributed heavily to the correspondence's milk bank, writing "at least three times a week and sometimes daily, occasionally sending letters twenty-five

[163] Kalstone, 8.

pages or longer,"[164] The house of Moore doubled as a dairy of letters, poem-vessels hand-crafted and filled with the milk of inquiry, inexhaustible.

What does it mean, then, when Mary Warner Moore refuses to trash the Borden dairy's disposable bottles? She won't throw them away, nor will she claim ownership — property of BORDEN, she thinks, for BORDEN is stamped right there, on the glass. She abdicates ownership in the language of belonging ("they don't belong to me") and, in fact, they belong to no one. They are orphans. Is MWM ashamed of the bottles' impropriety? Or is it simply the clutter of the bottles' excess that she is unable to process? They aren't hers to take care of, and yet disposing of them is unthinkable. In her philosophy, they belong to a delivery system whose circle must and shall be completed.

In this way, MWM acts not only as a mother, but as a daughter, too. When, like the daily mail, milk was once delivered to the family home, its purveyor, usually male, acted as a stand-in for Mother. It was natural that milk would appear each day, left on the door before dawn, without having to think or even ask for it. Once an adult with one's own address, there was no need, even, to cry out for it. It was part of the deal that used bottles would be

[164] Moore, *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, 3-4.

taken care of, switched out, that full bottles would replace the empties of the day before. Being-delivered in this way was not only a convenience, or a luxury, but a necessity, one that channeled the soft pleasures of daily feedings. Delivery was something you could rely on. Like Fanny Borden's lending library, the milkman from BORDEN's dairy once facilitated a circular economy in which nothing was lost.

Sadly, the dairy's circulatory systems, siblings to those of the U.S. post, have become obsolete. Milk has lost its former glory, and the poetics of the transparent, returnable glass bottle have been eclipsed by the dull, plastic jug. The Moores, witnessing this transition into obsolescence, resisted it: in Mary Warner Moore's mind, *every* bottle was marked, RETURN TO SENDER. The weirdest, most fascinating moment in BORDEN scenario is Moore' refusal to cut the cord even *after* the grocer has explained that the bottles were keepers. Preservation is an element of her disavowal. By insisting on the closed circle of RETURN TO SENDER's economy, Moore rejects the censure and finality of permanent disposal. But it is not, perhaps, only a culture of disposability that Moore resists, but the severing of a deeply maternal circulatory system that so pains her. B O R D E N 's stamp of ownership is also

synonymous with disposing of Mother; its transparent inscription includes the trace of matricide.

If we read the Borden milk bottle anecdote as intended, proof of MWM's staggering sense of honor and adherence to the proprieties, even different analogies to poetic production come into focus. Warner Moore's vigilance against theft seems to bleed over by proxy into Elizabeth's writing process, as we see in a letter to Marianne in January of 1937[165] (One Art, 54). The letter opens with a paragraph of extraordinary, almost paranoiac anxiety surrounding an imagined theft of language; the vertiginous trompe l'oeuil of maternal correspondence is in effect, particularly the hallucinatory fix of not knowing where one body ends and another begins. Bishop fears she has crossed the line when, in "The Sea & Its Shore," she uses the word "maneuvers":

> This morning I have been working on [the story] "The Sea & its Shore"——or rather, making use of your and your mother's work——and I am suddenly afraid that at the end I have stolen something from "The Frigate Pelican." I say, "Large flakes of blackened paper, still sparkling red at the edges, flew into the sky. While his eyes could follow them, he had never seen such clever, quivering manoeuvres.." I am afraid it is almost criminal. I haven't the book here and I wonder if you will tell me how guilty I am and forgive what was really unconscious. When I think of the care and time that you and your mother have taken

[165] Bishop, *One Art,* 54.

> with that poor story, I feel that you should both be quite out of patience with me. I only hope that from now I shall be able to notice my own roughness and lack of natural correctness better.[166]

Bishop had in fact stolen nothing from Moore: the word "manoeuvres" does not appear in her "Frigate Pelican" at all. And while the fear of a young writer that is at best mimicking the poet she most admires is not uncommon, Bishop's anxiety surrounding an imagined theft of language is especially severe. In hindsight, she writes that she still is "sometimes appalled to think how much I may have unconsciously stolen from her," but adds that "Perhaps we are all magpies,"[167] thereby slightly lessening her crimes. In 1968, Bishop remembers Moore saying that her poems at Bryn Mawr sounded "*Just* like Swinburne, Elizabeth,"[168] but in 1937, such perspective is noticeably absent. Our attention is piqued not only by Bishop's terror of having stolen from Moore, but the extremity of the panic with which her perceived theft is addressed. Kalstone remarks that "Bishop's notion of stealing is overly fastidious, especially since the word "manoeuvers" doesn't occur in "The Frigate Pelican" at all...The debt she is becoming

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[166] Bishop, 54.
[167] Bishop, *The Collected Prose,* 141.
[168] Bishop, 138.

aware of is more interesting and complicated."[169] Interesting and complicated, indeed! Can we trace this debt, or perhaps break it down into somewhat discrete and identifiable elements? Bishop fears having stolen from Moore's body of work, in her eyes, an unforgivable crime: her poems mustn't bear the imprint of Moore's style, the taint of her ancestry. It's a problem of lineage: one desires to be part of a poetic line, to be of a school, and yet, one must have a wholly unique poetic voice. The guilt of the stolen word, while rooted in poetics, signals a deeper current of ontological debt to the maternal, of which word-choice is only an index.

Mary Warner Moore's insistence on keeping the Borden bottles in circulation seeps into both Moore and Bishop's treatment of poems that they can't quite bear to finish off. Both had a habit of continuing to edit poems they had begun years or decades earlier. In Bishop's case, poems would often continue to incubate for years on end before seeing the light of day; Moore was better known for slicing and dicing poems that had already been published, and republishing them in a modified form. Bishop's endless tinkering, mastering, and remastering poems reflects a resistance to finishing, and hence trashing them, cutting

[169] Kalstone, 62.

off a lifeline. Moore's reprints and revisions negotiate the same problem by different means. By cutting up old works, she *does* trash the bottles, then glues various pieces back together and footnotes the broken shards. (When "Poetry's" 38 lines were cut down to four for the *Collected Poems*, the edition included the original poem in an extended endnote.) Once again, the cutting-up of poetry rears matricide's ugly head: Moore writes in a letter that, after chopping down "Poetry," she feared that her editor, upon receiving the newly-revised manuscript, would have a heart attack on the spot.

Perhaps this shared impulse to cut is what Bishop was referring to when she described Fanny Borden as an "appropriate" matchmaker to herself and Moore. In Borden, we have a third body in which the echoes of slicing and dicing, murder and writing, coincide. "The echo of a scream": Fanny, to our knowledge, neither wrote nor killed anyone, but as librarian and famous niece, she acts as the inheritor of both. As such, she must have understood the rhetorical implications of keeping books in, and out of circulation. At the very least, it is important for us to remember that, while she had known Marianne Moore since she was a small girl, Borden kept no copy of *Observations* in

the Vassar library. When Bishop asked after its absence, Borden lent her a private copy.

Waiting room

Let us return for a moment to Proust's description of Swann's envelope at the beginning of the *Search*. In it, Swann's voice is compared to a transparent envelope that acts as an agent of a malleable and volatile identity. Sound travels, trafficking in alterity: this theory of the vocal envelope and a correspondent coming-to self brings Proust into conversation with Elizabeth Bishop yet again. In her poem, "In the Waiting Room," Bishop reminds us how sound can send us. In a scene that turns identity's envelope inside out and in on itself, "In the Waiting Room" tells the story of a vocal correspondence that, like that of Proust's Swann, coheres and ruptures identity at once. What's more, the poem's narrator, Elizabeth, recounts a childhood tale much in the way that Narrator Marcel tells his own story in the *Search*, in simultaneous steps away from and towards biography. "Elizabeth" isn't exactly Elizabeth Bishop, but she isn't completely a fiction, either. While in the waiting room of a dentist's office (another between-space of anticipation and suspended animation), Elizabeth as a young child waits for her aunt, who is being examined in an adjacent room. All at once, from behind the wall:

Suddenly, from inside,
came an *oh!* of pain
——Aunt Consuelo's voice——
not very loud or long…

…What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me:*
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I——we——were falling, falling…

…I said to myself, three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an *I,*
you are an *Elizabeth,*
you are one of *them.*
Why should you be one, too?[170]

In Swann's envelope-scenario, where the voice carries and coheres identity, recognition is an intellectual act,[171] in Elizabeth's case the convergence occurs "without thinking at all," on the outside of linear or rational thought. The difference is self-referential. In Proust's

[170] Bishop, *The Collected Poems,* 160-161

[171] "Even the very simple act that we call 'seeing a person we know' is in part an intellectual act… [our notions] do so well at nuancing the sonority of his voice as though the latter were only a transparent envelope that each time we see this face and hear this voice, it is these notions that we encounter again, that we hear. Marcel Proust, *The Way By Swann's*, 22-23.

scene, boundaries between self and other are clearly defined, and remain so. Swann remains at a distance, over which his voice neatly travels back to Marcel, telling him everything he already knows, the reiteration of the notions Marcel invented. In the waiting room, though, the distance between self and other collapses, and with it, the referential system of the transparent envelope. The realization of having to adhere to an identity leads not to a sense of security, but of vertigo and fall: to name is to define, to finish off, to find a boundary, to *bring an end to*, all things to which the *perhaps* of Swann's envelope stands in opposition. For Elizabeth, the boundaries of an "I," which means being "one of them," means closing off the promise of multiple selves that Swann's envelope-alterity promises.

The strangeness of "In the Waiting Room" is far scarier, and suffocating. Earlier in the poem, when Elizabeth browses through an issue of *National Geographic* she sees pictures of African women who frighten her, their necks "wound round and round with wire," their "horrifying breasts." She makes an important ontological distinction between childhood and adulthood when she describes the waiting room as being full of grown-up people, a category to which she thankfully does not belong. To be a grown-up

is to be “one, too,” a state in which fluid notions of identity are definitely out of the question. The cry shuts multiplicity down, and duality is in effect; no longer is Elizabeth changeable, mutable, more than two. When she asks, “*Why* should you be one, too?” the echo of “one, two” at the end of the line underscores the dualism in which she finds herself trapped, the either/or scenario that provokes a fall from grace.

The fall is set into motion by the *Oh!* of pain, directly after which Aunt Consuelo’s voice is bracketed by em-dashes — Morse code transmissions that interrupt the line ——severing the voice from its surrounding lines and, like an envelope, containing it. The dashes remind us of Dickinson’s sutures, marks which, like the *oh!* of pain, both graft the line together and interrupt its flow. They remind us, too, of Moore’s em-inence, the double motion that becomes the hallmark of maternal correspondence: to enter into correspondent unity, one must, by definition, be separated, establish a distance over which envelopes may find a path. The event of “In the Waiting Room,” induced by the aunt’s trauma-cry, breaks this system into pieces. The simultaneity of the cry as Elizabeth’s voice in Elizabeth’s mouth collapses the distance between herself

and her aunt; when this space between self and other, the distance that correspondence requires, vanishes, gravity's pull is revoked. Elizabeth loses the gravitational pull that keeps her connected to the ground; she has the sense of "falling off the round, turning world," Mother Earth. Like the umbilicus that connects as it separates the mother from the child, the cry of correspondence is the site of a traumatic break that gives birth to a Self. The cry is the clarion call that announces, "You are an I, you are an *Elizabeth,* you are one of them," hardening the skin of nascent identity, securing its death in a name. As Derrida argues, such naming effects are postal principles: "the proper name does not come to erase itself, it comes by erasing itself, to erase itself, it comes only in its erasure, or, according to the other syntax, it *amounts to, comes back to, [revient à] erasing itself, It arrives only to erase itself.* In its very inscription, *fort/da.* It guards itself from and by itself, and this gives the "movement." It sends [*envoie*]."[172]

[172] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 360.

Throat

"In" is an important word for Bishop, and it seems significant that both "In the Waiting Room" and "In the Village"'s tales of rupture have titles that begin with the preposition. "In" provides us with a setting, an enclosure that in both instances will be irreparably breached. Both times, voice is the culprit, breaking laws of both space and time. And in both instances, "in" is tied to anticipation in some way, a darker manifestation of the "perhaps" which imbues Swann's envelope with possibility. In Bishop's dreamscape, anticipation is a fearful enterprise. "In the Village's" scream hangs above a town which seems paralyzed with the fear that it may repeat itself, and in the waiting room, while she may not know it, Elizabeth is "still waiting for the scream" that will return in the form of the "Oh!" of pain. The cry returns in an appropriately slant form, ventriloquized through Aunt Consuelo, who morphs Mom: mother askew, neither a substitute nor a stranger, Consuelo's relation to Mother is one of resemblance and, like the cry itself, the uncanny. The waiting room's "*Oh*" echoes "In the Village"'s maternal scream that ruptures sanity, domesticity, and motherhood, and just as it returns Elizabeth to this primal fissure, reverberation of the cry within and between these stories

returns us to a Freudian *fort-da* and the repetition compulsion. The *Oh!* echoes the *fort* of *fort-da*, the *o-o-o-o* uttered by a young boy who, with a spool, a piece of string, and his throat, re-enacts Mother's appearance-as-disappearance:

> *O-o-o-o-o…* was not a mere interjection but represented the German word '*fort*' ['gone']. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive 'o-o-o-o'. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful '*da*' ['there']. This then, was the complete game——disappearance and return…[The game] was related to the child's great cultural achievement——the instinctual renunciation that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach.[173]

The *fort-da* game of disappearance and return is at the core of maternal correspondence, the seed from which all letters to mother grow. Each letter throws the spool and awaits its return; each letter approximates Mother's body, hurling it out of sight and awaiting its response. This makes the idea of the waiting room all the more poignant — an existential state of anticipation for Mother's return. Of course, in Elizabeth's case, there is no return: she is

[173] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 14.

greeted instead by the opposite of a body, the *Oh!* which busts up the sense of self which the maternal is meant to provide. She must turn to writing to re-enact *fort-da,* play, and reap the benefits of its reparations. The poem becomes the spool.

Why do we write, and re-write, traumatic experience? With whom do we correspond during such a performance, and what relation does it have to mother's disappearance, to *fort-da* re-enactments? Significantly, Freud uses the example of a doctor examining a child's throat to illustrate his findings:

> If the doctor looks down a child's throat or carries out some small operation on him, we may be quite sure that these frightening experiences will be the subject of the next game; but we must not in that connection overlook the fact that there is a yield of pleasure from another source…he hands on the disagreeable experience to one of his playmates and in this way revenges himself on a substitute.[174]

When Freud uses the example of looking down the child's throat as the representative incident of fear that sparks the repetition compulsion, we are in the heart of *fort/da*'s trauma-neighborhood, a district with which Bishop is most familiar. It is no coincidence that "In the Waiting Room" walks the same streets, under *in*'s umbrella,

[174] Freud, 16.

or that it centers around utterances that emerge uninvited from the throat. Site of voice and writing, hence the formation of identity, the throat is the channel between inside and outside, the passage where correspondence finds its mobile home. Tender tissue, site of erotics, nourishment, speech, and emesis, its flare-ups strike at the very core of what makes us. The intensity of the raw throat is the focus of "In the Waiting Room," and it manifests as a vertiginous erotics: the aunt's voice in Elizabeth's mouth, the "horrifying" breasts of the African women, and the climatic "falling, falling." All point to *Oh!'s* other, orgasmic reference point. The idea that pain may coexist with pleasure is hard for some to swallow, along with the notion that terror and erotics may share a common space; the fact that this is a poem about a child only makes matters more complicated. But the uncanny simultaneity of the "Oh!" suggests not only vertiginous self-realization but simultaneous orgasm: "falling off the round, turning world," "sliding beneath a big black wave." At once transcending and illuminating the body's boundary, the "Oh!" effects a moment that fuses inside and outside; that it is its true simultaneity. And as Anne Carson teaches us, "Eros is an issue of boundaries," of negotiating the edge between bodies, words, and things.

The boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me."[175] The boundary of difference keeps Eros alive, and at the edge of desire, the self takes shape.[176] Elizabeth and Consuelo's simultaneous *Oh!* explodes this boundary for an instant: the explosion teaches Elizabeth about where the edge lies. Carson reminds us that the edge between bodies can never really be dissolved——in doing so, her language of realizing that fact mimics the temporality of the *Oh!:* she writes, "And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can." Is this not Elizabeth's realization when she realizes she is an Elizabeth, bound up in an I and a name?

Freud describes the boy handing on the disagreeable experience of the doctor's office to one of his playmates, a revenge scenario which in our case points to the violence of passing on writing to another, handing-over the traumatic experience to the reader in order to be rid of it once and for all. We have seen the guilt-admissions that both Bishop and Moore include with their poems submitted to each other for review, apologies that stem in part from an implicit understanding of the aggressiveness of letters:

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[175] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 30.
[176] Carson, 39.

when one takes the often disagreeable scene of writing and send sit off to a happier auditor for "feedback," darker forces are put into play. The guilt of correspondence is in part a response to the revenge scenario Freud describes, an imposition of letters that passes along matricidal tendencies, *fort-da* payback. Never a one-to-one substitution, letters run on the fuel of *fort/da* play, the "staging of disappearance and return" that compensates for the renunciation of pleasure by making mother vanish, appear, and vanish again. Aunt Consuelo's slant maternal, and the uncanny *Oh!* of pain and pleasure that issues from her throat repeats the *fort-da* and, at least for the time being, ends Elizabeth's "waiting for the scream": its stage is the foundation on which correspondence is built, for which the disappearance of the mother is ground zero.

Bald performances

A letter from MM to EB dated May 1, 1938 is often cited by critics as a definitive moment in the tutelage of Moore to Bishop; Responding to Bishop's story, "In Prison," published several months earlier in the *Partisan Review*, Moore chastises Bishop for the perceived weakness of "tentativeness and interiorizing," which she calls her "danger as well as [her] strength."[177] After raising the eternal question of style versus substance, then gets to the real point: the wish to see Bishop's literary performances express values and experience more transparently. Moore writes, "I feel that although large-scale "substance" runs the risk of inconsequence through aesthetic impotence, and am one of those who despise clamor about substance—to whom treatment really *is* substance—I can't help wishing you would sometime in some way, risk some unprotected profundity of experience; or since no one admits profundity of experience, some characteristic private defiance of the significantly detestable."[178] (391)

David Kalstone reads "In Prison" and its partner, "The Sea & Its Shore" as "not simply examples of 'interiorizing' but Bishop's self-conscious studies of the habit of

[177] Moore, *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, 391.
[178] Moore, 391.

withdrawal for which Moore had been taxing her." Understanding that "what Bishop does in both tales is to ritualize her nomadic separatist existence and her cravings for withdrawal," Kalstone, with his usual acumen, recognizes in Bishop's fantasy of the "hotel existence" an examination of dwelling spaces that, once Bishop's poetic career develops, will grow into a study of the mobile dwellings that a life of travel creates. Such stories "seemed to free her not just for poetry but for an entirely new kind of poem."[179] Brett Millier writes that "this warning against too great a distance from her subjects, too theoretical a treatment of emotion…may have been the most important single piece of criticism Elizabeth ever received."[180] The question of transparency and distance, though, is more complicated that it appears. Such is the nature of reticence. Millier leaves out the postscript to Moore's letter, which complicates matters considerably: After signing her name, Moore continues:

> The wrought excellence and infectious continuity of your thinkings—the abashingly as I said above—formidable demureness, disgust me with my own bald performances, and what I have said sounds preceptorial but such clumsiness perhaps is better than the conscientious timidity which

[179] Kalstone, 59.
[180] Millier, 137.

> kept me from writing...(Don't interrupt yourself to answer this deference & attack). [181]

A year earlier, responding to Bishop's "The Labors of Hannibal," Moore also uses "baldness" to denote clarity, specifically of moral expression, and the postscript cited above echoes that original plea for substance: "I am sure good treatment is a handicap unless along with it, significant values come out with an essential baldness. I hope the *un*essential baldness of this attack will not make it seem that I am against minutiae."[182] The play of "essential" and "unessential" marks another instance of the reversals embedded in the structure of their correspondence; there can be no attack, it seems, without deference. But it is Moore's postscript a year later that significantly reveals the third rail of anxiety and abjection that "baldness" of expression may invoke. Sparks fly when what it means to voice one's self comes into question, and the too-neat, too-clean polarity of reticence and openness begins to show cracks. What the "bald performances" postscript illuminates, and the argument the body of the letter fails to take into account, are the intricacies of the performative. Drawing our attentions towards the problematics of exposure, the postscript

[181] Moore, 391.
[182] Moore, 384.

overturns the absolute notion of reticence, while the power dynamics that govern poetic mentorship fracture, reverse, and annotate themselves in outbursts of embarrassment.

The post-script is perhaps far more representative of the tenor of the pair's poetic exchange than the scolding Moore gives Bishop for her interiorities, scoring as it does the guilt, shame, and even disgust which the "unprotected" display of one's writing is likely to dredge up. After urging a more explicit exteriority in Bishop's work, and suggesting that her poems could ultimately suffer from the perils of "protection," Moore retreats just enough to complicate matters by criticizing her own writing as being too exposed, naked, bald. Without retracting her criticism, or her earlier position in the letter as top to Bishop's bottom, she playfully slips out from under.

The parenthetical exhortation that closes the post-script, while stopping short of complete self-nullification, asserts its own unimportance while at the same time issuing an order: *Don't interrupt yourself to answer this deference & attack.* The critical fix in a nutshell, the order underscores the back-door structure of the post-script, and displays an aggressiveness that masquerades as guilt and inadequacy. Or, perhaps, it is the other way around. Moore gets it right when she calls

her letter both a deference and attack, a simultaneous yield and strike; such is the double-edged blade of writing's bald performances.

The post-script voices the unspeakable, the excess. Unlike the body of the letter, she refuses to sit still. Far from tangential, the postscript has the effect of a fluorescent wash that colors the rest of the letter, or a live wire that, once touched, electrifies the rest of the body. Perhaps this is the sensation of "baldness," or transparency, that Moore both praises and fears in her (and Bishop's) performances. When, going out on a limb to criticize Bishop, she strikes one of her own nerves. Bishop, however, takes the criticism in stride. The tone of her response is grounded and confident, detached from the sense of panic that can sometimes surround the scene of writing. She takes care of the requisite admission of guilt in the letter's first paragraph — "Your extreme thoughtfulness has again outdistanced my industry, and I am very sorry and embarrassed."[183] — and while she expresses profound doubts about her future as a poet,[184] she discusses her completed prose work with a surprising degree of proportionality When she moves on to discuss "In Prison," all hints of inadequacy have flown. She refers to "having

[183] Bishop, *One Art*, 72.
[184] Bishop writes that she fears there may be no "real use" in writing poems, and that she wishes Moore would tell her "quite frankly if it is worth continuing with them." *One Art*, 73.

some meditations this morning on the theme of [Moore's] criticism," and asserts the conscious attempt of "something according to a *theory* I've been thinking up down here out of a combination of Poe's theories and reading 17th century prose!"[185] And then there is the certainty and resilience of this key sentence: "Of course a flaw goes all the way through." A year earlier, Bishop had written to Moore that "It is probably just an excuse, but sometimes I think about certain things that without one particular fault they would be without the means of existence."[186] Responding to feedback on "A Miracle For Breakfast," she defends the slant rhyme of "sun" and "crumb" as one such fault line, a necessary skid whose imperfections define the poem's ethic. A year later Bishop again suggests a theory of writing in which the "flaw that goes all the way through" is a necessary part of the foundation, whose fundamental cracks, impossible to repair, lay the groundwork for an ontology. By saying, "Of course, a flaw goes all the way through," Bishop sneakily extends the theory while apparently apologizing, and asserting the story's imperfections. Her flaw is the companionate fissure to Moore's double-edged sword of deference and attack, a way to play at topping her mentor while remaining the dedicated pupil. Her tone

[185] Bishop, 73.
[186] Bishop, 54.

suggests that, despite the reflexive deprecations that accessorize the sharing of writing, Bishop has in 1937 and ‘38 already developed a sense of independence as a writer that is often not attributed to her until after the debacle over her poem, “Roosters,” that leads her to break with Moore in 1940. Certainly, “Roosters” marks *the* turning point in their relationship as mentor/pupil, and the importance of that moment as a break can’t be overlooked. It is clear, though, is that the endlessly self-deprecating assertions that circulate around the exchange of writing mustn’t be chalked up solely to the insecurities of a young poet struggling to find herself. Moore’s capacity to match Bishop blow for blow in this capacity is proof enough to dispel that notion. When poems are in play, both mentor and student tap into a current of abject guilt and apology that eddies and flows around the “bald performance,” and that appears to gush from the intersection of writing’s codes of propriety with the negotiation of interior and exterior. Both, it seems, are maternal epistemologies.

Invitation(Gift)

Bishop's poem, "Invitation to Marianne Moore," crosses bridges and blurs the boundaries of genres (poems, letters, invitations) that, upon further investigation, are often palimpsests from the very beginning. The poem flirts with being a letter just as it flirts with Marianne, teasing the boundary between public versus private speech. So much comes down to public versus private when the Moores are in play, of negotiating what falls on either side of the increasingly bold-faced border that encircles them, a boundary that manifests, in this case, through linguistic performativity. "Invitation's" poem-ness, what diversifies it from the letter, is that it is meant for public consumption: while addressed to Marianne, it is in fact an open letter to the poetic community that performs the relation between the two women. Publicly entreating Marianne, Bishop exposes their intimacies while performing admirably as her poetic inheritor, standing on poetry's "concentrated ground." The term "concentrated ground" refers to a line in the Maysles brothers' *Grey Gardens*, an absolutely crucial film for anyone interested in maternal matters. The film documents Big Edie and Little Edie Bouvier Beale, and their rich, reclusive domestic

partnership; in it, Big Edie utters a line that essentializes the distilled power of poetic speech. Her genius is a pun and a mistake: Edie, unflappable matriarch, proclaims, "I'm not ashamed of anything! Where I stand is a very sacred place. It's *concentrated ground*."[187] In the background, one of the Measles corrects her: "Consecrated." But Edie's version is more accurate, a representation of the ground established both by art (the film as a concentrated version of the Beale's world that continues to develop and unfold after the film is viewed), and by the maternal body. Matriarchal ground is consecrated, concentrated; Big Edie posits a maternal landscape free from shame, that sops up the power overflowing her fantastic form. Applied to poetic language, the theory only accrues interest. "Invitation's" concentrated ground is the letter's alter-ego, a distillation of the Moore-Bishop correspondence, and of being-sent itself.

> From Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning,

[187] The Bouvier Beales are the Moore's evil twins: their house crawls with critters (raccoons and cats are the visible cohabitants), and is virtually falling down around their ears in disrepair. In one famous shot, a kitty pees behind an elegant portrait of a queenly-looking woman (Big Edie in her youth?). The "concentrated ground" comment becomes even more moving when heard with an understanding of the extent to which the Bouvier Beales were considered holy terrors in East Hampton, and the degree to which they had strayed from Bouvier propriety. While directly in the Bouvier line, Big Edie really *is* shameless, in the best sense of the word: nothing embarrasses her. Her dress is constantly falling off on-camera; Edie scolds her; she couldn't care less. She is a rock.

please come flying.
In a cloud of fiery pale chemicals,
please come flying,
to the rapid rolling of thousands of small blue drums
descending out of the mackerel sky
over the glittering grandstand of harbor-water,
please come flying.[188]

The first stanza bowls us over with prepositions, reminding us of the preposition's role as the diaphanous, connective tissue of being-sent. As the figure of speech at the helm of relationality, the preposition elucidates the relation between bodies in space, and the vectors of attraction and repulsion. Like the letter, each connects as it separates. Bishop stresses, *from, out, over, to, in, on:* each word creates a tiny hinge between sites, pivot-words that direct traffic. What may seem at first glance like prepositional excess reveals itself to be wholly appropriate to Bishop's invitation, for, if as Anne Carson attests, adjectives are the latches of being,[189] prepositions are the latches of sending. "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" sings "You Send Me" while describing being sent, describes Moore's flights of fancy as it sends up her manners. Its playfulness of tone and substance,

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[188] Bishop, *The Copmlete Poems*, 82.

[189] In her *Autobiography of Red,* Carson writes, "Nouns name the world. Verbs activate the names. Adjectives come from somewhere else…These small imported mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity. They are the latches of being." Carson, *Autobiography of Red,* 4.

particularly the pokes at Moore's morals, has been misread by some as meanness. That's a pity, for Bishop's teasing seems far more rooted in a currency of intimacy and (dare we say it) erotics than petty cruelty. Erotics are consistently overlooked and displaced in commentaries on the poem, even though the bulk of the poem is written in keys of praise and pleasure, elaborating Moore's rich, occult majesties; critical misappropriations of Bishop's ribbing of Moore's prudishness overlook her flirtatious undertones, along with the poem's prepositional latches and their relationship to sending and ecstasy, repetition and pleasure. The first stanza's seven steady downbeats of prepositions suggest that Moore's grandeur, as well as that of the Brooklyn Bridge, demands a procession in kind, elucidated by the traveling line that overflows the break. *From Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning, / please come flying.* "Invitation" operates as a beckoning hand that sketches out the desired route of its addressee, a magnetic pull within the magnetic field of the poem. A love letter, it pays homage to Moore's "priceless vocabularies," her grammar that suddenly turns and shines." It sends us, enraptured, via transversality — the thrill of a bridge that can span and dissolve two thresholds, the

promise of “a long, unnebulous train of words.” Flight is its hallmark.

Please come flying is the poem’s chorus, each stanza’s foot, and “please” is a complicated word. Bishop uses it as a nexus of propriety and pleasure, for as perhaps the most astute reader of Moore, she recognized how propriety and pleasure were interwoven in the fabric of her poetry, her correspondence, all she touched. “Please” is the *a priori* marker of propriety, the first word one is taught to say while asking for anything. And with *please come flying,* Bishop introduces good manners to the company of being-pleasured, of *jouissance*. The rises and swells of the ripe, long lines of the second stanza are deeply Whitmanic, as are their backdrop, the vaults and flows of the bridge and the harbor. Bishop takes the physical prowess of Whitman’s line and sets it airborne, as if MM were one of her own birds, all the while maintaining Walt’s fever-pitches: *Whistles, pennants, and smoke are blowing. The ships / are signaling cordially with multitudes of flags / rising and falling like birds all over the harbor.*
“Please come flying” appears three times in the first stanza, twice in the fourth and sixth, and is the final line of each stanza. Each repetition of please and come,

each appearance illuminates the entreaty and the poem itself as the meeting-place of propriety and pleasure.

Don't overlook the repetition of *come* on this pleasure-trip, or how repetition alone can turn singular into plural, duality into multiplicity. "Invitation" is full of pairs of things that turn into flocks——a poetic version of Deleuze's theory of becoming that displaces binary thought for rhizomatic, molecular dissemination. Along with *please come flying*, the trope of the pair that turns into multitudes repeats (two rivers, each black shoe, a capeful of bon-mots, butterfly wings). Manifesting Moore's grammar that suddenly turns and shines, in the black facets of these diamonds, Bishop discovers the flock. And "Invitation's" pleasure finds a body (or more accurately, thousands of bodies) in multiplicity. Bishop lingers in descriptions of jewel-laden rivers and fabrics out of whose folds tumble proliferating beauties: flocks of sandpipers, butterflies, bon-mots. Proliferation manifests through flashes of light, instances of glitter that sparkle throughout the poem; light's continuous, traveling form becomes a symbol of Moore's strength. Moore is a savior that could "come like a daytime comet," "trailing a sapphire highlight" "over the glittering grandstand of harbor-water;" above all, it is proliferation

that gives Moore's imagined journey wings, that loosens and even breaks the strictures of land-bound bodies.

As the poem turns on the idea of the letter, it allows for a play on and with the formalism of the invitation, and Bishop exploits/makes the most of its flirtatiousness, just as she was wont to do in her actual correspondence with Moore. This play always had something to do with exchange: Bishop's most flirtatious moments in her letters usually surrounded the exchange of gifts. In 1943 she asks for a picture of Moore to keep, writing coyly, "Margaret wrote me about seeing you at the Calder show opening——described a beautiful pale blue dress, taking pictures, etc…Please don't dream of bothering to satisfy my curiosity now, will you? What Margaret said about the pictures reminded me again, though, that I wish I could have one, too, sometime. Please, won't you be a pin-up girl?"[190] One almost expects her to ask for a lock of Moore's hair; she writes that she takes a letter of MM's along with her on her travels "as a kind of amulet or password."[191]

An invitation is a sort of an offering in reverse, a request for the gift of the other's presence: indeed, Lorrie Goldensohn reads the equilibrium of "Invitation" as

[190] Bishop, 117.
[191] Bishop, 114

a desire for "pure exchange:" "The rightness of balance also stems, perhaps, from a wish for friendship as pure gift and exchange, for that 'disinterested friendship' grown in the Arctic climate for which Bishop longed in her letter to Frani Blough." (Goldensohn,141) The letter to which Goldensohn refers was written in 1937, in which Bishop proclaimed, "Mother-love, isn't it awful. I long for an Arctic climate where no emotions of any sort can possibly grow, always excepting disinterested 'friendship' of course."[192] The context of the assertion was a complicated one: her dear friend from Vassar, Margaret Miller (another beloved MM), a beautiful and elegant painter whom Bishop loved deeply, had just lost her arm in a car accident. Bishop had also been in the car, and was herself still recovering from the shock of the accident (she had to be hospitalized for asthma for ten days afterwards), and was speaking to the emotional burden of spending time together with Margaret and her mother. It's unknown what kind of dynamics between the two she witnessed; certainly all were reeling from the traumatic experience of the accident, and the amputation of Margaret's arm. Bishop's own maternal traumas, the awfulness of being forced to sever herself from mother-love's body, undoubtedly haunts this scene. But while

[192] Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, 6

Goldensohn is correct in identifying "pure exchange" as an ideal of the Moore/Bishop relationship, the dream of a correspondence in which nothing is left over, and nothing returned, her collapsing of that desire into the incendiary assertion of awful mother-love seems misguided. What Bishop means by "awfulness" (as well as awefulness), and the notion of "pure gift and exchange" may form correspondent rings around a maternal sun, but it is unclear how, in the example of "Invitation," they speak to one another. If any ethic or philosophy was shared without reservation by both poets, it was the implicit understanding that a pure and simultaneous exchange of *anything* — words, trinkets, letters, ideas, affections — was impossible. And yet, the ideal of that simultaneity is what motivates and propels forward every poem, every utterance. Anne Carson often writes of this edge of language and desire, the point on which "dilemmas arise, staircases reverse…the blind point of desire:"[193] this point appears to be the key pivot on which "Invitation" turns, one whose investments and rewards are anything but disinterested.

[193] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 166, 91.

Exchanging Hats

1. Derrida

In Derrida's "Envois," a scene of hat-exchange frames the filial confusion that defines the post-card, in which the hat is a switchpoint of reversibility that "unleashes itself, goes mad."[194] Recto and verso, master and disciple, speech and writing fall and spin interminably into each other. Derrida's theory springs from a found image of Plato and Socrates on a picture postcard. an image that, upon further inspection, reveals a puzzling mistake. In the drawing, Plato stands behind a seated Socrates, instructing him with outstretched fingers; Plato dictates as Socrates takes notes with both hands. We know the roles have been reversed because above the hats that each figure wears, the wrong name is written in script: *plato*, with a lower-case p, for the figure behind the chair, and *Socrates* for the seated man who writes with his left hand and dips his pen in his inkwell with his right. Plato's hat is smaller than Socrates's, rather like a bowler with no brim, while Socrates looks like a court jester, his hat with a slight flounce at the end of the point trailing behind it. Derrida wonders, "Did he get it wrong or what, this Matthew Paris, get the names as well as the hats wrong, putting

[194] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 13.

Socrates' hat on Plato's head and vice versa? On their hat, rather, flat or pointed, like an umbrella this time. On the proper name as art of the umbrella. There is some gag in this picture."[195] The hat tips us off to the gag reflex of correspondence: gag as in joke, gag as in throat, the gag that interrupts breathing ingestion, speech. It's a hold-up, a kind of crime.[196] The hat is thereby caught up with suspension, going the wrong way, crossing the line. Proust's theories of the transversal exemplify the unifying and prescriptive power of crossing the line: how, when two parallel lines are crossed by a kinetic third, a dynamic form is created that catalyzes writing. Marcel's experience of visualizing the steeples of Martinville, bringing them into focus and in dialogue with each other from his position in a moving car, is one such example, where the action of the transversal opens everything up. Marcel immediately and easily begins to write, letting loose a torrent of words. Disparate elements coalesce into spontaneously generating paragraphs.

Correspondence's gag reflex is a member of the transversal's family, but stands apart: transversality's queer, mad uncle, exposed. The hat is the agent that

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[195] Derrida, 13.

[196] Derrida connects hats to hidden contraband, writing and counterfeit currency: "Look again at their unbelievable hats. In order to pass off their counterfeit money by contraband, not writings under their cloaks as I wrote previously (in the PP) about the two compères, but counterfeit money under their hats or in their hats…" *The Post Card,* 37.

allows the switched-up photo of Socrates and Plato to operate as a trompe-l'oeuil of reversibility. It's a trip. Once Derrida recognizes the mistaken hats as such, the gag sparks paragraphs on correspondence theory ("What I prefer, about postcards, is that one does not know what is in front or in back…")[197]. Correspondence switches out identity, exchanges hats, and in the interruption, liberates: each time we address a postcard, we throw our hats into the ring.

2.

Bishop's "Exchanging Hats" is a poem that pivots on the mortifying performance: the joke at the queer's expense that, at the same time, exposes the "straight" comic as an embarrassment:

> Unfunny uncles who insist
> in trying on a lady's hat
> ——oh, even if the joke falls flat,
> we share your slight transvestite twist
>
> in spite of our embarrassment.[198]

An air of indecency pervades the scene; perhaps drunkenness aids and abets transvestism's twists. Perhaps transvestism itself, and the queerness towards which it points, is enough to manifest the panic that underlies the

[197] Derrida, 13.
[198] Bishop, *The Complete Poems*, 200.

poem's impressively mannered tone. The bad joke of transvestism hits a nerve, and the hat serves as secret agent to its abject crimes. As the poem's title suggests, these aunts and uncles, and by extension, the narrator, have entered into an economy, a system of exchange whose currency is secret; the hat, once passed around, unleashes a realm of shadow identities, secrets and lies.

There are no parents to speak of in this poem, only nameless aunts and uncles: from the very beginning, the poem is off its axis in this filial sense. Officially, there are no children in the poem, either. We only know the narrator-child was present because the adults are referred to as "Uncle" or "Aunt," but there is no mention of her presence in the scene, or any actions she took before, during, or after the hat performances described. The aunt typically serves as a kind of slant maternal in Bishop's oeuvre, and usually, she is a frightening figure. Bishop's scene is populated with "anandrous aunts who, at the beach…keep putting on the yachtsmen's caps/with exhibitionistic screech."[199]

While the poem's hats circulate with abandon, inspiring the "exhibitionistic screech" of "anandrous aunts," Bishop returns more than once to the idea of the hat as containing something equally dark, or darker,

[199] Bishop, 200.

underneath its brim. The flip-side of the exhibitionistic performance of these terrible aunts is the realm of darkness and shadow that lies underneath the hat, a darkness that Bishop suggests is as vast and fathomless as night itself.

The poem's narrator exhibits a remarkably neutral tone, bridging the two poles of mortifying hilarity and deep dark secret. The bumbling, unfunny uncles, rather than being judged or condemned by the niece, are identified with, held in sympathy: Bishop writes," we share your slight transvestite twist // in spite of our embarrassment." The narrator glosses over the visceral pang of the mortifying joke both from the point of view of the unfunny uncle and the queer child. But while the jolt of internalized homophobia that the scene provokes is elided, its explosion makes itself heard silently in the gap between stanzas, the space between "slight transvestite twist" and "embarrassment."

While typing out the text of this poem, I mistyped "breach" for "beach," and the mistake led me to consider "breech" — a queer birth. What connection is there between the breech, backwards child narrator and the breach between stanzas that so marks this piece? This poem takes a peek at the flip-side, the avernal underbelly beneath the brim

of familial secrecy. The slant. And there are two significant breaches in this poem, the only two sentences interrupted by stanza breaks. The first, “we share your slight transvestite twist // in spite of our embarrassment,” wherein both the twist of queerness and embarrassment come into question, dancing with each other in the silence the interruption allows. (What does it mean to share a “slight transvestite twist”?) There is a tension between the lightness of this avowal and the avernal eyes of the final stanza. We are not dealing only with a harmless joke, or even the sophisticated fact that “Costume and custom are complex./The headgear of the other sex inspires us to experiment.” For neither is this poem solely about gender codes and customs, or the changing tides of fashion. These are its topics, and yet something more disturbs us in the wake of these tides that disturbs us. This is no simple exchange; what disturbs us is silence.

The silence between stanzas, the silence underneath the vast, shady, turned-down brim. The silence in between “——perversities may aggravate // the natural madness of the hatter.” What lies in this gap? Remember that we are dealing with a method of exchange, an economy, the currency of which is an unstable element: the hat. Remember that

this poem is off its axis from the very beginning, orphaned and parented as it is by unfunny uncles. Remember, finally, that our hat is a sign of reversibility, and the mortifying joke: like the post-card, once the hat is tipped, the "natural madness of the hatter" "unleashes itself, goes mad." The hat, and its symbolic value as identity's keeper, are turned inside out.

And still, Bishop suggests that more lies unrevealed underneath these caps, perhaps frightening, perhaps beautiful. She asks the uncle, "tell us, can't you, are there any/stars inside your black fedora?" The uncle is the symbol of plenty (or at least, the possibility of a bounty of stars), while the aunt plays a more severe role, avernal, "exemplary, and slim." Even the rhyme scheme suggests enfolding: the rhymes follow a pattern of ABBA, wherein the fold of the inside rhyme are enclosed by the doubling over of the first and fourth line. A letter inside an envelope, secret inside secret. From the Oxford English Dictionary: secret, sub rosa: *under one's hat.*

Ray Johnson

Marianne Moore was on Ray Johnson's mailing list.[200] While the two were not exactly friends, his simultaneous projects of mail art, collage, and writing engaged her work, life and image-repertoire as an intimate correspondent. It's difficult to identify anyone after Johnson who tapped into her letter-writing drive as fiercely, playfully, or with as much sympathy as Johnson did; Ray played rough with Marianne. He took unprecedented liberties with her legacy, and subverted her image as the beacon of propriety; he recognized and identified with the deep perversity that underpinned her genius and fueled her language-factory; perhaps more than other any other American artist that preceded him, Johnson's work embodied the "foolish bemusement" that is part and parcel of Moore's eminence. Johnson took Bishop's "subliminal glimpse of the capital letter M multiplying"[201] and turned it into a logic of art-making, a methodology of thinking that relied on a system of questions rather than answers. This, too, was an eminent strategy – Bishop, on the topic of the relation between Moore's morals and manners ("Manners and morals; manners *as* morals? Or it is morals *as* manners?")[202] ends by admitting that she can't answer either question, only

[200] Johnson, *Correspondences*, 203. A chronology tells us that, in 1956, RJ meets MM, "whom he adds to his mailing list."
[201] Bishop, *The Collected Prose*,156.
[202] Bishop, 156.

that it *seems* to be making sense. Such seeming is the bread and butter of Johnson's art.

Who was Ray Johnson? Born in 1927, he was trained as a painter and visual artist at Black Mountain College, and moved to New York City's Lower East Side in 1948. From the fifties until his death in 1998, Johnson pursued the work of collage, performance, and correspondence art; known as the father of mail art, Johnson was a prolific and accomplished post-war artist who today remains largely unknown. He both courted and shunned the center. A signature correspondence piece is a letter to the Whitney that reads, "Dear Whitney Museum. I hate you. Love, Ray Johnson.") A New York Times critic once dubbed RJ "New York's most famous unknown artist," [203] and the paradox still applies.

Critic Sharla Sava writes that Johnson first began to develop the use of mail as an art form in the 1950s, and began to apply the moniker of the New York Correspondence School to his correspondent activities in 1963. "The NYCS was comprised of a network of friends, strangers, and public figures in the worlds of art, politics, and entertainment with whom Johnson sustained an ongoing exchange of ephemera and correspondence."[204] In his mail art, collage is never far behind: Henry Martin reminds us that the collages "have

[203] Johnson, 7.
[204] Johnson, 121.

frequently been known to get cut apart and sent out in the mail to friends, and the Correspondence School is a vast sea of objects, images, and information that the collages often take as material to be worked on."[205] Collage, correspondence, and performance were far from discrete in Johnson's art-making; Martin's observation that the elements of mail and collage were shared also applies to the underlying ethic and drive of Johnson's art-making, arguably his very self.

Rife with slant intimacies, Johnson's collage and correspondence functioned both as a means for art-making and as a strategy for being-in-the-world. Through an almost pathological talent for homonymic punning and anagrammatic play, Ray spent his every waking moment investigating semiologic slippage and the ontological ruptures that ensue. Cutting and pasting, surgically altering the apparent wholeness of people, places, things, words, images and ideas was for Johnson as reflexive and compulsory as breathing. Endlessly decanting and replenishing identity's vessels, Johnson rendered the unrepresentable by bursting words and things apart at the seams. His collages and letters were full of code and word-play, homonymic neologisms, reversals and inversions that rhetoricized the drama of being-sent; the

[205] Johnson, 183.

gaps, lags, and delays of the U.S. post offered an ideal transit system for such a traveling show.[206]

While Johnson's correspondence work may have trafficked most obviously in the visual realm, it functioned as a deeply *writerly* project in its most intimate paradox: engaging the other while being alone. We suspect his double drive to collage *and* correspond has something to do with the cut cord of the maternal. Johnson claimed that "[his] reason for being interested in people is their anagrammatic names. Since I cut everything up they're all people like in a kaleidoscope, but one person is many-faceted, like a crossword puzzle."[207] (Correspondences, 147) I had thought he was going to say *diamond*, something with sides. A crossword puzzle has no sides, only intersections and gaps. Black squares, holes. Puzzles are series of problems based on word play, spaces that need filling: Johnson understood identity in much the same way. His correspondent project was to make these puzzles speak to one another across great and small distances, project these problems into space and in relation to one another. In so doing, Johnson relinquished authority by giving orders (*Detach and mail.*). Here, you do it. What Johnson desired

[206] Johnson would have undoubtedly made the Sullivanian pun on show and shoe, further delineating the ambulatory nature of the work. It just refuses to sit still. Not to mention the fact that Johnson was hilariously funny, ridiculous, the flip-side of all this theoretical baggage. Johnson liked to stick heavy vessels with pun-pins to deflate their egos, lighten the load.
[207] Johnson, 147.

(and created) was a self-propelling network that was set in motion by him but had a life of its own, was rhetorically attached to him, but traveled as a satellite that was distinctly detached from himself. Sound familiar? The tune has its maternal cadences. Each letter, and the NYCS as a "whole," carried Johnson's genetic code, but once sent, altered, and sent on again by the middleman, became something significantly other. This process of becoming-other was the essence of all of Johnson's work——the anagrams, the collage, the altered books, the writing, the mail art.

Johnson's New York Correspondence School re-negotiated the terms of the postal system much in the same way that his particular technique of collage reorganized the logic of portraiture. When names and things are busted up and taped back together, they uncover a truer palimpsest of identity's history. Johnson understood that his was an impermanent system——as one story goes, a collector who had bought a Johnson collage telephoned Ray to complain that the pieces of Scotch tape holding the piece together were drying out. The adhesive was failing: could he come over to repair the damage? Johnson responded to the news that his art was falling apart by leaving it be, reminding the collector that the nature of the work was to fade, decay, fall apart. Nothing Johnson made was "archival": this speaks to just one of many ways he

engaged the death-drive, and interruption. Johnson returned again and again to the subject of death in his work, and much has been made of his suicide as his final piece of performance art. Another piece, *A Book About Death*, offers structural clues: not really a book, its pages remained unbound. Loose leaves, the "book" was "an ongoing project of photo-offset drawings, pages of which [he] periodically mailed out to [his] friends."[208] It's as if the book, once bound, would be too complete, too whole; left as discrete pages, the work falls in line with the interrupted current of the NYCS.

The arrows in a mailing from 1971 draw out a road map to this umbilicus, full of tiny ruptures over which its missives leapt. The network of the NYCS was full of gaps, his collages full of schisms, and the directives he gave recipients included the instruction, *Detach along dotted line and mail*. Detachment was crucial to the system. Donna DeSalvo, in her introduction to the invaluable exhibition monograph, *Correspondences*, writes that Johnson was motivated by the "desire to work in the gap between art and life," and that he used collage as a paradigm for communication. "Decrying the need for a pure logic to his activities or evident reason for his distribution schemes…[he claimed,] 'A correspondence will reassert itself,' and his spontaneous gestures served as the vectors that created new relationships

[208] Johnson, 150.

and new players with whom he exchanged words and images."[209] Johnson's emphasis on *reassertion* underscores the mode of retrieval that was inherent in the system, the spool of the *fort-da* going out and back. The future tense, and the assumption that the correspondence will make itself known again and again without any need of logic or animation from its origin, illustrates that the "obsessive and relentless motion of contact" that underpinned the operations of the NYCS was a maternal, as well as filial, enterprise.

In his essay, "Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore," Johnson alludes to collage as "children's play":

> In collage, Marilyn [Monroe's] head can be put on Marianne [Moore's] body. One can pretend to be someone one is not. Children's play. I'll be you and you be me. Be my valentine. Ray Johnson wearing Marianne Moore's hat.[210]

Tripping out on eminence, the Ms that Moore and Monroe share, Johnson plays with superimposing the iconography of the dumb blonde on the intellectual spinster, and goes on a correspondent bender. The essay is a tangential masterpiece with MM's tricorne hat at the origin. What it ends up being is a meditation on identity and artistic practice unhinged. Wearing someone else's hat opens the door to the uncanny relation between self and other, a sensation that for most

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[209] Johnson, 19-20.
[210] Johnson, 169.

comes in glimpses and gaps, but elongates itself in Johnson's work.

The allusion to children's play throws out a reel towards the Freudian *fort-da* and its absent maternal. Was not Johnson's "daily ceremony" of collage, and the dance of the Correspondence School, that of throwing out a spool on a string, and then pulling it back? Few biographical details about Johnson's actual mother are available to us; when I asked Johnson's friend Bill Wilson if he knew anything about Ray's mother, his clearest memory was that Johnson had corresponded with *Wilson's* mother, artist May Wilson. This had been a vibrant and productive correspondence, he said, but could remember nothing about Johnson's relationship with his own mother. Again, a slant maternal trumps the real, and the absence of any "real" maternal evidence in the discourse surrounding Ray Johnson feeds into the notion of the NYCS as a fort-da machine. Children's play. *Detach along the dotted line and mail.*[211]

[211] Avital Ronell weighs in on *fort-da*, detachment, and retrieval: "The child throws the reel to call it back. Like the mother (but Lacan says the reel is not the mother), it is a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, still retained. Hang on to this detachable part. Disappearing like her and making her return along with himself, the child identifies with the long distance mother. Effecting his own disappearance, he masters himself symbolically, and he makes himself reappear henceforth in his very disappearance...[Derrida writes,]'The child makes himself *re-*... This recalling, by telephone or teletype (i.e. voice or writing, from afar), produces the 'movement' by contracting itself, by signing a contract with itself.'" Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, 86.

Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore?

How to begin to write an academic essay about an essay meant to defy the academic essay, intended to expose its ways and means as essentially bankrupt, false? Ray Johnson's "Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore" began as such a rebuke, a detour from the visual. Friend Bill Wilson writes that in 1963, "while Ray was thinking with the image of Marianne Moore's tricorne hat, I was planning to write a complementary essay…Ray so disapproved of my academic writing that he wrote an essay about Marianne Moore's hat to show how it should be done."[212] *Thinking with the image*, not solely about the image, authors a theory of the hat that is all-inclusive, a rounder, pluralistic world which Wilson's straight lines, complete sentences, and linear paragraphs could point to, but never completely inhabit. Johnson couldn't, wouldn't think straight; rather, he embraced and pursued the palimpsests and kaleidoscopes inherent in every name, word, and thing. No wonder, then, that his essay ends up being a delirious meditation not only on MM's hat, but on being-sent itself, a primer on correspondence, its ecstacies and aporias. It writes itself silly in tangents and circles, builds on misreadings and writings, propels itself forwards on slant rhymes, initials, reversals, and substitutions. Even while

[212] Johnson, 167.

writing, Johnson has scissors and glue in his hands. The anti-logic of his collage and correspondence, donning the costume of the essayistic, becomes a kind of manifesto. That its title takes the form of a question is significant, as is the fact that it is written on Y.M.C.A. stationery, with the heading, "MEMBER'S CORRESPONDENCE" in small caps, top left. Even, always, Johnson's essays take the form of letters.

Note that the pun on "member" is far from incidental. This will be neither the first nor the last time in his work that a meditation on Moore's eminent legacy shares space with the gay male underground. It seems that M.M. is always placed squarely there, whether her prodigality takes the shape of orality's O in "Untitled (Marianne Moore)," or beefcake phallism in "Untitled (Marianne Moore's Hat)." Because Johnson thinks and writes and corresponds with the image of her hat, MM becomes an ersatz member both of the homo-underground and the New York Correspondence School.

The Y.M.C.A. letterhead reminds us of how hilarious RJ could be, how in his cosmology the Freudian joke was as pertinent as the Freudian slip. Most important, though, its imprint reminds us of how *every action* that Johnson took was under the sign of correspondence. To take anything at face value meant to take its resemblances, antagonists, and casual acquaintances along for the ride.

Johnson used homonyms to illustrate simultaneity; as a result the uncanny becomes normalized. "Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore" becomes doubled-over space the instant we read its title, when, as Marianne's name doubles over itself, our understanding of her self comes into question. We have yet to address the question of this question, how "Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore?" takes the form of uncertain possibility, eschewing any ontological absolute. Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore? What kind of question is this?

Maurice Blanchot's writing on the question may shed some light. In *The Infinite Conversation*, a very different kind of correspondent primer, Blanchot approaches the rhetorical problem towards which the entirety of Johnson's work seems to be addressed:

> How can one speak so that speech is essentially plural? How can the search for a plural speech be affirmed, a speech no longer founded upon equality and inequality, no longer upon predominance and subordination, nor upon a reciprocal mutuality, but upon dissymmetry and irreversibility so that, between two instances of speech, a relation of infinity would always be involved as the movement of signification itself? Or, again, how can one write in such a way that the continuity of the movement of writing might let interruption as meaning, and rupture as form, intervene fundamentally?[213]

Johnson achieves this discontinuity by cutting and pasting, allowing the fragment to revel in itself as complete, and by asking the open-ended question of identity. Don't look

[213] Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation,* 8.

for an answer to the question, "Is Marianne Moore, Marianne Moore?": Johnson knew, as Blanchot wrote, that "The question is the desire of thought," the place of the incomplete, "The very movement by which the undetermined…still reserves itself."[214] The question manifests pure possibility; the answer closes off this opening, the pipeline of correspondence that Johnson sought to build in the NYCS. Sensitive to this very real rhetorical death, Johnson never answers his own questions, but leaves us hanging. "Questioning is the movement wherein being veers and appears as the suspension of being in its turning," the rhetorical distillation of being-sent. Blanchot tracks this theoretical movement, Being unfolding as a movement "turning in a circle…[going] from the most interior to the most exterior, from the undeveloped interiority to the exteriorization that alienates it, and from this alienation that exteriorizes up to an accomplished and reinteriorized plentitude."[215] Is this not the structure of the NYCS's traveling show, the path inscribed by the letter that is sent out, altered, and returned to sender?

Let's focus on the notion of interruption *as* meaning, and rupture as form for a moment, for this is as apt a description of the formal elements of "Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore"

[214] Blanchot, 12-13
[215] Blanchot, 15.

as we're likely to find. The essay is organized in paragraphs (non-indented though they may be) that help gather sentences together; taking on a rhythm like a bellows that opens and closes, Johnson's sentences are fragmented and his logic tangential. The sound of a word, name or letter reminds him of something which follows fast on the first thing's heels, and then another, and then another. This chain reaction of correspondences, interruption as meaning, and rupture as form, intervenes to such a degree that rupture itself becomes the piece's signature and subject. By unhinging the name in such a way, Johnson explodes the notion of identity and self as a static, coherent impenetrable dragon:

> Marianne Moore certainly is not Marilyn Monroe. In collage, Marilyn's head could be put on Marianne's body. One can pretend to be someone one is not. Children's play. Ray Johnson wearing Marianne Moore's hat. Lend me your ears.[216]

Just as the phrase, "You send me" has no object, "Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore?" has no answer, or two answers: yes and no. Doubling-over her name, folding Marianne in two, Johnson sends her. William Wilson reminds us that this was Johnson's m.o.: "Ray thought of himself sometimes as a set of twins. Always loving sets in motion…when Ray was consciously two, himself and his twin, ghost or other double, his

[216] Johnson, 169.

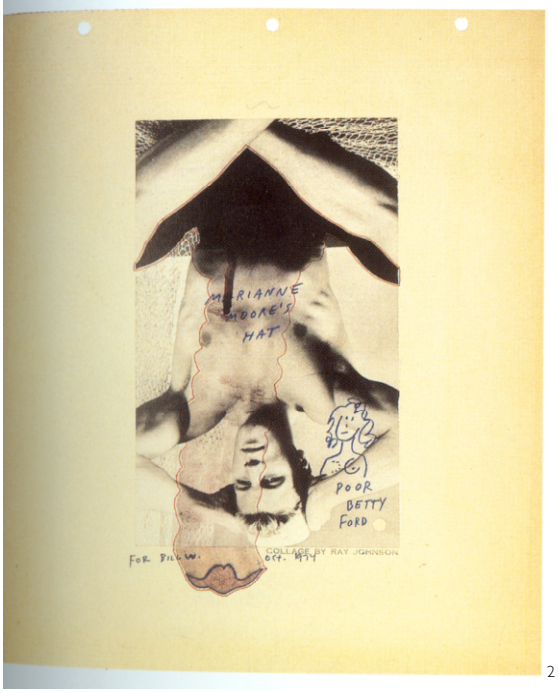
relations with one other person became triangular. He used threeness to alleviate problems in twoness. Such triangulations opened his responses to the three-cornered hat worn by Marianne Moore.“ [217]

[217] Johnson, 166.

Untitled (Marianne Moore), 1963
6⅝ x 3¼
William S. Wilson

218

Untitled
(Marianne Moore's Hat), 1974
13½ x 11¼
William S. Wilson



219

[218] Ray Johnson, *Correspondences*, 81.
[219] Johnson, *Correspondences*, 81.

Tricorne

Johnson recognized MM's tricorne as sign of her eminence; the tricorne hat was Marianne's trademark, suggesting that triangulation defined her, became her crowning glory. He knew, too, that the tricorne's connection to the postal principle is deep. A three-sided version of Derrida's emblematic post card, Marianne's tricorne is a postal animal due to its thirdness. The hat shares the postcard's recto/verso ambivalence; it's impossible to locate its front or back in any definitive way. Its three points suggest constant revolution, return-to-sender's loop, how each letter inscribes a return to the self as it travels towards the other. Anne Carson describes the epistolary action in ancient texts as standing "oblique to the action and unfold[ing] a three-cornered relation," producing a "triangular, paradoxical, electric"[220] effect; Johnson was drawn to MM's hat because it manifested this effect in three dimensions. On a purely formal level, the three points represented the triangulation that is elemental to the postal principle, not to mention the thirdness that resonates in all things queer: the odd term that can derail straight thinking and being. The third rail on which Johnson's work propelled itself took shape in MM's hat.

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[220] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 91.

In Moore's tricorne, the postal principle takes shape as style itself, the iconography of legend. The tricorne effect was heightened by its being completely out-of-sync with contemporary style: in Moore's public appearances in the 60s, clad in tricorne and her collared, "too-big" shirts,[221] she looks like a suffragette, or a general of letters. The mode of tricorne-as-costume surely spoke to RJ, concerned as he was with the objects, garments, words, and names we use as protective devices against, and filters of, the outside. As Bill Wilson asserts, the tricorne was representative of both protection and a kitschy militarism: "anachronistic and militarily fantastic," the hat appeared "to Moore's head as her imagination was to her mind as she moved images and signs about to protect her mind from an undesignated reality."

I don't quite buy Wilson's reading of Moore's imagination as something opposed to her mind, or the idea that her motivation for writing poetry was primarily a protective one. Wilson's description seems to apply more to Johnson's sensibility; it's likely that this reading of the hat-as-helmet, and the manipulation of signs as a prophylactic necessity, was what Johnson saw and identified with in MM's tricorne. The idea of moving signs and images about certainly applies directly to his daily practice – what he called "the ceremony" —– of collage, and we may at the very least take

[221] Bishop, 122.

from Wilson's observation that Johnson's fascination with the hat signals that it represented a form and process of mediating stimulus from the outside world. The hat makes a kind of envelope, a filter, or mind-shield.

The hat as shield, or battle helmet, takes a back seat to other modalities in Johnson's collages. There, the tricorne's substance seems more shadowy than solid, less a protective barrier than a darkness from which oneiric fantasies spring. Johnson chooses to explore the shadow under the aunt's brim in "Exchanging Hats," and to play with the spatial hierarachy of the hat — how its wearer exists perpetually underneath its brim. Moore understood this, even as a young woman: in a letter to her mother written while in 1908, she alludes to the being-topped of hat shopping and wearing. The letter extensively describes an excursion to buy a spring hat, a trip on which MM had to beg her mother to let her go alone. The letter suggests that an enormous amount of energy, time, and discussion was necessary to complete the purchase, that MWM was consulted on every crucial detail before approving the transaction. Marianne had to beg her mother to let her go shopping alone: the choice of a hat was assumedly too important to be made without Mother's guidance, or at least that of a proxy aunt. After Mother insists that Aunt Mary accompany Marianne on the shopping venture, Marianne pleads in

a subsequent letter to let her "go *alone* for a hat,"[222] arguing that her good judgment in millinery matters precluded the need for Aunt Mary's assistance. She goes alone, but makes no purchase before consulting MWM once more:

> I got no hat yesterday—at Wanamaker's, and Gimbel's there was *nothing*, at Stetson's a hat which I almost came down to, a brown shiny, fine straw with pale yellow inch rim, trimmed with feathers. The hat is $6 (itself) the feathers could be removed and dull brown ribbon substituted (beautiful ribbon) which would make the cost 9.50 instead of 15 as it is now. The shape is becoming but the hat is *big* and I was afraid to get it.
>
> At Keebler's a plain hat place (*sic)* I saw a panama hat "mushroom" shape with a black band, for $10. I should like to get it, if you are willing. It is white, and *plain*. There is nothing on it—and you desire things so *dressy* or rather suitable to all occasions that I was afraid to get *it*. What attracts me, is good material and both these hats are so beautiful I feel as if I should feel comfortable under either. The Stetson one would just suit the pongee suit. But it would not naturally be the thing for blue.
>
> I like very much the plain 3-cornered sailor and should invest in such (black) if you would allow me.[223]

Several themes loom large, here: the importance of thriftiness, simplicity, and the *plain*, not only because the Moores so valued cleanliness of line, but because the spring hat had to be "suitable for all occasions," a necessary accessory for everyday wear. The essence of the hat's dailiness connects to how, in later years, Moore will become identified with and by the tricorne, as a costume, uniform, and marker of style. We don't know which hat Moore ended up

[222] Moore, *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, 43.
[223] Moore, 46.

buying, but it's quite possible that this letter marks the birth of MM's "investment" in the tricorne. If so, it only came to pass because Mother allowed it.

A less obvious element to the hat-purchase, and yet striking all the same, is Moore's proclamation that she "should feel comfortable *under* either (italics mine). The characterization is sweet and perverse; Moore establishes the hat as something which tops her, a relationship which suits her just fine. The hat offers both power and safety; her comfort underneath means this power dynamic constitutes a successful working relationship. Marianne, underneath her chapeau, is graced with its strength; she is safe, and ready for action (i.e., writing).

The only requirement for such an investment would be Mother's seal of approval, the transfer of power that purchase makes real.

Flat Black

Being under and topped by the hat reminds us once again of another MM, Bishop's Man-Moth, whose orientation in the world is anchored in the *underneath*. The Man-Moth lives underground, rising to the surface only occasionally, and always night, in darkness. This shadow realm is Ray Johnson's territory, and in his collages, the black space of the hat folds under and gives rise to dreamy bodies. Think of alternate dimensions to and of the real; first and foremost, Johnson plays with scale while playing with MM's hat. It's all out of proportion. In "Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore?" he uses puns to illustrate the paradoxical dimensionality of the "flat black" hat:

> About Marianne Moore's hat. It is a manta ray. It is flat black…I once thought of painting my flat black I had read a book about S.D. (sensory deprivation) where people were put in dark rooms for long periods of time…[224]

What was Johnson's interest in sensory deprivation? A quick Google search on S.D. turns up articles on flotation tanks designed for deep relaxation, advertisements for S/M hoods, an article on torture and interrogation techniques at Guantanamo Bay, and the effect of isolation on inmates at supermax prisons. Sadly, we don't know what book Johnson read, where his interest in sensory deprivation took root: we

[224] Johnson, 173.

do know, however, that in the sixties the discourse on S.D. was largely one of psychological experimentation and altered states. Hallucinatory experience, and the expansion of one's "experiential horizons" was one area of study.[225] The "flat black" room, engineered to induce extreme perceptual states, reminds us of the secondary meaning of a hat's "brim": the max, the threshold. "Brim" in this context is the lip of a container that is prone to overflow, an overstuffed envelope or a bulging waistline. The coffee commercial that urged us to "Fill it to the rim…with Brim!" awakened our desire to take our consumption to extremes, to go ahead, have as much as we wanted. The "Brim" commercial hinted that something like a bottomless cup could in fact exist, that theirs was the inexhaustible elixir that could save us. The blackness of the hat spoke to Johnson of such promise. "Thinking with the image of the hat," he embarked on a pilgrimage towards the fourth dimension, an experience of extra-sensory perception that takes the form of the hallucinatory, the obscene, and the divine. And with the pun on "flat black," MM's tricorne becomes both hat and domicile, a *living space* in which he could trip out under the brim, hang ten over the brink.

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[225] Robert E. Mogar, "Current Status and Future Trends in Psychedelic Research," *Journal of Human Psychology*, Vol. 2, 1965, pp. 147-166. Jack Vernon, Theodore Marton, and Ernest Peterson. "Sensory Deprivation and Hallucinations: What conditions of minimal or controlled sensory stimulation favor the generation of hallucinations?" *Science* 9 June 1961: 1808-1812.

Untitled (Marianne Moore)

"Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore" is not the first, or only time the tricorne hat makes a starring appearance in Ray Johnson's work. Two collages in particular that date from several years before and after the essay suggest that Ray "thought with the image" of MM's hat for over a decade, and that his meditations on the tricorne were central to a larger trajectory of thought and art-making. I focus on two images in particular here, mostly because they are readily available to the public in a monograph of Johnson's work. The first is "Untitled (Marianne Moore)," a collage made in 1963, and "Untitled (Marianne Moore's Hat)," which dates from 1974.

Of the two, "Untitled (Marianne Moore)" is simpler, yet somehow more baffling. In it, Johnson has superimposed on Moore's elderly face a cutout illustration of a mouth open impossibly wide. The drawing is diagrammatic, possibly taken from a medical textbook, and tiny letters on the tongue, teeth, and upper palate suggest a lost or missing key. Wickedly out of proportion, the mouth entirely obscures the features of her face, and is reined in only by the tricorne, which establishes a triangular border to the mouth's circle. Framing orality's O, the sharp lines of the hat lend a much-needed boundary to the mouth's excesses.

The simplicity of the collage, its one substitution, leaves little room for ambiguity. And yet, the piece is no one-trick pony. No punchline exhausts the joke; no peace can be found in the image. The disjunctiveness of a mouth that seems to have consumed the delicate features of MM's face suggests an orality and erotics that are out of control. And eroticism of any kind, be it excessive or no, is a topic rarely broached in Moore's presence, even critically, thirty years after her death. This has to do in part with the Moore's codes of propriety, and also how we view her canonic work: while prodigious, Moore seemed to be the absolute epitome of self-control. Johnson takes this self-control and flips it, tapping into the mad force of her writing energies, the control freakishness that shaped language's coal into diamonds.

It is no coincidence that Moore's excesses are most visible in the sheer volume of her correspondence, the bulk of which is a tsunami compared to the average writer's tide. Bonnie Costello estimates that at the apex of her fame, Moore topped out at fifty letters a day, and that thirty thousand letters have been preserved by her correspondents. How many more than that were actually written? Taken in this context, the open mouth suggests the opening to a conduit that cannot be closed off, a broken water main of letters.

Not only is the mouth out of proportion to the face it eclipses, but we are unable to read its directionality with any certainty. The pasted mouth terrifies us on account of its ambivalence. It seems to be inhaling and exhaling at the same time. Its pendulum appears to be suspended, ready to ingest or expel, and the reader has no way of knowing which direction to anticipate, or follow. In the original photo, the expression on Moore's face is that of an indrawn breath. Her eyes are half-closed; her hand forms a delicate gesture that appears as though she is conducting a quiet symphony. In Johnson's collage, the mouth that obscures these delicate details exudes complete surrender, and, at the same time, the assault of a scream so large it could shake houses. Moore's voice goes both ways, silent and deafening.[226]

The only thing that contains this mouth, gives it any sort of frame, is the tricorne. Its straight, black lines offer a thick border to the too-open mouth, reminding us of Moore's love for delineation and impeccable metrics, her love of line. Were it not for the hat, the mouth would go mad.

[226] The mouth seems also to refer to the *open wide!* of the doctor's office, the "Oh!" of pain that goes both ways in Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," and brokers Elizabeth's coming-to-self.

Untitled (Marianne Moore's Hat)

Johnson's hat ontology involves the pornographic but is not limited to it: it casts pornography's shadow. In Johnson's "Untitled (Marianne Moore's Hat)," Johnson uses the tricorne as a wellspring of queer sexuality, a paradoxical source of both invagination and growth. Shadow allows for the occurrence of both, simultaneously.

While "Untitled (Marianne Moore)," made six years before Stonewall, establishes an erotics of orality and excess, it remains, in a sense, closeted, separate from explicit reference to gay male sex or sexuality. "Untitled (Marianne Moore's Hat)," on the other hand, marries queer sexuality to Moore's iconography, bringing the hat's generative power to the very center of the work. In the piece, Johnson has reproduced a photo of a blond male nude, then turned it upside down. His genitals, obscured by shadow, appear only as a black triangle, below which Johnson has written "MARIANNE MOORE'S HAT." In red pen, he has drawn an enormous erection emerging from the shadow-hat, nearly twice the size of the man's torso. It's a hilarious dirty joke, not only because of the cock's size but because of the idea of its growing from, and being housed by, Moore's prim hat. And yet, there is more to this picture than a simple laugh at MM's expense. Our

laughter taps into a deeper current: the shadow-world of Moore's own sexuality, and what it might have to do with queerness. Johnson uses a language of dislocation and paradox to describe it: the disproportionate size of the phallus, and the paradox of invagination and growth that the shadow-hat establishes. A slant transexualism is in the air, here; not the drastic measures of actual M2F or F2M surgeries, but a kind of *member's correspondence* that Johnson's Y.M.C.A. stationery alludes to in "Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore?" The signature of Moore's propriety houses and gives rise to pornographic excess; this is a portrait of queer fruit in blossom, drawing a clear connection between Moore's own poetic output and the prodigious endowment of a blonde beauty. This beauty is itself a kind of hybrid of blonde luminosity and hat-shadow, of relaxed cross-leggedness and erection, of invagination and swell: Johnson teases us to poke around in the shadows of Moore's silences and investigate her own hybrid perversities, her excesses and silences of letters.

A small cartoon drawn on the right side of the collage, like a footnote, adds another shade to this picture of slant transexualism: in blue felt-tipped pen, next to the model's head, is a small cartoon of a female torso with one breast intact, and one breast missing, with the caption, "Poor Betty Ford." First Lady Ford underwent mastectomy surgery in 1974,

and it is likely that the piece coincided with the announcement of the surgery in the news. Why include the cartoon in the piece? Current events of the day were central to Johnson's work and its marking of time: remember that he called collage a "daily ceremony," a ritual of immediacy and dailiness, a way to approach and make sense of daily life and living. And with the drawing in the same blue marker as the caption, "Marianne Moore's Hat," Johnson sets in motion a twist on the castration complex over which the hat presides. Betty's breast-lack is a mirror image of the model's enormous image, her face an inverted camera lucida-like projection of the model's pretty face. The tricorne anchors the inverted complex from above, the play of presence-as-absence that Johnson's work ~ and the work of correspondence art generally ~ makes known. Ford's story is of a body in transition, off-center; so too, is that of the beautiful boy. Both bodies are in flux, in between; neither is at rest in the traditional garments of gender. The first lady is stripped of a breast; masculinity is anchored in female shadow, and the pornographic is topped by propriety's hat.

Four and twenty blackbirds

To suggest that Marianne Moore even *had* a sexuality, or a sexual life, is a somewhat radical act. Johnson exposes the lie of assuming otherwise, and speculates that, on the contrary, Moore's sexuality included turbulent and uncontrollable longing, that, Medusa's hair hid underneath the tricorne. In "Is MM MM?" he writes,

> About Marianne Moore's hat. Medusa snake hair
> pig tails a piece of pie and when the
> pie was opened the birds began to sing…
>
> About Marianne Moore's hat. It is a manta ray.
> It is flat black. Can you imagine
> her with a large piece of pie on her head?[227]

We mustn't write off this question of the hat-pie —— Johnson's metaphor is no mere trifle. Just as in his pictorial collages, he uses substitution, play, and convulsive jokestering to tap into core ontological breaches. The idea of Moore with pie on her head is hilarious; while reading in a public library we have to stifle a guffaw. Both this response, and the metaphor that elicits it, circle back to Freud's writing on both trauma and the joke. Pie in place of Moore's omnipresent (and

[227] Johnson, *Correspondences*, 173.

somewhat omnipotent) tricorne offers another connection to Freud and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that encourages us to read hats not only as markers of identity, "umbrellas of the proper name," but conduits and cloaks that key into our relation to trauma and the outside world. In *Beyond the PP,* while describing trauma's effects on our consciousness as it relates to the pleasure principle, Freud, too, uses a pie metaphor: speculating on the nature of the system consciousness and how it negotiates stimulus from the outside, Freud compares it to a "living organism in its most simplified form as an undifferentiated vesicle of a substance that is susceptible to stimulation," the fruity center of an unbaked pie:

> It would be easy to suppose, then, that as a result of the ceaseless impact of external stimuli on the surface of the vesicle, its substance to a certain depth may have become permanently modified, so that excitatory processes run a different course in it from what they run in the deeper layers. A crust would be formed which would at last have been so thoroughly "baked through" by stimulation that it would present the most favourable possible conditions for the reception of stimuli and become incapable of any further modification.[228]

Trauma disengages the PP, cuts through the pie. Only the traumatic experience is powerful enough to break through the shield: "there is no longer any possibility of

[228] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 28-29.

preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus," and a new problem arises instead, "the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can be disposed of."[229]

This new information allows us to read the pie-portrait of Moore in a new way. To imagine Moore "with a large piece of pie on her head" is to visualize our poetic matriarch with a trauma-crown, her poetics as a means of mastering and binding a flood. Moore's masterful control of vocabulary, diction, meter and grammar is so deft that we rarely consider excess and overflow as a part of her cosmology. The privacy and propriety with which her private and emotional life remain so closely guarded play no small part. It may be only in her inheritors — Bishop, Johnson, Cornell, and others — that trauma scars are more readily visible. But Johnson's portrait points us towards the ancillary drama of correspondence — the conduit between, and negotiation of, inside and outside on which writing is based.

[229] Freud, 33-34.

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