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The Engraver's Hand: Representation and Image in Elizabeth Bishop's "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance"

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...Our visions coincided—“visions” is too serious a word—our looks, two looks:
art “copying from life” and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they’ve turned into each other. Which is which?
Life and the memory of it cramped,
dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
dim, but how we live, how touching in detail
—the little that we get for free,
the little of our earthily trust. Not much.
About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.
—From “Poem,” Elizabeth Bishop

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In “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” Elizabeth Bishop sets out for distant lands—ancient cities, islands, places long barren—to explore how image adapts and changes in reaction to unfamiliarity. The trope of travel might seem an obvious and even cliched way of representing the manner in which a poem can transport a reader, or an experience, a poet, but there is nothing traditional about Bishop’s wanderings. She carries us over a great deal of ground geographically, historically, and theoretically as she enacts a careful mediation between the sites visited and the illustrations perused. Ultimately, she erodes the boundaries between text and image and imagination and reality, suggesting a new sort of vision which transcends physical sight.

The poem opens, “Thus should have been our travels: / serious, engravable,” emphasizing from the beginning the stark contrast between the traveler’s memory (not serious, not engravable) and the Bible’s illustrations (serious, engraved) (1-2). The engraved Bible only arrives as such at the end, and then, rather subtly, so upon first reading, we have no distinct understanding of the division between seen and printed image that Bishop is beginning to construct. We start to intuit the tension, though, when we cannot be sure whether the branches, courtyard, and well of the first stanza are components of a picture or actual physical objects. This ambiguity is deliberate, and in fact emphasized by the similes which accompany the branches, which “look like files,” and the courtyard, which is “like a diagram” (11,13). Files and diagrams have to do with the storage of information, the schematization of it, and whether Bishop intends the scene to be a real place or not, the description of the courtyard remains strange. If the courtyard is within an illustration, then it is a diagram that is “like a diagram”—built into this comparison is a suggestion of difference—but if the courtyard is real, it becomes diagrammatic only within the traveler’s vision of it.

Both possibilities speak to the manner in which apprehending something can change it. The courtyard, whether naturally a diagram or a diagram only when perceived, can never be seen simply as a courtyard. It can exist simply as a courtyard, but the introduction of the viewer, the perceiver, creates a fundamental distance, one that in turn prompts analogy. This proclivity—the attempt to make things comprehensible on our own terms—enters the poem quietly: “Always the silence, the gesture, the specks of birds / suspended on invisible threads above the Site, / or the smoke rising solemnly, pulled by
threads” (17-19). Perhaps precisely because we cannot be sure whether these birds are living creatures or creatures of image, they manage to be both, suspended at once in the air and on the page. The “threads,” mentioned twice in two lines, are what fix the birds in the image, or in the traveler’s sight, as well as more figurative entities which invisibly yoke the two terms of an analogy. In other words, Bishop is enacting metaphor to describe metaphor. That the smoke is “pulled up” suggests it does not rise of its own accord, but instead is actively moved by something above it. This motion is the motion of one thing compared to another, a motion which requires, and yet attempts to bridge, distance. Though the smoke is moved by the threads, we do not know what moves the threads; the motive force is absent from the poem. This lack is at the center of analogy, as Elaine Scarry notes in *On Beauty and Being Just*: “In the absence of its counterpart, one term of an analogy actively calls out for its missing fellow; it presses on us to bring its counterpart into existence . . . An analogy is inert and at rest only if both terms are present in the world; when one term is absent, the other becomes an active conspirator for the exile’s return” (100-01). Bishop figures the conspiracy for the exile’s return not only in the threads, but also in “the gesture,” which is another, more physical sort of reaching out.

Though Scarry’s use of “exile” is general and somewhat figurative, it is particularly apt in reference to the geographical wanderings of “2,000 Illustrations.” The traveler, able to move from Morocco to Mexico to Ireland, feels a pronounced sense of unease in the world: freedom of movement does not correspond to comfort, but rather engenders a certain discontinuity of place. Despite the extraordinary list of place-images in the poem—from the reddish goats leaping buttery cliffs on St. Johns to the purposeful Italian collegians to the pockmarked prostitutes of Marrakesh—which should, perhaps, correlate to a more general notion of place, these particular, exotic scenes are only examples. They are instantiations which do not guarantee the existence of an underlying idea; they are not parts of a whole, but rather insufficiently joined components at best. Bishop explains the failure of conjunctions with an attempt to yoke: “Everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and’” (60). Her triple “and” is wonderfully clever because it employs parataxis while criticizing it, physically representing the discontinuity between the poem’s separate scenes. The first and third “and”s are small islands, and the second
is a failed bridging of the archipelago. Here we have a microcosmic representation of the traveler’s quandary: how does one go forth into the world and experience it in very particular, different ways, without being overcome by disparity, defeated in an attempt to discern coherence? The concomitant question is why we desire the continuity of “and” over, for example, the contrast of “but.”

The power of disparity is significant and even dangerous—in Bishop’s poem, the quiet homelessness which pervades can be ascribed to an at least temporary supremacy of “but.” Despite its difficult repercussions, though, difference is integral to the thematic ambition of the piece and to trope itself. Another way to articulate Scarry’s idea of analogy’s dependence on absence would be to describe it as dependent on difference. Both describe the same relationship: absence spatializes the interval, whereas difference emphasizes the disjunction between the two terms. Let’s return to a familiar example, the courtyard which is like a diagram. It is not the courtyard’s similarity to a diagram which interests us here (after all, if it were identical to a diagram, the simile would no longer be necessary), but rather its difference from it, the ways in which it is not a diagram. The comparison of the courtyard to a diagram simultaneously draws the two terms together and pushes them apart. These competing motions recall the birds, which are autonomous and yet linked to invisible threads. The tension present in the courtyard and the birds is evidence of a more general anxiety in the poem, that of the relationship between world image (which, in that it is experienced, we might think of as primary) and textual image (which would, then, be secondary). In other words, the experienced and the represented are constantly competing within Bishop’s poem, and they do not always interact cleanly.

Though challenging to articulate fully, a danger of sundering is implicit in description. The fixing of an object, place, or scene in image or words calls for a great degree of care, for it brings with it the liability of petrifying the object, place, or scene. Rendering the animate inanimate or the mobile immobile is a fracturing that Bishop represents with an organic image of growth: “at Volubilis there were beautiful poppies / splitting the mosaics”\(^1\) (43-44). These lines, deceptively lovely as an image, are all too easy to pass over, but they contain an instructive instance of the poem’s primary concern.

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\(^1\) Volubilis, located in present-day Morocco, was a flourishing center of late Hellenistic culture in the first centuries BC and AD and contains extensive Roman ruins, due to its annexation to Rome around 44 AD.
The mosaics, themselves representations, perhaps even of poppies, are being broken and thus in a certain sense re-animated by their living subject matter. The cycle between image and representation of image circles back as the flowers separate the tesserae, creating a strange sort of pixellation wherein the primary and secondary\(^2\) coexist. Neither dominates, but nevertheless the two are not reconciled. It remains that the poppies are physically breaking the mosaic, not unlike the way in which the traveler is fractured by his or her incongruous experiences of the world, or the way Bishop herself is broken by image in “The Weed.”

Published in an earlier collection of poems, *North & South*, “The Weed” is a surreal meditation on a plant that grows out of Bishop’s heart in a dream, ultimately bifurcating into two rivers. These rivers in turn perform a strange baptism of Bishop which endows her with a new vision:

A few drops fell upon my face
and in my eyes, so I could see
(or, in that black place, thought I saw)
that each drop contained a light,
a small, illuminated scene;
the weed-deflected stream was made
itself of racing images.
(As if a river should carry all
the scenes that it had once reflected
shut in its waters, and not floating
on momentary surfaces.) (40-50)

That the images constitute the stream suggests a peculiar combination of object and representation: the stream, a natural entity, has an atomic structure of autonomous scenes. These scenes make up the river, rather than the other way around, thus calling into question the assumption that the object is separate from and exists outside of representations of it. The inquiry into the link between object and representation is further complicated by the collocation of light and image: “each drop contained a light, / a small illuminated scene.” The light *is* the image in these lines, in turn implying that the illuminated scenes may in actuality be nothing more than the play of light on the surface

\(^2\) I’m using these terms provisionally here, for there is clearly a complication between primary and secondary implicit in the image of the poppies growing up through the mosaics.
of the river.\(^3\) The notion that the light only becomes a scene within the viewer’s perception of it recalls the courtyard, diagrammatic to the eye, and leads us to wonder whether all image is interpreted light. Apprehension, then, becomes a miraculous, generative event which moves beyond the categories of object and representation to focus on what it means to exist between the two. This kind of seeing is liminal—here Scarry’s description of the often synaesthetic experience of beholding is pertinent: “This crisscrossing of the senses may happen in any direction. Wittgenstein speaks not only about beautiful visual events prompting motions in the hand but, elsewhere, about heard music that later prompts a ghostly sub-anatomical event in his teeth and gums” (4).

If there is any sub-anatomical event for Bishop, however, as a result of seeing these light-scenes, it is not a revelation, but rather a disappointment. She realizes that she has imagined, not seen, the ideal interstice between image and representation, light and scene: rivers do not, and cannot, carry all that they have reflected. They are momentary surfaces, always changing and refracting, mercurial in their meaning. Bishop’s bodily experience of the river’s water, at first miraculous and later painful, evidences her incredible, visceral engagement with her subject. Though she logically understands that a river can never be physically constituted by what it has reflected, she endeavors to defy the limits of image, even if it is going to break her. The closing lines of “The Weed” emphasize this fracturing: to Bishop’s query of what it is doing there, the weed answers, “I grow... / but to divide your heart again” (55-56). The sense that splitting—of rivers, of hearts, of mosaics—is a necessary component of the poetic act indicates the intimate link

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\(^3\) Whether the connection is particularly instructive or not, the resonance between Bishop’s new vision and that with which Dante is endowed toward the end of Paradiso cannot be denied:

> and I saw light that took a river’s form—
> light flashing, reddish-gold, between two banks
> painted with wonderful spring flowerings
> Out of that stream there issued living sparks,
> which settled on the flowers on all sides,
> like rubies set in gold; and then, as if
> intoxicated with the odors, they
> again plunged into the amazing flood:
> as one spark sank, another spark emerged. (XXX.61-69)

While Dante physically experiences this new vision, Bishop only dreams it, and while it allows Dante to see things that otherwise would have blinded him, for Bishop it painfully highlights the transience of any given image. In this sense, the two experiences are almost antithetical, but the ways in which they are described are similar and both treat the question of how to portray the supernatural within, or by means of, the natural.
between growth and division in language. There can be no reunion here, however, because the fracturing is continuous.

Nevertheless, "2,000 Illustrations" is neither messy nor sprawling, for Bishop remains committed to a degree of exactitude akin to the copper-etcher's. As a result, the first instance of imprecision, the location of the holy grave, comes as a surprise, a stark contrast to the extraordinary catalog of geographic and cultural particulars that has occupied most of the first two stanzas. Following the vividly conjured prostitutes, who practically kneel before us in their specificity, this place, which "was somewhere near there," is enigmatic and intriguing (54). It seems as if Bishop is hesitant to disclose its exact location for fear of misrepresenting it or altering it. To place the grave specifically within the fictional space of the poem might make the grave itself fictional, or fictionalized, and in turn erode its affective power. To express it vaguely, however, allows it to exist as a real and a fictional thing simultaneously, without one valence subsuming the other. Bishop worries little about fixing the Englishwoman, for example, in an instance of detail that metonymically comes to stand for the woman herself, for this Englishwoman is a device within the poem, a mere member of the incredible catalog of varied locations and experiences. The grave, however, lacking even the dust "of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there," possesses the power to frighten: in its understated silence, it calls out, "carved solid / with exhortation" (63, 59-60). It is an absence made present in the space of imagination, the distance between the eye and the world. The grave becomes all the more holy because it is free to be nearly anywhere and mean nearly anything: it is defined by a geographic and thematic polysemy.

The notion that the power of a poetic image is commensurate with its lack of fixity leads to the issue of naming, specifically whether to name something is to delimit it. Robert Hass articulates the problem elegantly in "Meditation at Lagunitas," writing that "a word is elegy to what it signifies" (11). In Bishop, it is not simply the word which is in danger of being elegiac, but also the symbol—the act of writing is fraught with several sorts of liability, of which symbolization is only one. To represent something too strongly in one incarnation is to limit it, to erode its presence as an idea and make it too dominantly a thing. Wallace Stevens offers a striking enactment of this mistake in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":
Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

...

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images . . .

...

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be. (1-21)

The quadruply-repeated refrain of “idea” is at the center of the passage and in fact the whole of the poem, for it is precisely the idea of things that we, as sentient beings, have difficulty with. The sun as we know it is the sun as we perceive it, the sun-as-thing: the giver of light and warmth. Even when used as an image or a symbol, it is defined by its properties and therefore inextricably linked to us. If we attempt to represent it as an idea, we are always extrapolating from what we know of it (which is to say, what we have perceived of it), and thus not representing the idea of it, but rather reifying the idea of it. A concrete thing, however, does not necessarily translate into a concrete idea, so we must ignore our knowledge of the sun-as-thing, or even try to forget it, when we are attempting to work with the sun-as-idea. Personification, for example, as in the case of Phoebus, falls short: “Phoebus was / a name for something that could never be named.” The reason for this failure lies in the assumption that the ability to name characteristics of a given thing translates into an analogous ability to describe the sophisticated qualities of an idea. Such a correspondence does not necessarily exist—it ignores, for example, the possibility of the ineffable. That the sun must inhabit “the difficulty of what it is to be” is
not elegiac, like Hass’s word or Stevens’ Phoebus, but rather full of promise. This potential is born from the fact that the sun-as-idea is not assigned a particular imagistic or theoretical embodiment, but is, rather literally, the idea of the difficulty of being. Bound to no particular thing, it is free to become any shape or form in the imagination.

Stevens’ conception of a heaven “that has expelled us and our images” and allows a poetic subject to exist dynamically within a landscape of ideas carries us back to Bishop’s struggle with the actual and the imagined in “2,000 Illustrations.” As Stevens employs the sun to explore the interplay between thing and idea, Bishop opposes travel and an engraved Bible to challenge the division between experience and representation. While it is clear that Stevens separates the sun which is the difficulty of being from the sun which lights his rooms⁴, Bishop seems to desire a certain mediation, or interplay, between the particularity of place the traveler experiences and the generality of the Biblical allegories. This is ultimately manifested in a setting-in-motion of the engraved illustrations. Whereas the particular places are somewhat fleeting and ultimately dissatisfactory, the fixed illustrations unfold into miniature worlds. They allow a movement of imagination, and strangely, they are the most animated things in the poem. Though “they all resolve themselves,” they retain the movement of their creation, and effervesce each time they are beheld:

The eye drops, weighted, through the lines  
the burin made, the lines that move apart  
like ripples above sand,  
dispersing storms, God’s spreading fingerprint,  
and painfully, finally, that ignite  
in watery prismatic white-and-blue. (26-31)

These lines contain an extraordinary layering, an archaeology of image. The eye guides the engraver’s hand, the burin marks the copper plate like it is a landscape, the marked plate is like windblown sand, in turn the engraver’s hand is like God’s hand, and, finally, the image is like the sea, which is also the page seen by the eye, carrying us back to the beginning again. This nuanced cycle is at the crux of understanding how it is that a representation fixed within a text can “[pollinate] the fingertips” (67). Though the

⁴ At least in a theoretical capacity, and perhaps only in a theoretical capacity. “Sunday Morning,” for example, is clear evidence of Stevens’ appreciation of real sunlight.
pictures printed on the page are themselves static, they can come alive when looked at. The glance, which makes the lines of the engraving ripple—appropriately invoking a topographical map—contains within it two underlying, analogous movements, that of the artist's hand, and that of God's. Within the imagination, divine vision and human vision are collocated, and these two original motions, themselves intimately connected, are recreated in the ink on the page, which itself begins to move "in watery prismatic white-and-blue." Even this water is polysemous: Bishop's use of "ignite" creates an opposition between flame and water and figures the sea as blue gas, thus making the illustrations voluble. They become prismatic as well: they move, and are moved by, light.

Recognizing the dynamism of the engravings liberates Bishop from the binary of real versus represented. Freed from the conjunctions which fall short, from the strange places which feel inexplicably empty, she can move into the realm of the imagination without feeling as if she has to legitimize it. By positing representation as an ever-changing thing, she creates a new sort of travel. This travel is between text and the world, carried out by the image-as-traveler, which articulates the real within the realm of the imaginary. Italo Calvino pursues this concept of the hyper-real text in *Invisible Cities*:

"I think you recognize cities better on the atlas than when you visit them in person," the emperor says to Marco, snapping the volume shut. And Polo answers, "Traveling, you realize that differences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, distances, a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents. Your atlas preserves the differences intact: that assortment of qualities which are like the letters in a name." (137)

Polo's privileging of the atlas is distinctly congruent to Bishop's ultimate understanding of the engraved Bible. Both are concerned with maintaining difference, differentiation, and doing so not in a physical way, but rather in a textual one. Reading Calvino, we realize that Bishop's Bible is transmuted into an atlas of sorts by the end of "2,000 Illustrations," for it is the site where the real travels, the most essential places, are

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5It is interesting to note that "lunette," the term Bishop uses a few lines preceding the section cited above, can mean a small crescent moon or, as it likely does here, "a circular crystal case...in which the host is placed for exposition" (OED). Transubstantiation requires an inferential leap similar to that which animates the image, and both are based on a certain faith, which might be defined as the "substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews: 11:1).
recorded. Unlike Stevens' Phoebus, however, neither the atlas nor the Bible is elegiac in its taxonomization, for neither is quite fixed. As the names of seashore towns can run out to sea, so too can the individual lines of an engraving quietly move. This dynamism saves them from being petrifications and allows them to become new worlds. They correspond and they transcend; they create a sense of reality which is new, which is their own. It is a reality into which we are called and in which we are implicated, a reality that refigures the real precisely because it departs from it.

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⁶ Bishop's "The Map," as its title suggests, treats the issue of mapping directly. One of its most memorable images is that of the over-enthusiastic printer who allows "the names of seashore towns [to] run out to sea" (14). This overlapping, a transgression of sorts, speaks to the way imagination allows things to interact more freely.
Works Cited


