

## Susan McCabe: On "One Art"

Though personal loss is often not explicitly confronted in Bishop's poems, it pervades them. Readers of Bishop frequently turn to "One Art" in *Geography III* as distinctively Bishopian in its restraint, formality, classicism. Yet this poem deals openly with loss and has been rightly called by J. D. McClatchy "painfully autobiographical." The formal demands of the villanelle keep "squads of undisciplined emotion" from overwhelming the poem, while James Merrill has spoken of "One Art" as resuscitating the villanelle in that its "key lines seem merely to approximate themselves, and the form, awakened by a kiss, simply toddles off to a new stage in its life, under the proud eye of Mother, or the Muse." Personal expression makes the form looser, more pliant and intimate. In fact, Bishop uses form frequently, and especially here, to show its arbitrariness, its attractive flimsiness. Bishop claims that she had not been able to write a villanelle before but that "One Art," possessing a somewhat diaristic dating through its metrics and tone, "was like writing a letter." It is a form tellingly imitative of the obsessional behavior of mourners with their need for repetition and ritual as resistance to "moving on" and their inevitable search for substitutions.

We are ultimately left not with control but with the unresolved tension between mastery and a world that refuses to be mastered; we are left with language. Restraint is tense hilarity here:

?Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident the art of losing's not too hard to master though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

The imperative self-prompt "(*Write it!*)" conveys the immense energy needed to utter the last word of "disaster." From the beginning, Bishop presents "the art of losing" as perverse rejection of the desire to win. In the poem's alternating rhyme of "master" with "disaster," disaster has the last word. "The art of losing isn't hard to master" is true because losing is all we do. The poem reveals a struggle for mastery that will never be gained. We can only make loss into therapeutic play. One does try to master loss, but Bishop recommends that we recognize our powerlessness and play with the conditions of loss: the blurring and splitting of presence and absence, being and nonbeing.

Bishop's "art of losing" resembles what Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* calls the rule of "fort-da" (gone / there), after a game his grandson constructed in his mother's absence:

The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. 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 the 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.

At first perplexed by an impulse seemingly opposed to the pleasure principle, by a symbolic repetition of the distressing experience of the mother's departure, Freud offers two explanations for the child's apparent gratification in this loss game.

At the outset he was in a passive situation--he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part. These efforts might be put down to an instinct for mastery acting independently of whether the (repeated) memory were in itself pleasurable or not. But still another interpretation may be attempted. Throwing away the object so that it was "gone" might satisfy an impulse of the child's, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him. In that case it would have a defiant meaning: "All right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself." (10)

Freud finally hands over to a "system of aesthetics" (17) the consideration of how pleasure can come from repeating traumatic moments of dissatisfaction. The child's rendering of loss in symbolic terms with the accompanying verbalization "fort-da" suggests that loss marks entry into language, as language marks entry into the awareness of the presence of absence. The shifting between such appearance and disappearance, as we have seen, becomes quite vivid through abruptly sequential sentences of "In the Village":

First, she had come home. with her child. Then she had gone away again, alone, and left the child. Then she had come home. Then she had gone away again, with her sister; and now she was home again.

In a sense, Bishop practices the "instinctual renunciation" Freud points to in her poem not only by making loss an intention and active practice (as she does by swallowing the coins and burying the needles in the story) but by losing and recuperating words in rhyme. Poetry can imitate through refrain the experience of "fort-da."

The poet's "one art" handles plural loss; but the expansion of this phrase to include so much validates such activity as the one and only one possible?with death as the ultimate project to be undertaken even as it is postponed within language. The middle line endings weave together to spell ultimate "evident" loss?"intent" / "spent," "meant" / "went": the other side of will and choice must always be loss of control, abandon, renunciation. Bishop instructs us: "Lose something every day," and in the third stanza, "Then practice losing farther, losing faster." The tercets logically build up from small (keys) to big (continent) with demonic precision and momentum. We are reassured by the second stanza that mastery will come to the novice in time, that we will develop the ability to "[a]ccept the fluster." Yet the items lost become increasingly personal with her "mother's watch" at the center, deliberately at the beginning of a line as if to skip over it with a distracting exclamation, one that further heightens the way the poem presents a consciousness in process:

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or next-to-last, of three loved houses went. The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Still a potentially "last" or "yet-to-be-dismantled" house remains for us to see slip away from the poet, but there will always, one senses, be a further house, the never-to-be-secure home of her childhood that must be continually refigured, the child of "Sestina" drawing yet "another inscrutable house." As we move forward, we also step backwards. The watch stands in for her mother's absence and loss?a timekeeper that reflects its inability to "keep" time. Embedded in the loss of the watch is also the loss of her mother's caretaking and vigilance, as well as her father's position as timekeeper.

In the penultimate stanza, she leaps from the moment of initial loss:

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster, some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent. I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

She can afford to let go of these "realms" because her imagination can provide new ones. She travels from one tercet to the next, pushing the poem in opposing directions with rhyme. Crisis occurs just when we might expect "mastery." Even within lines there emerges the desire for mastery along with its inevitable breakdown. Enjambed lines in all stanzas but the next to last indicate slippage. A complete sentence occupies only part of a line in stanzas 2, 4, and 5 and so disintegrates any effect of finality or surety. Movement in time? "losing farther, losing faster"? is loss, and Bishop reinforces her theme of displacement with "farther" liminally haunted by "father."

Bishop's characteristic dash emphasizes breakage and propels us forward into the last enjambed four lines:

?Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident the art of losing's not too hard to master though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

Loss and love are significantly enjambed with the first two lines of this final stanza, but they not only confess how loss and love are bound, but give continuing evidence of "I love)," risked with a solitary parenthesis in the line. The most intimate words are not deemphasized by being parenthesized but blaze out as a temporary withholding, as her most prominent resistance to and acceptance of losing. We no longer have an object such as the timepiece standing ill for a person but an evanescent voice and gesture, silhouette and trace. There appears a breakdown also in the certainty of the declaration "The art of losing isn't hard to master" by the addition of "not too hard" and an admission of strain with the fiercely whispered "(*Write it!*)" between the stuttered double "like." Her "write it" is another way of saying "don't lose it." But disaster exceeds troping. Writing reveals a doubleness: Bishop wants language to gain mastery, but writing brings us back to the recognition of displacement and loss. Rhyming, dashing, parenthesizing, joking? all these are activities meant to contain but in emphatic practice remind only how such strategies finally fail. They can lead to renunciation not by making "disaster" into reified form but by accepting it as process and reenactment.

The "work of mourning," explains Freud, involves a gradual withdrawal of investment from a loved and lost object but against such a necessity "a struggle of course arises?as maybe universally observed that man never willingly abandons a libido position, not even when a substitute is already beckoning to him." Bishop's art is one that gives up fixed positions. We can now understand, perhaps, how "One Art" is only seemingly far removed from *The Diary* or "In the Village": these texts demonstrate as well, as we have seen, Bishop's concern with absence as it participates in writing. Language insists upon presence but always keeps loss in sight through its movement; ultimately it cannot hold back the fluid self and reminds us of the space left between us and our words.

Elaborating upon Freud's "fort-da," which brings language and loss together, Jacques Lacan asserts that the experience of primal loss and the emergence of identity coincide in language. An originary unrelatable moment, removing us from a state of undifferentiated wholeness with our mothers, commits us to continuous desire and translates us into the symbolic order of language and law. We become bound up in the paradoxical condition that "is neither the

appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting"; our "demand for love," the articulation of it, then, puts us forever out of love's reach. Coming to see and say ourselves outside of the maternal body, we call ourselves others and feel the loss that this entails.

Since our identity, our assertion of "I," can only be constituted through language, according to Lacan, we see ourselves as whole or unified subjectivities only through the "function of *meconnaissance*" most notable in the mirror stage when the child sees its fragmented drives and motor impulses duplicated as a whole-but a whole that rests on the split or chasm necessitated by mirroring; the "*meconnaissance*" occurs as "form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction" and offers a gestalt, or "an exteriority in which this form . . . is certainly more constituent than constituted" and that "symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination." Language, thus, aids us in believing the false vision of wholeness even as it shows such a vision to be an oversight. Consciousness attempts to veil over the power of the signifier over the signified, "the incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" that represents the operation of the unconscious. Poems that reflect such ontological uneasiness will appear from Bishop's first volume on, with its "Gentleman of Shalott" presenting a character divided by a shifting, unstable mirror, living within the breach "of constant re-adjustment, " within perpetual yet "exhilarating" uncertainty and halfness (*CP*, 9). Such a poem almost literalizes the Lacanian fracturing of the self.

Lacan, as does Bishop, always points us back to our language. Dreams rely upon the functions in language of metonymy and metaphor, covered over in waking consciousness to conceal fissure. Both metaphor and metonymy reveal that we cannot escape an endless chain of signifiers. Metaphor corresponds to "condensation," the superimposition of one signifier upon another: "*One word for another*, that is the formula for metaphor"; metonymy, on the other hand, reflects "displacement," the continual "veering off of signification," the "eternally stretching forth towards the *desire for something else*" ("Agency," 156), much like the tireless and timely parataxis another early poem "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" discovers in its own text and the childhood book it describes with "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and'" (58).

According to Lacan's psycholinguistic model, we are constituted by a language that deconstitutes us, where "no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification" (150): subjectivity is always then, at risk, so precarious that it becomes appropriate to say: "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think" (166). The entry into the symbolic through the Oedipal event inaugurates a gendered subject while the desire for wholeness exists in excess of possible satisfaction: this desire for completion will be thwarted by the subject's fragmentation within language. The phallus comes to stand for that moment of rupture from the imaginary dyadic relation with the mother, where one does not feel desire for the Other, because the Other is yet the self, or not other, without limit or demarcation. Lacan's definition of demand is relevant in showing the gap that persists between the subject's need and demand; this gap constitutes desire, so that "[d]emand constitutes the Other as already possessing the *privilege* of satisfying needs, that is to say, the power of depriving them of that alone by which they are satisfied"; this explains the "unconditional element of the demand," which must look beyond itself to some fictive "'absolute' condition," and it is from such an absence, "the residue of an obliteration" that "the power of pure loss emerges," which cannot, in any last analysis, be singularized or pinpointed

("Signification," 287).

Such an understanding of language and identity as grounded in loss is central to Bishop's feminist attempt to undo fixed or unitary identity. Jacqueline Rose's introduction to Lacan's essays makes clear his acknowledgment that the phallus is made only to *figure* by anatomy and signals its own "pretence to meaning," and the impossibility of satisfying desire; sexual identity is only "enjoined" upon the individual through entrance into language. Because of the arbitrary element in gender division, Rose sees implicit in Lacan's argument the possibility that "anyone can cross over and inscribe themselves on the opposite side from that which they are anatomically destined" (49). Lacan's project, in this light, encourages boundary transgression, especially if we consider his belief that analysis should not allow an individual to mask over the precariousness of her or his identity.

In the Lacanian economy, woman becomes, however, "other." As Rose exposes, the phallus is by no means unproblematically privileged, for it is: "from the Other that the phallus seeks authority and is refused," but even as woman is subversive Other, Rose does not think females have "access to a different strata of language" (as does Yaeger, for example, in her discussion of "In the Village"): there is no escape from the Law of the Father (55). However, as Lacan does not differentiate enough the breakage of mother-child dyad in terms of the child's gender, he *misses* the distinct relationship that persists between mother and daughter. The female may indeed, come to the symbolic via an alternate route?her language a different relation to loss. For the girl child, the ruptured primordial relationship may appear less final, and her gender role less reified than the boy's in his identification with his father, as Chodorow has described. Rose objects to Chodorow's apparent assumption of a unified identity (37), yet Chodorow acknowledges gender position as social construction that makes intrasubjective shifting more available to women; in his emphasis on lack and loss, Lacan does not acknowledge *relation* (as do both Chodorow and Bishop), primarily because his androcentric perspective posits woman as the eternal Other.

If language is joined inseparably with the recognition of loss, females come to that language doubly exiled from the dominant sign system. Nevertheless, identification with the mother makes for a potentially more pluralistic and multiple self. Julia Kristeva, for instance, rereads Lacan and posits a "questionable subject in process" that exists through the fluctuation between the poles of the semiotic (associated with the unconscious, the maternal, the disruptive) and the symbolic (responsible for the rational, the paternal, the systematic). She considers such movement "poetic language," which through its "signifying operations, is an unsettling process?when not an outright destruction?of the identity of meaning and the speaking subject," and links the feminine with poetry, or more precisely, with the disruption it produces. While she does not explicitly catalogue her writing as feminist or, for the most part, treat women writers, Kristeva tellingly concedes: "It is probably necessary to be a woman . . . not to renounce theoretical reason but to compel it to increase its power by giving it an object beyond its limits" (146).

Bishop's poems subvert the very forms?not in themselves radical or "avant-garde"?they employ. "One Art," specifically, casts itself either forward or backward: testing the limits of rational control, revealing the subject unsettled within flux; it literalizes displacement through its calling up of and discarding of objects. While "One Art" appears almost hyperrational, it remains consistent with Bishop's earlier more explicit surrealism?the Paris poems "Sleeping on the Ceiling," "Sleeping Standing Up," and "Paris, A.M.," to name the most striking?which openly affronts reason and logic, manipulating dream symbols in incongruously neat stanzas, to disorient and to trouble. We come upon form, yet cannot locate or settle into a "subject."

Bishop wrote at least seventeen drafts of "One Art" before she considered it written. Not surprisingly, the act of writing is a focal concern of the poem, as becoming an artist is in the story "In the Village." Earlier drafts of the poem show her struggling with the crucial final stanza where phrases such as "Say it," "Oh, go on, write it!" recur as she tries to allow herself to articulate "disaster." Draft 2 even has the tentative entitlement: "(Why not just write 'disaster?'," protected within a parenthesis. The stilted archaism of "shan't" reveals the essential feebleness involved in the final version's assertion "I shan't have lied." In some of the telling drafts, she simply admits "all that I write is false. I'm writing lies now. It's quite evident" with false crossed off. Writing may tempt us into lies, but it also shows us up. It is only in the process of "writing it" that Bishop can face the catastrophic losing of a love, though the drafts do not foresee surviving such an event: the first one trails off with the impossible maxim, "He who loseth his life, etc. but he who / loses his love? never, no never never never never again?" (draft 1).

As Lorrie Goldensohn acutely reminds us in her study on Bishop, written with biography as guide to the poetry, we cannot read the poems in *Geography III*, and especially "One Art," underestimating the impact Lota's death had upon Bishop or without appreciating the topographical loss Bishop felt in repatriating to the States from Brazil: loss of person, home, family, country can hardly be disengaged (126). The seventeen drafts Bishop wrote present a series of "mislayings," a word Bishop uses in her first version, and the published poem continues to confess its inevitable lying. "I really / want to introduce *myself*," says draft 1: identity is predicated upon mislaying, so that like the more lavishly described loved one who disappears into a flickering "you," the "I" completely goes under. The "you" is at first an "average-sized" "dazzlingly intelligent person" with blue eyes that "were exceptionally beautiful" (draft 1), and does not, by the way, seem necessarily identifiable with Lota, but with all those whom she has lost or could lose. What becomes "eyes of the small wild aster" in draft 2 evaporates in the remaining trials. "One Art," with all its drafts, represents an archaeology of the struggle with losing. a process that is always with us, so that every loss comes to be all losses, retrogressive and prospective, shuttling through villanelle. As a love poem, "One Art," as Goldensohn points out, does not necessarily signpost a same-sex relationship. Yet it must; for we know what we know. It is stitched together through a lineage of female loss, with the mother's watch in the centrifugal position, with all other love relationships with women timed by it.

Throughout her work, Bishop will test and question the boundaries imposed by "theoretical reason" with the awareness that we must resort to them; if we continue to use Kristeva's model, language and sense emerge only in the spaces created through severance from the semiotic. Retrieval through rhyme in "One Art" again serves as a way of pointing up the passage of language from the semiotic through the symbolic; form becomes a net through, which identity and all its belongings slip. In spite of Bishop's reliance on form, her poem disturbs through its attention to arbitrary and frangible boundaries. Ultimately, Bishop practices forfeiture, a recognition of human limits and imperfection, and therefore, also a potentially freeing activity. When Adrienne Rich writes "It's true, these last few years I've lived / watching myself in the act of loss," she pointedly addresses Bishop's "One Art." Instead of sanctifying art, Rich insists upon imperfection, and says that "the art of losing" is "for [her] no art / only badly-done exercises." Rich's poem insists on the primacy of loss and refuses to accept "acts of parting." She concludes inconclusively:

trying to let go without giving up    yes    Elizabeth a village there    a sister, comrade, cat  
and more    no art to this but anger

Celebrating attachment to earthly things. Rich calls for a vitriolic response, not the pained submission that might be read in Bishop. Yet Rich's poem presents itself as both homage and umbrage in mirroring what "One Art" un- says by its terminal "disaster." Bishop does indeed feel her "heart forced to question its presumption in this world" (Rich, "Contradiction," *Your Native Land*, 98) because she does not see any reason to presume. Still "One Art" admits that? tied to the villanelle in a ritual exercise and exorcism of loss? she cannot but be *caught up* in desire and attachment. Bishop's poem suggests that she would like to write off artfully what she realizes always eludes inscription? those spaces marking the losses of a "questionable subject"; the form of poems becomes, again and again, expressive of the unruly processes of consciousness they denote.

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