Speculating Experience:

Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in the department of English at Brown University

Providence, RI

May 2009

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by the Department of English as satisfying the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their continued support of this project and the conversations that reshaped my thinking throughout, I want to thank the members of my dissertation committee: Mutlu Blasing, William Keach, and Kevin McLaughlin. For their encouragement and critical reading of early drafts, I am grateful to David Ben-Merre, Kerin Holt, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Finally, I am indebted beyond reckoning to my parents, for everything, and to Heidi Koelz, for her companionship, insight, and endless patience.

To Rick and Jean

and for Heidi

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I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch—
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience.

—Emily Dickinson

INTRODUCTION

"To Pass Through," "To Travel," "To Fare"

If this paper's subject could be condensed into a figure, a moving figure, it might resemble Dickinson's "precarious Gait." Stepping "from Plank to Plank," feeling her "cautious way" between "Stars" and "Sea" as though crossing through some unseen danger, Dickinson's speaker approaches "Experience" slowly, skeptically, accidentally even, ignorant of what it is and where it leads. The poem strays from its strict iambic measure just once, long enough to let "precarious" intimate the muted thrill of steps taken without license, potentially errant footfalls. This caution, one we might do well to emulate when moving toward something as impervious to definition as "experience," anticipates the stance of the three poets—Moore, Bishop and Merrill—who are the principals in this study. As for Dickinson's speaker, she seems to know to keep her distance from the poem's last word. Unsure where her steps might lead, she gathers only in hindsight that they have left her with this habitually guarded stride. Stretching out past what "Would be my final inch—," the poem's one dash triggers a turn toward this recognition along with a change in the lyric subject. The speaker seems to relax. Gaze no longer affixed to her feet, she lets the repetition of "I" and "my" subside. Actor becomes recipient—"This gave me"—then part, if reluctantly, of a collective "some." Between Dickinson's almost free-floating "this" and the more deliberately demonstrative phrase

"that precarious Gait," the poem's private narrative recollection gives way to the collective vantage of a community. "That precarious Gait" is something we all recognize. Not a discrete, completed action like the single step "from Plank to Plank, the gait is a moving figure, moreover, a figure least visible to the one taking the steps. As it requires a collective gaze, so this "Gait" ushers the poem into a provisional present tense that depends, as Dickinson's last line would have it, on the circulation of language, the chance that what "some call Experience" is intelligible to others. This lone present-tense verb, "call," identifies the act of naming, the act of recognition that language performs, as the perpetually moving, precarious ground of "Experience." Ultimately, Dickinson leaves her last word in other people's mouths, as if to disavow the use of any word at all. "Some" call her "precarious gait" "Experience," but to call it anything—to use a word in place of a moving figure, indeed, to forget that words *are* moving, changing figures—is to risk the loss of this curious thing that happens on a scale with the stars and sea. Acknowledging this threat, the poem's last line draws the speaker into a community made of language, even as she seems herself to withdraw. How different it would sound had she used the word "we."

Dickinson's poetry often works at the thresholds of definition, and this poem's image of perpetually walking the plank, risking one's "final inch," recalls meanings of the word "experience" nearly buried with its etymological roots. A "test" or "trial," "experience" comes from the Latin *experiri*, a root shared with words pertaining to danger, words like "peril." The Indo-European *per*, "to pass through," "to travel," "to fare," gives us "fear" as well as "wayfarer" and "seafarer," each of which suggests dangerous or uncertain passage. *Per* leads as well to the German *Gefahr*, "danger,"

fahren, "to travel," and one of two German words for "experience," *Erfahrung*.[1] We will return to the pair, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, soon. Suffice it here to say that the former comes closest to the "precarious gait" Dickinson describes. Given these connotations folded into the history of the word "experience," it is hard not to recall that Dickinson never did any seafaring herself, indeed that her travel was largely confined (once she quit going to church) to the twenty or so steps between her father's house in Amherst and her brother Austin's house next door. Of what kind of experience, then, is poetry made? This is the question that Dickinson surreptitiously poses here, one that will come increasingly to the fore in the work of poets who lived and wrote in the century after hers.

My project explores the ramification of this question in the work of Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Merrill. In the broadest sense, it might be understood as an attempt to rethink that curious feeling of being removed from one's one experience that Eliot called "dissociation of sensibility" through a set of terms not usually associated with American Modernist poetry and its heirs. My suspicion throughout is that some of the deepest engagements with the problem that Eliot identifies, engagements that have yet to be fully recognized, become visible in light of Walter Benjamin's theories about the vexed position of poetry in the wake of large-scale industrialization and the rise of mass media. Moore, Bishop, and Merrill, amidst the changing conditions for the reception of art in the age of its technical reproducibility, develop compositional habits that welcome the threat of dissociation, habits that allow the subject to be distracted, to lose his place, and to unravel. In so doing, they cultivate a kind of

[1] See Chamberlain 302-05. For a fuller discussion of the etymology of "experience," see Roger Munier's reponse to an inquiry on experience in *Mise en page* I (May 1972), quoted in Lacoue-Labarthe, fn 128.

experience that need not be conceived within the domain of the conscious subject and his capacity to pay attention.[2]

Given the depth of Eliot's interest in experience as a philosophical problem, an interest evident as early as his doctoral dissertation on F.H. Bradley and as late as *Four Quartets*, it is not possible to give a full account here of his considerable thinking on such a broad subject. Nevertheless, I want to notice briefly some of the figures he offers in an early critical piece, because they help to set the terms according to which we might think about the relation between poetry and modern experience. In the 1921 essay where he introduces the phrase "dissociation of sensibility," Eliot describes the conditions that make modern life inhospitable to the work of the poet then depicts the Metaphysicals as exemplars of a sensibility that would overcome these conditions. While "experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary" to the "ordinary man," Donne and Herbert are able to "feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose" (247). Samuel Johnson was right, Eliot grants, to claim of the Metaphysicals that "their attempts were always analytic," in the sense that they involved disparate parts or fragments, but what Johnson would not allow, and what Eliot wants to emphasize, is that these poets are able to combine these parts into new wholes, to "put the material together again in a new unity" (245). Eliot describes the formation of these unities, famously, as a process of

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[2] The question of poetry's relation to changing conceptions of experience is, of course, not a new one. Two book-length studies deserve mention here. Robert Langbaum's 1963 book, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, identifies a split between "sympathy" and "judgment," the validity of an individual's apprehension and the objective validity of an idea. In Wordsworth's poetry, and then in the nineteenth-century dramatic monologues, "experience" replaces Enlightenment rationalism. It replaces, in Alfred North Whitehead's terms, an analysis of reality with the concrete totality by which we live, such that rationalist measurement gives way to "an imaginative projection into the external object." Written thirty-three years after Langbaum's book, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe's *Poetry As Experience* also takes up the problem of the relation between its title terms, only the distinction he makes is not between sympathy and judgment, but between a non-occurrence and what he calls, after Celan, its "singable remainder." Celan's poetry emerges from an unsettling of the subject position, one I am interested in here.

condensation, a gathering of the "noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking" while one is falling in love and reading Spinoza. "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work," he writes, "it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience" (247). According to this description, the poet's mind must be a kind of perfect equipment, a machine that works without rest or lapses, "constantly amalgamating." While the "dissociated" sensibility of a Tennyson or a Browning might only "ruminate" on the experience of the heart, taking in just as much as he can digest, the Metaphysicals "possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience" (247). "Sensibility," here, is geared for maximum quantity. It enables the poet to keep pace. Next to this claim I want to consider Benjamin's description of the urban masses in his 1933 piece "Experience and Poverty," for he also describes modern experience as determined by a particular kind of consumption, only the ravenous consumers he has in mind are like tired holiday shoppers rather than Metaphysical poets; they "have 'devoured' everything, both 'culture' and 'people,' and they have had such a surfeit that it has exhausted them" (SW 2 734).

When Eliot suggests that the Metaphysical "sensibility" is a "mechanism" that "devours" experience and that the poet's mind must be properly "equipped for its work," his mixture of alimentary and mechanical terms gives Donne's appetite an inhuman supplement. By contrast, when Benjamin claims that the urban masses have "devoured everything" such that "it has exhausted them," the term "devour" is used not to remark the masses' large capacity for experience, per se, but to suggest that their relation to experience has changed, indeed that experience is now taken in mindlessly, indiscriminately, even unconsciously. Theirs is not the perfectly equipped, constantly

amalgamating poet's mind, but a mind made to scatter by the lures of consumer goods, spectacular newspaper items, and the phantasmagoria of world exhibitions. Whereas former generations, generations that Benjamin identifies with the practice of storytelling, traded in first-hand experience, mass forms of media replace experience with information, and, finally, mere sensation. The difference, he explains, is largely a function of a different relationship to time: "The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time" (Illuminations 90). What the storyteller offers cannot be devoured. It must be preserved, savored, given time to expend itself.

At this point we might turn to the distinction at stake in much of Benjamin's work, between the German terms *Erfahrung*, sometimes translated as "long experience" or "connected experience," and *Erlebnis*, "immediate experience" or "individual experience." *Erfahrung*, as noted earlier, derives from roots that suggest travel or passage, as well as a certain danger. It names the kind of experience that accumulates through long exposure and gets passed down through generations. "When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about" (Illuminations 84). So, too, the artisan, who does not travel, but who steeps himself in his work and in the local lore and tradition, is noted for his experience. He has counsel to give. The model combination of these two, Benjamin suggests, is the resident master craftsman of the Middle Ages, one who had been a traveling journeyman before settling into a town to ply his trade. By contrast, *Erlebnis*, from the verb *leben*, "to live," suggests something merely lived through that has

no evident connection to previous experience and no reason to last. Its form is epitomized by the position of a factory worker on an assembly line or the city dweller jostled in a crowd. *Chockerlebnis*, "shock experience," is the stock in trade of mass media, the forms of which "isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience [*Erfahrung*] of the reader" (Illuminations 158). As for the factory worker, he is isolated as well; "his work has been sealed off from experience [*Erfahrung*]; practice counts for nothing there" (Illuminations 176). The gambler is his counterpart.

The potential reconciliation between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, a task central to Benjamin's conception of modern subjectivity, is taken up in a number of different ways. Baudelaire's "correspondences," Proust's "involuntary memory," Benjamin's "dialectical images"—each develops alongside the feeling that we have grown poorer in communicable experience. Whereas American Modernist poetry often imagines the poet countering the flood of *Chockerlebnisse* and the dizzying character of modern life with a more finely tuned instrument, a more capacious sensibility, or a series of extraordinary feats of attention, what is just as important to Benjamin and, I will argue, to Moore, Bishop, and Merrill, is that this instrument fail, that the conscious mind not be capacious enough, that attention give way to distraction. Bishop will offer a strange and compelling image of this failure in her poem "Argument" when the voice of "Days," presumably a figure for Time itself, asks us to "think / of all those cluttered instruments, / one to a fact, / canceling each other's experience; / how they were / like some hideous calendar / "Compliments of Never & Forever, Inc." Bishop's "hideous calendar" announces not just the failure of its instruments to capture a single, coherent experience, but also something of the time it will take to sort through all this "clutter," that is, to reconcile

what “never” happened and its unaccountable, stubborn persistence. Shock experience, while it does not enter consciousness, survives as unconscious data in the involuntary memory, from whence it may be summoned to an afterlife. In his essay on the storyteller, just as he starts to think about boredom and about the position from which one can best hear stories, Benjamin hints at the way these two kinds of experience might be reconciled. It is from the position of craftsmen, absorbed in their work, listening, forgetting themselves, paying attention to one thing while receiving something else. Their world of spinning and weaving would seem to be remote from ours, yet they model a form of reception that will come more and more to characterize a culture marked by technical reproducibility, what Benjamin calls “reception in a state of distraction.”

To understand just what this form of reception involves, it may be helpful to return to some of Benjamin’s earliest work. Benjamin begins to write about experience as early as 1918, in his essay “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” where he claims that Kant’s model of experience, that of the individual subjective consciousness, is “temporally limited,” “experience reduced to a nadir, to a minimum of significance” (SW 1 101). While Kant is able to think past “the object nature of the thing-in-itself as the cause of sensations, there remains the subject nature of the cognizing consciousness to be eliminated” (SW 1 103). Kant’s conception of experience is of little significance, Benjamin claims, because it is limited to the horizon of the subject. It fails to conceive of a kind of experience for which the subject is not the guarantor. If we turn to Benjamin’s later work, we find him exploring “the subject nature of the cognizing consciousness” in the context of his interest in reproducibility. With the acceleration of technological reproducibility and the decline of aura, this “subject nature” begins to unravel, to be

distracted or, literally, "drawn apart." By unsettling the art object's unique existence, reproducibility frustrates attempts to place oneself as a subject in relation to a stable art object, such that the reception of art involves a shift from "the problem of *Vorstellung* to that of *Mitteilung*, from that of placing before and representing to that of imparting and parting with" (Fenves 83). *Vorstellung*, "presentation," combines the prefix *vor* with the root verb *stellen*, "to place," and suggests the placing of an object before, or in front of, a subject.[3] *Mitteilung*, "communication," contains the root *Teil*, or "part," and suggests, as Fenves implies, something "imparted" or "parted with." *Mitteilung* also suggests inclusion within a collective, the position of a *Teilnehmer*, or "participant," one who "takes part." Samuel Weber describes this kind of experience as an encounter with art whose movement has become "mass-like." No longer "grasped" as an object, the work of art does not "take place" so much as it "comes to pass" (97). With a conception of art set in motion, in time, and in history, Benjamin is able to consider the epistemological phenomenon that Kant seems to neglect, namely, "the integrity of experience that is ephemeral" (SW 1 101). For each of the poets in this study, a loosening of the distinction between subject and object will prove pivotal to the task of composition. Moore will describe the experience of art she values as "haunting," then as "possession." Being taken over or possessed, for Moore, involves a kind of participation that she represents as the dream of disappearing into a mass—sometimes the sea, sometimes a crowd, sometimes the unbounded circulation of a photograph. Bishop figures the subject position giving way in momentary black outs, moments of vertigo "when you meet someone for the first time," for example. As for Merrill, he may be the most explicit in

[3] For a discussion of the etymology of "subjects" and "objects," see Weber, "Objectivity and Its Others" in *Mass Mediauras*.

the way he imagines the sovereign subject overthrown. He will turn to puppetry, for example, to suggest that it can teach us what "to be moved" means. Tuned in, with David Jackson, to "voices from another world," he takes dictation for *The Changing Light at Sandover*, a sustained act of ventriloquism that uses the poet as dummy, medium, and host. My reading of Merrill will focus as well on a subtler version of these weirdly receptive states, one in which Merrill figures architectural passages as models for a form of experience not confined to the limits of the subjective consciousness.

While *Erlebnis* would seem to have little value as experience, per se, it is Baudelaire's distinction to have transformed this kind of passing or ephemeral experience into *Erfahrung*, to have granted the momentary jostling amidst a Parisian crowd a lasting significance. The "integrity of an experience that is ephemeral," the possibility Benjamin raises in his early critique of Kant, and again in the essay on Baudelaire, depends precisely on the inability of the conscious mind to keep pace with *Erlebnisse*. "The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions," Benjamin writes, "the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour of one's life (*Erlebnis*)" (Illuminations 163). Efficiency, the kind of efficiency Eliot imagines at work in the well-equipped poet's mind, is precisely what prevents the accumulation of lasting experience. The shock defense assigns to an incident a precise point in time, but "at the cost of the integrity of its contents" (Illuminations 163). It is here that Baudelaire's correspondences have their significance for Benjamin, as the transformation of *Erlebnis* into *Erfahrung* involves their particular relation to time. Whereas in the Baudelairean "spleen" "the perception of time

is supernaturally keen, and every second finds consciousness ready to intercept its shock," correspondences open up spaces in the calendar, "not marked by any experience." These are "days of completing time," "days of recollection" that "stand out from time" (Illuminations 181). Correspondences, to Benjamin, have little to do with synesthesia, hearing colors or smelling sounds. What is crucial is "the medium in which such reactions occur. This medium is the memory, and with Baudelaire it was possessed of unusual density" (Arcades 367). Benjamin is careful to point out that Baudelaire's successes were not limited to the poems in which he celebrates the correspondences, that "spleen" plays as prominent a role in his work as "the ideal": "The *ideal* supplies the power of remembrance; the *spleen* musters the multitude of seconds against it" (Illuminations 183).

To indicate how an ephemeral experience becomes part of the mind's store of unconscious data, Benjamin turns to Freud's description in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of consciousness as a screen or shield protecting the mind from external stimuli. While "this protective shield is supplied with its own store of energy," stimuli that exceed the conscious mind's registry, outstripping its capacity to represent and place objects before a subject, take the form of "shock experience." Benjamin indicates the significance of shock experience in Proustian terms, as the data of involuntary memory: "only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *mémoire involontaire*" (Illuminations 161). The involuntary memory, the storehouse of experience which has eluded the conscious mind, makes the past accessible given the occasion. As Proust

made clear, these occasions are left to chance, but their aleatory character fuels the collector's obsession, an obsession we will see when we turn to Marianne Moore.

Baudelaire's sonnet "To a Passerby" imagines the transformation of a chance encounter in a crowd into one of lasting significance. The poem opens onto an urban scene which would seem to preclude the possibility of concentration:

> The deafening street was screaming all around me.
> Tall, slender, in deep mourning—majestic grief—
> A woman made her way, with fastidious hand
> Raising and swaying festoon and hem;
>
> Agile and noble, with her statue's limbs.
> And there I was, who drank, contorted like a madman,
> Within her eyes—that livid sky where hurricane is born—
> Gentleness that fascinates, pleasure that kills.

While the disorienting movement of the crowd precludes its apprehension as an object, this mass collects around a figural center, the passerby in the poem, which causes it to withdraw into the background. Her eye, the still center within the moving, amorphous mass, is "that livid sky where hurricane is born." From it Baudelaire's speaker "drank, contorted like a madman." Shocked, "contorted," he is taken up by the crowd and receives its impression. Samuel Weber describes how this apparition makes the crowd visible not as a stable object, but as an appearance that withdraws.

> The law of dispersion and collection that governs the ambivalent movement of the allegorical mass can therefore be designated by the term: *coming-to-pass*. The mass qua crowd appears as what it is in withdrawing before what seems to be an individual, feminine figure, that of the *passante*. But the ostensible individuality of this passerby is anything but individual: she comes to be only in passing by. And in so doing, she reveals herself to be the allegorical emblem of the mass, its coming-to-be in and as the other, in and as the singularity of an ephemeral apparition. The mass movement—the mass in/as movement—produces itself as this apparition, which provides an alternative to the formed and mobilized masses of the political movements of the Thirties. (97)

When Weber describes the passerby as "coming to be in and as the other," he is suggesting that the poem stages an encounter with alterity that "resists all reciprocating, all exchange, all synthesis, all appropriation," something that the conscious mind cannot register. What marks this encounter, both a first and last sight, is simply a series of blanks, the ". . ." of ellipses.

> A lightning-flash … then night! –O fleeting beauty
> Whose glance all of a sudden gave me new birth,
> Shall I see you again only in eternity?
>
> Far, far from here! Too late! or maybe, *never*?
> For I know not where you flee, you know not where I go,
> O you I would have loved (O you who knew it too!)

Baudelaire stages this "impossible appropriation," Weber notes, by embedding the accidental, chance encounter within a narrative, the "imperfect past of a 'Once upon a time.'" This is the language of the storyteller, a language of continuity and tradition that binds communities through the exchange of experience. Recalling the impression left by a fleeting encounter, placing it within an intelligible narrative structure, Baudelaire transforms the moment of shock into an imagined reciprocation—"(O you who knew it too!)" Weber notes how Benjamin carefully distinguishes this kind of reciprocation from the Fascist reinstitution of aura. Whereas Fascism thrives in the depiction of formed and mobilized masses that allows "the mass to look itself in the face and thereby to find a gaze that ostensibly looks back," "the urban mass, although it is omnipresent in Baudelaire's poetry, is never represented or depicted as such." This mass, Benjamin says, is "imprinted on [Baudelaire's] creativity as a hidden figure." As Dujardin claims, Baudelaire was "more concerned with implanting the image in the memory than with adorning and elaborating it" (Illuminations 168). What is implanted or imprinted in the

memory is precisely that which never takes place. We never see the crowd in Baudelaire's poem. I mention Weber's remarks about the Fascist reinstitution of aura through its depiction of crowds here, because they will come to bear on my reading of Marianne Moore and the two different kinds of encounter with a mass that she contrasts in a number of early poems. "The Fish," "Reinforcements," and "A Grave" have each been read as a response to the American entry into the First World War. What has yet to be recognized is how the need to respond aesthetically to the war and its parade of masses is part of the persistent problem of ephemerality in Moore's work.

Transforming *Erlebnis* into *Erfahrung*, embedding the momentary, startling encounter within a narrative of ritual remembrance, redeeming the past through the apprehension of correspondences, through sudden, unexpected access to the involuntary memory—these operations look forward to Benjamin's "dialectical image," the methodological key to his reading of cultural history in *The Arcades Project*.[4] In his introduction to *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland offers perhaps the most succinct explanation of how a reading of dialectical images involves the collector's particular relation to time:

> To speak of awakening was to speak of the 'afterlife of works,' something brought to pass through the medium of the 'dialectical image.' The latter is Benjamin's central term, in *The Arcades Project*, for the historical object of interpretation: that which, under the divinatory gaze of the collector, is taken up into the collector's own particular time and place, thereby throwing a pointed light on what has been. Welcomed into a present moment that seems to be waiting just for it—'actualized,' as Benjamin likes to say—the moment from the past comes alive as never before. In this way, the 'now' is itself experienced as preformed in the 'then,' as its distillation. . . . The historical object is reborn as such into a present day capable of receiving it, of suddenly 'recognizing' it. This is the famous 'now of recognizability' (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*), which has

[4] In "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" Benjamin defines the dialectical image as "the involuntary memory of a redeemed humanity" (SW IV 403).

> the character of a lightning flash. In the dusty, cluttered corridors of the arcades, where street and interior are one, historical time is broken up into kaleidoscopic distractions and momentary come-ons, myriad displays of ephemera, thresholds for the passage of what Gérard de Nerval (in *Aurélia*) calls 'the ghosts of material things.' Here, at a distance from what is normally meant by 'progress,' is the *ur*-historical, collective redemption of lost time, of the times embedded in the spaces of things. (Arcades xii)

What is called here "actualization" or "recognition" of the historical object, its flashing up in the form of a "dialectical image," is very close to what Benjamin in other contexts calls "legibility." Dialectical images must be read, Benjamin tells us, for "the place where one encounters them is language." Howard Caygill argues that Benjamin's early fragment "On Perception in Itself" gives some indication of what reading involves for Benajmin, for it treats perception not simply as the receipt of sensory impressions, but as the reading of configurations on a surface. What is crucial here is that a surface is "a particular mode of configuring appearances for subsequent reading or perception" and that the number of potential surfaces is infinite (4). The legible image, the image in the "now of recognizability" is infinitely divisible. In this sense it opens like the folded fan of memory in Benjamin's reading of Proust: "He who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments. No image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside—that image, that taste, that touch for whose sake all this has been unfurled and dissected; and now remembrance progresses from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows even mightier" (SW 2.2; 597). It would seem that the smallest details, those most likely to be overlooked, look back from the greatest distance, and so retain the greatest auratic power. In another example of the layering of surfaces, Benjamin cites Proust's practice of filling his galleys with marginal

notes, using all the available space for “fresh text,” as evidence that “the laws of remembrance were operative even within the confines of the work.” These potentially endless additions to the text demonstrate the crucial function of memory with regard to experience. Whereas “an experienced event is finite,” “a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it” (Illuminations 202). This key, opening room after room of the past, opens as well the inexhaustible storehouse of the involuntary memory.

The “now of recognizability,” the point at which dialectical images “actualize” what has passed, has “the character of a lightning flash” because the moment of reading, a moment of illumination, requires an ephemeral triangulation of moving bodies:

> The perception of similarity is in every case bound to a flashing up. It flits by. . . . It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly, transitorily as a star constellation. The perception of similarities thus seems bound to a moment of time (*Zeitmoment*). It is like the supervention of the third, of the astrologer to the conjunction of two stars that wishes momentarily to be grasped. (Doctrine 66)

The perception of similarities, for Benjamin the paradigm of all reading, “flits by,” because it is bound to a configuration that cannot come to pass without the “supervention of the third,” in this case the observer from whose momentary vantage point the moving stars resolve themselves into an arrangement. It is this momentary glimpse of similarity visible upon the “supervention of the third,” that Richard Howard will find in Moore’s method, what he figures as a kind of “salvage”: “Placing two things perceived as unrelated but capable of producing a third, indissociable thing—this is the characteristic Moore operation, an enterprise of salvage, a venture toward that integrity she so much adored. Indeed, the invention of the zipper” (9). Kay Ryan offers an appraisal similar to Howard’s: “Great lines in a Marianne Moore poem aren't exactly *results*. They are more

like particles in suspension. They depend on whatever is holding them in place, but it's more the way jewels need the prongs of the setting" (167). According to these descriptions from Howard and Ryan, the value of Moore's poetry inheres in the configurations she fashions from seemingly unrelated materials. The "jewels" of the poems are not to be extracted from their settings. They are "indissociable." We will see a similar affinity for unlikely juxtapositions in Bishop's work when she describes her "respect" for what she calls "coincidences," the apprehension of which, she will say, may seem "superstitious," "primitive," or "mystical." These "coincidences" are the logical outcome of her theory of "experience-time," a time in which constantly shifting orders of moments yield piercing points of recognition. And, finally, the "now of recognizability" has its counterpart in Merrill's work, which often represents experience as bound to unforeseen temporal conjunctions. Repeated in the refrain of his villanelle "Dead Center" is an image which might be taken as a version of Benjamin's law of reading: "In Now's black waters burn the stars of Then" (540).

Having suggested some of the ways in which Benjamin's approach to the contours of modern experience can help us to rethink poetry's response to the "dissociation" Eliot identifies, I want now to give an indication of the direction each of the remaining chapters in this study will take. In the case of Marianne Moore, Benjamin's interest in "the integrity of experience that is ephemeral" provides a conceptual framework with which to think about her life-long engagement with mass-cultural productions. My reading of Moore challenges the critical commonplace that Moore's career can be easily divided into two discrete halves: the early, High Modernist phase in which she wrote the celebrated, elusive, hermetic poems of *Observations*, and a

later phase marred by her prominence in popular culture—in glossy magazines, on late-night talk shows, in a box seat at Yankee Stadium, throwing out the first pitch of the 1968 baseball season. I argue that the mass media's power to distract and absorb informs Moore's idiosyncratic compositional habits from the inception of her career, moreover, that these habits sustain a notion of speculative experience in which the ephemeral, scattering, distracting movements of the mass yield the constellations that are Moore's poems. These poems require that we see through culture, that "natural" or "raw" experience be filtered through the accumulating mass of material in her file drawers.[5] Her endless practice of quotation (discouraged in the Bryn Mawr undergraduate who felt a "paper could survive on quotation alone") culls from across the "great divide" that would protect High Modernism from the contagion of popular culture, such that scraps from *The Illustrated London News* and the *Report on the Introduction of Domestic Reindeer into Alaska* become a jostling mass not unlike what Benjamin calls the "agitated veil through [which] Baudelaire saw Paris" (Illuminations 168).

Given the way in which Moore's profound ambivalence toward mass culture informs the composition of her poems, I want to rethink the significance of her status as a minor celebrity and perhaps try to cushion the shock with which some of her most committed readers have greeted her role as the "Mary Poppins of Poetry." The care with which Moore cultivated her own public image through the mass forms of photography and television is inextricable from the interest in ephemerality that runs throughout her work. Moreover, we can see as Moore contemplates her first book, a form decidedly

[5] As Bonnie Costello notes, "anyone familiar with Moore's poetry knows she was a kleptomaniac of the mind. She kept file drawers of clippings, photographs, postcards, in which are hidden away the sources of many poems. She was once impressed by the remark 'a good stealer is *ipo facto* a good inventor,' and made a note of it in her reading diary" (Marianne 5).

sturdier than Modernism's little magazines, that the crucial terms of her poetic practice are already active. Discussing publication with her mother—perhaps Moore's most important critic—it is the "ephemeral" character of her work on which the conversation turns: "I said to Mole [Mother], 'now with what poems I have published and my general well-being, I could publish a book anytime.' Mole said 'I wouldn't publish,' I said, 'Never?' Mole said, 'After you've changed your style.' 'Huh!' I said, 'you would omit all these things I prize so much?' 'Yes,' said Mole, 'they're ephemeral' (Letters 100). Mary Warner Moore's estimation of her daughter's work as "ephemeral" eventually gives way to a critical reception that agrees on nothing so much as her poetry's lapidary quality, its permanence. Eliot tells us that Moore's is "part of the small body of durable poetry written in our time," perhaps because he recognizes the sign of a mature poet in her facility for stealing.[6] I will argue that this durable quality, what Moore will call idiosyncrasy, depends on the mass of pedestrian materials she displays in her poems as well as—and here I follow Mary Warner Moore—her ability to turn these ephemeral encounters into a "style."

Randall Jarrell describes brilliantly the way in which Moore's thefts effect a kind of partial appropriation, "imparting and parting with" her source materials: she is like "a burglar who marks everything that he has stolen with the owner's name and then exhibits it in his stall in the marketplace" (173). Jarrell's word "exhibit" hints at the peculiar kind of looking characteristic of a Moore poem, the "look at that of which I may regard myself as the imaginary possessor," the artificiality or indirection of her descriptive technique

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[6]Here is Eliot on imitation and theft: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion" (182).

that, like her quotations, seems not so much to bring one closer to the "thing" described or quoted as to establish a necessary or internal distance. Too much of Moore's critical reception would essentially equate her emphasis on accurate or precise visual description with that of the Imagist project, as if her attention to minute particulars aims at transmitting a sensuous experience unchanged through the medium of her text. Lynn Keller, for example, cites Moore among the modernists "dissatisfied with concepts and terms that could be detached from sensory reality," those who "tried to attach their poetry to particular objects and instants" (86). And yet, Moore's poems obscure in their very gestures toward clarity; "for all their faithful documentation of perception, they are often more astigmatic than lucid: they seem to be all foreground, all detail, all strangely cropped objects and oblique angles" (Carson 17). This "astigmatic" character is such that "particular objects" function less as "objects," per se, than as occasions for discursive layering or folding. Moore's famous precision, though we have been slow to admit it, makes it very difficult to discern discrete objects in her poems. Indeed the minute details often hint that her "object" is not the first-hand or natural thing we thought she was describing, but a painting, an etching, or a catalogue photograph. Musing on a version of this problem in "Those Various Scalpels" she asks, "But why dissect destiny with instruments / more highly specialized than components of destiny itself?" Charles Molesworth responds to this "enigmatic rhetorical question" by suggesting that "Moore may be telling herself that an overly refined art will fail to register the main outlines of her experience and hence lose its force in its details" (108). This failure to "register," to account for the "outlines of experience," is, I will argue, central to a poetic practice

willing to grant the "integrity of experience that is ephemeral," a practice that, in Moore's words, finds it "a privilege to see so / much confusion."

Apparently, it took the eye of Elizabeth Bishop to recognize the mood in which Moore's "observations" have their genesis: "Although her tone is frequently light or ironic," Bishop writes, "the total effect is of such ritualistic solemnity that I feel in reading her one should constantly bear in mind the secondary and frequently somber meaning of the title of her first book: *Observations*" (Schwartz 279). Bishop suggests that we understand Moore's "observations" as rites or rituals. In so doing, she indicates their connection to the ritual or cult practice that Benjamin identifies with art's auratic function. The unapproachable object, secure in its distance, serves a ceremonial function. Its apprehension is tied to holidays, days of remembrance, days "shot through with chips of messianic time" (Illuminations 263). While cult or ritual value increasingly gives way to display value in the age of technological reproducibility, what emerges in Moore's observations is a phenomenon that Benjamin contemplates in relation to photography and film, namely, the auratic disappearance of aura, the thriving of aura in its decline.

Turning to Elizabeth Bishop in my third chapter, I show how the healthy suspicion she cultivates toward the immediate experience that the Imagists offered, and on which her contemporary "confessional" poets traded, helps her to develop her notion of "experience-time," an unfolding of events that depends on periodic lapses, distractions, and "blanks" in the calendar. In a 1935 notebook entry she gives an early indication of how she will conceive of such a chronology:

> A set of apparently unchronological incidents out of the past have been reappearing. I suppose there must be some string running them together, some spring watering them all. Some things will never disappear, but rather clear up, send out roots, as time goes on. They are my family

> monuments, sinking a little more into the earth year by year, boring silently, but becoming only more firm, and inscribed with meanings gradually legible, like letters written in 'magic ink' (only 5 metaphors) (quoted in Kalstone 23).

This admittedly fantastic figure of the monument (Bishop is the one counting her metaphors here), a family marker that sinks into the ground like a gravestone, combines the durability of writing in stone with the comparatively ephemeral marks of "magic ink." Bishop's curious mixture posits a direct relationship between the lasing impression and its gradual, fleeting legibility. As we will see, she returns to the figure of the monument on several occasions, most notably when she reworks the lettering in Eliot's "existing order of monuments," to accommodate a shifting order of "moments." What this speculation about "apparently unchronological incidents" already suggests is that experience comes to pass in Bishop's poems through encounters with second-hand, worn, and decaying objects. Victoria Harrison describes Bishop "musing in her 1935 journal about the mysterious life of things stuck together in a mail-order catalogue and fantasizing an attic room where the smells, colors, and textures of her life's things would decay together to produce oddly new combinations" (5). The "stuck together" quality of these "things" and their inevitable "decay" indicate the role of chance and contingency in Bishop's narratives of experience, narratives in which one finds "everything only connected by 'and' and 'and.'" To give a sense of this contingency and to set the terms according to which Bishop will respond to it, my reading begins with Edwin Boomer, a character in Bishop's early short story "The Sea and Its Shore," hired to collect the scraps of paper left on a public beach. Boomer's peculiar reading habits anticipate Bishop's own. Crucial to this strategy is vigilance, the practice of waiting and watching that Boomer observes amidst the proliferation of papers on the beach and that Bishop's poems

will convert into an aesthetic principal. The process of condensation that Eliot describes, whereby the poet "is constantly amalgamating disparate experience," the noise of the typewriter and the smell of cooking, to form new unities or wholes, is displaced in Bishop's poetics onto an unsteady temporal narrative, whereby "a set of apparently unchronological incidents" give way to "coincidences," "moments of recognition," "pricking out the past, or present, or casting into the future" (Dimensions 99).

James Merrill, who has claimed both Bishop and Proust as "surrogate parents," might have learned from them that the most important experiences of his life will often come to light only after a long wait. The distinction between immediate sensation and lasting experience is everywhere observed in Merrill's work. Still, much of its critical reception testifies to the ongoing demand for poetry of immediate experience. Even though, as David Kalstone notes, "it is clear that Merrill is not engaged in capturing the raw momentary feel of experience in the present tense," Merrill's early volumes prompt a steady stream of objections to their revels in artifice, their refusal to represent lived experience directly, and their willful suspension of emotion (79).[7] The poems are "impeccably written," Louise Bogan declares, "but everything about them smells of the lamp; they are as frigid and dry as diagrams" (quoted in Yenser 92). While a twentieth-century love poet as unabashed as Merrill seems an unlikely target for the term "frigid," the claim that his poems bear some relation to "diagrams" may have some unintended interpretive value. That is to say, Merrill's obsession with rooms, both the architectural spaces of his houses in Stonington, New York, and Athens, and the quatrains, octaves, and sestets to which he says he took "instinctively," enables him to acquire a wealth of

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[7] Dennis Sampson's description of Merrill as a poet "thoroughly committed to his craft and yet maddeningly unable to render experience" is fairly representative (quoted in Rotella 15).

lasting experience that depends on the gradual mastery of given arrangements. This attitude toward the use of forms sets him apart from many of his contemporaries. Whereas certain strands of Modernism, Imagist and Objectivist among them, attempt to secure the dissociated subject an experiential grounding through the immediate apprehension of stable objects, Merrill's work sustains a notion of experience as both speculative and retrospective. Experience, for Merrill, accrues not in direct confrontation promised by the object, but in the repeated exposure to a series of passages whose impressions prove both stronger and more lasting for never having entered the conscious mind.

Merrill's feel for the rigors of particular verse forms can be startlingly vivid. Here, for example, is his description of Dante's terza rima:

> At the humblest level it serves as a No Trespassing sign, protecting the text. A copyist's pious interpolation or unthinking lapse would at once set off the alarm. No verse form *moves* so wonderfully. Each tercet's first and third line rhyme with the middle one of the preceding set and enclose the new rhyme-sound of the next, the way a scull outstrips the twin, already dissolving oarstrokes that propel it. (Prose 185)

Expulsion from guarded property, propulsion through water, terza rima is both a guarantee of structural integrity and a way to keep moving. Strict enough to survive a copyist's reproduction intact, regardless of any "unthinking lapses," Dante's form trains the poet to move with a grace grounded in a kind of muscle memory, the mastery of those two rhyming "oarstrokes" that enclose each stanza. According to Merrill, this kind of training falls to Dante's reader as well, for the "great concision" of the *Comedy* leaves him no room to "spell out connections for a torpid reader. This *we* must do, helped by centuries of commentary" (Prose 185). And while these connections are invisible upon a first reading, the poem's form prepares us for the task: "As rhymes interlock throughout a

canto, so do incidents and images throughout the poem"; eventually "the progress of the verse . . . becomes a version . . . of the pilgrim's own" (Prose 185). When Merrill contrasts the thrill of the terza rima's rigors to the supposed daring of the free verse forms that many of his contemporaries were using—"'These poems take risks!' gloat the blurbs"—he draws an analogy, curiously, to film: "What a shock it is, opening the *Comedy*, to leave today's plush avant-garde screening room with its risk-laden images and scrambled soundtrack and use our muscles to actually get somewhere" (Prose 185-86). It is rare indeed to hear this scion of an investment firm magnate rejecting the confines of any "plush" interior in favor of muscular exertion. But "to actually get somewhere," to make one's way through a passage, even the most modest pilgrimage, requires the kind of training that verse form provides. Merrill's point is not simply that the old forms are better than new formlessness, or that film, with its splicing and scrambling, takes the place of an epic poetry now relegated to history. Rather, he seems to suggest that when we participate in Dante's form, making the effort to "spell out connections" among the poem's "incidents and images" that the terza rima prepares for, we are in for a "shock" more startling than the tricks of poets "performing without a net." Benjamin posits a connection between durable structures and a certain kind of unconscious training as well. Near the end of "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility," he turns to the most "ancient" of the arts, architecture, before offering his insights into the structure of film. Architecture, he suggests, is an art form whose reception might prove instructive for the twentieth century since, from the earliest points in human history, buildings have not been subject to the kind of rapt attention that can accompany the other arts. Rather, they are appropriated unconsciously, "mastered

gradually" through habit, while one's attention is drawn elsewhere. Kinesthesia and proprioception help one navigate through houses and rooms more than do sight and hearing. "As regards architecture," Benjamin writes, "habit determines to a large extent even optical reception, [which] occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion" (Illuminations 240). Drawing on Benjamin's insight, my final chapter will show how Merrill cultivates this form of reception while moving through a series of remarkably durable little rooms: the quatrains, octaves, and sestets in which he sets his life's work.

In a letter written in May of 1940, Benjamin tells Adorno of a childhood memory that contains the germ of his theory of experience. The event is an ordinary one: "In the towns and villages where my family used to spend the summer, our parents of course took us for walks. . . . When we had made the obligatory excursions from Freudenstadt, Wengen, or Schreiberhau, my brother would say: 'So we've done that one now.' The saying has impressed itself on me unforgettably" (SW IV 412). There is a satisfying symmetry in this recollection. The attitude of Georg Benjamin, who would treat each visit to a new town as the content of a single hour of his life, checking it off his list, is balanced by the indelible impression his "saying" leaves on Walter. "So we've done that now," becomes a problem that will occupy Benjamin in a succession of guises to the end of his life. It is the motto of the voluntary memory: "So now we've been there. (I've had an experience)" (Arcades 211). To this remembered scene I want to contrast a passage from Merrill's memoir, *A Different Person*, which describes a day trip during his travels in Europe, a trip to Ravenna that he almost didn't make. The trip was supposed to have been made in the company of Claude, Merrill's partner at the time and, had they gone,

would have had much the same character as the trips to various towns had to Benjamin's brother. But a medical condition prevented it: "Had Dr. Simeons's injection not kept me in Rome the previous June," Merrill writes, I would no doubt have gone to Ravenna with Claude, ticked it off my list of places to see, and never found myself there now" (Prose 621). "So we've done that now," he would have said; I've "ticked it off my list of places to see."

When Merrill does make the trip to Ravenna (no doubt a kind of "pilgrimage," as Dante's tomb is here), he is not the hurried tourist. He moves through the Tomb of Galla Placida, then San Vitale, then Sant' Apollinare in Classe, marveling at the fifteen-hundred-year old mosaic depicting a sky full of stars, Christ the "*buon pastore*," and "the sages whom Yeats called 'the singing-masters of my soul,'" without the slightest notion that the trip could ever actually be "done." In fact, this first pass through is only an initial exposure, a "time for first impressions," and he looks forward to its repetition already: "tomorrow at leisure I can take it all in more sensibly" (Prose 622). Pausing at the end of the day, now back in his hotel dining room, Merrill finds that this trip will hardly be confined to a certain hour of his life. Indeed, the mosaic's after-image opens an inexhaustible index to events thought to have been done long ago, "free associations that sparkle my way from remote crevices of the past: a forest scene composed of butterfly wings in Brazil; sun rising over fish-scale wavelets; a richly iced gingerbread cottage; my grandmother's beaded evening purse, turned inside out" (Prose 623). Astonished at the staying power of these ethereal impressions, ecstatic "merely to know that these early, glistening states are still attainable . . . ," Merrill lets his account trail off into reverie, leaving ellipses to mark events yet to come to pass.

In the near term, this trip counters the deepening sense of isolation that sent Merrill to Europe in the first place. Writing his memoir some forty years later, he will say that these passages through Ravenna's tombs have left an impression crucial to the rest of his life. They have given depth to time. Returning a second day to San Vitale, Merrill sees, written on the walls, in the thin rows of decorative border tiles surrounding each of the biblical scenes "like an idealized circulatory system," the key to their startling effects. "The profusion of motifs, their vigor by now a reflex long past thought, gives out a sense of peace and plenty in the lee of history's howling gale" (Prose 624). What seemed lost to history, a victim of its violence, survives as a life and "vigor," a "circulatory system," tucked safely away in the "profusion of motifs" on the walls, their moving, circulating repetitions. These motifs tell not of the "creeds or the crusades," but of "the relative eternity of villas, interior decoration, artisans, the centuries of intelligence in fingers not twenty years old" (Prose 624). While the eye is drawn to pictures of religious and mythical events, the borders it looks quickly past are themselves testaments to an old habit, a "reflex long past thought," passed down through the tradition of artisans' handicraft. Merrill's image of hands "not twenty years old" that nevertheless wield "centuries of intelligence" brings us back to where we started, to the medieval craftsmen that Benjamin cited as the keepers of long experience. How their practice can be replicated amidst the "chaotic, irregular, fragmentary" life of modern cities, a life in which the tourist has replaced the pilgrim, is suggested, finally, by Merrill's description of the mosaics themselves: "Thousands upon thousands of glass-paste dice—each by itself dull and worthless as a drawn tooth—have been shrewdly cast to embed a texture now matte, now coruscant, with colors fifteen hundred years have failed to dim" (Prose

622). Thousands of chance encounters, each "worthless" by itself, garner a luster that can be caught in periodic flashes. This transformation of chance to necessity, fragmentation to contiguity, *Erlebnis* to *Erfahrung*, is the practice Merrill's poetry will take up. From "these days which, like yourself, / seem empty and effaced" he will draw an unlikely sustenance, turning, in time, what seemed like "waste / To shade and fiber, milk and memory."

CHAPTER ONE

"It is a privilege to see so / much confusion": Marianne Moore and the Masses

> You will never sell more than five hundred copies,
> as your work demands mental attention.
>
> – Ezra Pound to Marianne Moore, 1918

> If you fear that you are
> reading an advertisement,
> you are.
>
> - Moore, "The Arctic Ox (Or Goat)"

How should we cope with Marianne Moore's remarkable prominence in the mass media? Framed by her tricorne hat, Moore appeared in the pages of *Esquire*, *Look*, *Sports Illustrated* and the *Saturday Review*. She was watched on NBC's *Today Show* and at Yankee stadium, delivering the first pitch of the 1968 baseball season. This public Moore signals, from the point of view of Pound's early letter, a kind of disastrous reversal. For Moore's early poems are oblique, allusive, severe enough in their craft to ward off any sizable audience, yet, thirty years after the publication of *Observations*, after the Pulitzer Prize, the Bollingen Prize, and the National Book Award, this former editor of *The Dial* is having tea with Cassius Clay and answering fifty letters each morning from her fans. We read in *Life* that "her devotees catch glimpses of her all over New York—at fashion shows, applauding Vladimir Horowitz's fifth encore, unmasking at

Truman Capote's ball, autographing (with 'spidery curlicues') copies of her books at Poetry Center readings. The invitations wedged in her bedroom mirror would do credit to a debutante" (Howard 37). Moore spends the final decades of her life as a darling of the mass media and popular press. As Bonnie Costello puts it, "the poet's poet had become the public's poet."

Moore's most appreciative critics have responded to her negotiations with popular culture, indeed their mutual embrace, with a certain chagrin. Charles Tomlinson summarizes their disappointment in 1969: "here is a poet whose public image is now perhaps only slightly less famous than that of Allen Ginsberg, but whose most characteristic and sound work would, from all appearances, have ensured a long and healthy unpopularity" (14). "It is a pity," Vendler writes, "that Moore's own struggle culminated in things like the weaker poems and the preposterous exchanges with the Ford Motor Company over the naming of the Edsel" (76).[8] "Weaker poems" and "preposterous" public exchanges merge into a single category, "things like" these, which, all mutually reinforcing, seem to account for the dearth of critical interest in Moore's late work as well as our pervasive sense that she does not take seriously the threat mass media poses to high art or, worse, simply gives over to the wiles of celebrity. But if an eager participation in the construction, marketing, and circulation of her image prompts a squeamish response on the part of her critics, perhaps it also belies our reluctance to explore the full implications of high Modernism's more promiscuous engagements with

[8] John Slatin summarizes the situation this way: "To the extent that there is a debate about Marianne Moore, the issue is whether she did her best work in the 1930's or the 1940's; there is no question at all about the work of the 1950's and 1960's, whose slightness is conceded universally" (13).

the mass media.[9] For while Moore's most celebrated poems of the 20's and 30's cull from across the "great divide" that would protect Art from the contagion of *Life*, her critical reception has tended to preserve this divide by splitting Moore. Whether one believes that her work became "slight" with the rise of her celebrity, or that the late poems represent an advance into heretofore avoided sociopolitical realms, the critical consensus maintains two Moores: the hard modernist, quoting James and Jehoshaphat, and the soft celebrity, offering the Ford Motor Company names for their new car: "Utopian Turtletop," "Pastelogram," "Mongoose Civique."[10]

I want to complicate our reception of Moore's work by suggesting that the power of mass media both to distract and absorb cannot be understood simply as a regrettable influence on her late poems, that the mass is integral to her poetic project from its inception. Indeed, the pressures that mass forms of media bring to bear on the reception of art provide the impetus for Moore's idiosyncratic compositional habits. Clipping from the *New York Times*, filing away postcards and photographs, copying notes from nature films into her indexed reading notebooks, Moore devises remarkably coherent strategies for negotiating with her century's mass of second-hand material. As this material finds a kind of afterlife in her poems, she transforms the "chaotic, irregular, fragmentary" experience of modernity into a trove of speculative experience. To explore what it might mean to conceive of experience as speculative I want to draw on a cluster of writings by Walter Benjamin that trace the changing contours of experience in the wake of mass media and technological reproducibility, for Benjamin's interest in particularly modern forms of experience—experience marked by the competing forces of distraction and

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[9] As for the cultivation of her image, Moore would often have her picture taken in the subway photo booth to gauge the effect of her outfits.

[10] For accounts that find Moore's later work increasingly concerned with politics see Holley and Stapleton.

collection—offers a critical vantage point from which to consider Moore's reading and writing practice. Benjamin's essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," for example, begins with an observation not unlike the one Pound makes at the outset of Moore's career, namely, that Baudelaire's is an audience whose "will power" and "ability to concentrate" are not "strong points" (Illuminations 155). Receptivity, for these readers, assumes a form borne out of mass experience, both the experience of the urban crowds in their jostling and amorphous movement, and the equally unsettling experience of technically reproducible art. As the unique existence of the traditional art object is unsettled by a plurality of copies, it becomes mass-like, such that our sense of a unique "here and now" declines, giving way instead to a scattered form of receptivity, what Benjamin calls "reception in a state of distraction" (Illuminations 240).[11]

My reading of Moore will consider how a profound ambivalence toward mass forms of media, a mass that can both scatter and absorb the subject, structures her inimitable method of observation, a method that depends on obsessive habits of collection and citation. Moore's materials, drawn from all manner of popular print culture and mass media publications, provide a storehouse of ephemera in which a kind of speculative experience appreciates. Continually returning to passages of her reading that have left impressions on her, now filed away and indexed in the reading notebooks she kept throughout her life, Moore activates a potential latent within what seem to be mere passing fancies, momentary objects of attention, transforming them into constructions that a reader learns to inhabit through repeated passage, something more akin to the architectural forms that, according to Benjamin, have always lent themselves

[11]Benjamin's work may seem like an unlikely critical apparatus for a reading of Moore. Nevertheless it has received a glimmer of attention from Moore scholars. See Carson Hubbard and Joyce.

to a kind of distracted reception. Leading the reader to wander through an array of discursive arrangements, what Srikanth Reddy has called an "architecture of digression," they invite him to pause, to be drawn into the distance of an absorbing image.[12]

I. Collecting Moore

> O bliss of the collector, bliss of the man of leisure! Of no one has less been expected, and no one has had a greater sense of wellbeing than the man who has been able to carry on his disreputable existence in the mask of Spitzweg's "Bookworm." For inside him there are spirits, or at least little genii, which have seen to it that for a collector—and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be—ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them. So I have erected one of his dwellings, with books as the building stones, before you, and now he is going to disappear inside, as is only fitting.
>
> –Walter Benjamin "Unpacking My Library"

A glance at Moore's recent publication history confirms an impression that runs throughout all of Moore scholarship, that here is a poet whose work has proven unusually difficult to collect. We have been hearing, at least since the publication of *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, that there is no definitive collection of her work, for the various collections we do have, collections that overlap insofar as they reproduce what are ostensibly the same poems, in fact offer radically different versions of these poems. While perhaps her situation is no different from that of any prolific poet yet to appear in a variorum edition, the editor who would "collect" Moore has a peculiar challenge. Not

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[12] Srikanth Reddy, in "To Explain Grace Requires a Curious Hand": Marianne Moore's Interdisciplinary Digressions," compares the structure of "The Pangolin," among other poems, to that of the anatomy (Burton's, Frye's, etc.) and leans toward architecture: "While Whitman had employed parataxis (in the form of anaphora and catalogs) to place multiple subjects in relation to one another within a single, inclusive utterance, the modernist speaker of 'The Pangolin' designs a new kind of lyric within the American idiom – one constructed upon an unbroken architecture of digression" (458).

only is her entire *oeuvre*, as we will see, particularly difficult to gather in any fixed form, individual poems themselves can appear to be the most tenuous of assemblages. Add to these difficulties Moore's penchant for revising her notes nearly as often as she revised the poems, take into account her inscription on the threshold of *Complete Poems*, "OMISSIONS ARE NOT ACCIDENTS," and we have a poet who is not only difficult to collect, but who fairly defies us to try. At the center of this difficulty, of course, are Moore's own reading habits. Both a voracious reader and an incorrigible collector, in Bonnie Costello's phrase, "a kleptomaniac of the mind," Moore files away postcards, photographs, scraps from *The Illustrated London News*, *The New York Times*, *Life*, lines from nature films, literature from the National Parks Service, and from the *Report on the Introduction of Domestic Reindeer into Alaska* (5). Once these scraps are deposited and indexed in reading notebooks, they become part of the store on which she draws to compose her poems. "No Swan So Fine," for example, brings together a caption from a *New York Times Magazine* photograph, "There is no water so still as the dead fountains of Versailles," and a Christie's announcement Moore had seen a year earlier in the *Illustrated London News* for the sale of a pair of Louis XV candelabra, each containing a swan with gold collar, that had belonged to the late Lord Balfour: "'No water so still as the dead fountains of Versailles.' No swan, / with swart blind look askance / and gondoliering legs, so fine / as the chintz china one with fawn / brown eyes and toothed gold / collar on to show whose bird it was" (189).[13] By the time a line or phrase from the popular press makes its way into one of Moore's poems, its original reception has been forgotten, supplemented by a latent period in her notebook. Drawing on these notebooks when prompted by new material, Moore brings bits of her reading to legibility within the

[13] Quotations from Moore's poems are taken from Schulman's edition unless otherwise stated.

particular configurations that recollection provides. It is this compositional method that structures the practice of reading her writing performs.

But finally, and perhaps decisively for the Moore collector, there is reason to believe that Moore herself regards this form of reading as a practice that was guaranteed, in a certain sense, to fail. Kay Ryan's candid admission describes the predicament that I want to explore:

> I always have a double feeling, reading lines like these. Oh, more than double. . . . I love the pure eccentricity of her language; and I think, *who will ever read this?* A poet friend of mine recently said, "They should have taken away her library card." God, it's true; she goes on and on. I can barely hold on to a single whole poem. And at the same time I think she is the Statue of Liberty. (174)

The possibility that we "barely hold on to a single whole poem," that Moore's archival assemblages may be eccentric to the point of incomprehensibility, hints at the intimate relation of her texts to the "scattering" effects of technical reproducibility. Samuel Weber reminds us that Benjamin's word for this scattering, "*Zerstreuung*," often translated as "distraction," has an English cognate in the verb "to strew" (92). The technically reproducible art object, no longer an *object* per se, does not "distract" simply in the sense of averting one's attention to some new point of focus. Rather, it can be said to "take place" in many places simultaneously. Reception, then, shifts from a question of the subject who would "hold on to a single whole" to that of the participant, or *Teilnehmer*, who takes part, but in taking part may be in turn "taken apart," "dis-tracted," "strewn." Moore's readers can be, in a phrase she uses in "Subject, Predicate, Object," "exasperated to participate" (Prose 505). Reading Moore can feel like being multiplied, Ryan suggests, "more than double," as we shuffle through citations that go "on and on." And yet, just as, in John Vincent's phrasing, we feel "adrift on a discursive stream whose

currents are mysterious," we might also seem to glimpse the lady of liberty in the harbor, as it were, the woman from whose head light seems to emanate, an image to which we will have occasion to return.

The scattered state of Moore's poems troubles readers at both ends of her career. Yvor Winters, trying to persuade Moore to collect her earliest poems into a single volume, hints at what might be at stake in the decision to publish a book: "I know many people who want your poems, and want them badly, and it is very difficult to gather them up from magazines … Why won't you? I hope you don't have Mr. Stevens' unwashed aversion to book-publication. It is untidy, you know. People who leave poems littered around in the magazines are so very much like people who leave papers around in the parks" (quoted in Becoming 22). Winters's simile points up the relation between Moore's poems and the mass of material pouring out of the popular presses in order to contrast the two. To leave the poems uncollected, scattered about in various magazines, is to treat them like "litter" and to risk contamination from the popular press. It is "untidy," "unwashed." An implicit hierarchy governing books, magazines, and newspapers sharply distinguishes writing that should be preserved from "news" subject to its freshness. To collect the poems now scattered in magazines is to ensure a kind of durability. To leave them scattered is to risk a certain ephemerality or disappearance.

Near the end of Moore's career we encounter a somewhat different problem. Moore's late authorized collections preserve her poems in widely available editions, but the integrity of individual poems often seems to be compromised. Richard Howard's comments exemplify the tenor with which so many of Moore's most committed readers meet "the crisp Penguin that purports, in a plausible mendacity of 247 pages, to be *The*

Complete Poems of Marianne Moore: this is a scandal . . . the choppings and changings are disastrous . . . we are to put up with excisions, with renamings, with revisions out of all recognition . . . what we need is a textual reprint of the 1924 *Observations* and of each subsequent book *as it first appeared*, without the deleterious cutting and fussing which the misguided and somewhat craven poet perpetuated upon her true genius" (5 original emphasis). Howard's rant—and it has been seconded many times—suggests a particular kind of failure, for in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* we have a final collection from which the poems have disappeared, from which they have been revised "out of all recognition."[14] What is more, this failure is attributed to Moore's celebrity, for it is the "mascot" poems, "poems written, or assembled, when she had become so resigned to the absurd charm of her appearance among us" that "disfigure" first the 1951 "so-called *Collected Poems*" and now the *Complete Poems* as well. This ringing call for a reprint of each book "*as it first appeared*," this description of the violence enacted on the body of Moore's work—the "choppings" that "disfigure" her and revise her "out of recognition"—conjures a Moore who disappears just as she seems to become omnipresent, just as we "catch glimpses of her all over New York." Whereas Winters had tried to convince Moore to collect in book form those poems scattered like newspapers in public parks, Howard sees the older Moore as having scattered once again, only this time in full "costume." She is the "Mary Poppins of Poetry" in the pages of *Life* and *Esquire*, shuffling that other Moore, the "true genius," out of sight.

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[14] Here is William Logan, for example: "For Moore, readers have long relied on the serial acts of butchery she committed in *The Complete Poems* (1967), whose author's note reads, in its entirety, 'Omissions are not accidents.' This volume could have been titled *Half the Complete Poems* with some justice. Moore was an intrepid and reckless reviser of her work (one who preferred the ax to the scalpel), taking poems cast into delicate stanzas, among the most beautiful syllabic verse ever written, hacking out lines here and there or crushing their fine crystalline structures into a squarish mass closer to prose, then printing the mutilated version without apology" (66).

After years of calls for a variorum Moore, two major volumes have been published since 2002 that respond to this problem of collecting or restoring Moore's work. Each attempts to broaden the scope of Moore material widely available and to establish some consistent reference point for scholars. The first, *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907-1924*, edited by Robin Schulze, begins the task outlined by Howard by reproducing the 1924 volume *Observations*. Only Schulze does not stop there. She gathers and reprints the originally published version of each poem collected in that volume, as well as the poems Moore published in journals before 1924 then decided not to collect. Juxtaposing these earlier publications with the collected versions of the same poems, Schultz's volume complicates Howard's demand, for it shows that the "choppings and changings" that "disfigure" the poems in *Observations* were begun well before that volume went to press.[15] Thus, the narrative Howard presents of a "craven" older poet destroying her "true genius" is somewhat misleading in so far as the late "authorized" versions of Moore's poems are not lesser forms of fixed originals so much as the latest in a series of revisions Moore continued her entire life. Her oft-anthologized poem "The Fish," to cite just one example here, shows changes in diction and phrasing from its 1918 publication in *The Egoist* to the 1924 publication in *Observations*. Whereas "The barnacles undermine the / Side of the wave—trained to hide / There" in *The Egoist*, they "encrust the / side / of the wave," and "cannot hide" in *Observations*. The poem also morphs from its neatly aligned quatrains in *The Egoist* to the distinctive wedge-like shape we find in *Observations* and in every subsequently published version. What, if anything, is at stake in the description of these fish or barnacles "trained to hide," a training that is itself subject to a certain hiding, and perhaps a game of editorial

[15] For this reason Schultz refers to "presentations" rather than "versions" of a poem.

hide-and-seek in the "restoration" of Moore's poems' original contexts? John Slatin has suggested that this particular revision effectively hides the political thrust of the poem, downplaying the connection of these fish, who earlier in the poem "wade" like men, to soldiers in the First World War. At stake in the decision to mention their "training" then is a question of agency, in particular the agency or lack of agency required to organize the movement of a mass. When we turn later to Benjamin's interest in the various forms of mobilized masses in Europe in the 1930's, we will find there a broader context in which to consider the kinds of movements Moore's poems make and how they might be authorized.

The second volume of Moore's work recently published, Grace Schulman's 2003 edition of *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, reprints over a hundred previously uncollected poems along with a new set of notes, previously unpublished drafts, and drafts of poems "authorized" by their publication at various times during Moore's career. Schulman does not try to include all the published versions of a single poem. *The Egoist* version of "The Fish," for example, is not reproduced in her notes; she simply mentions that it was first published in *The Egoist*, leaving the reader to assume that it retained the same form from one publication to the next. Inevitably bound up in the problems of collection and dispersion at the center of Moore's poetics, Schulman's volume increases one's sense that the more Moore's work is reproduced the more amorphous or mass-like it becomes. Howard's exasperation at Moore's own editing practice was tempered by an enthusiasm largely absent from the reviews of Schulman's work. William Logan, for example, detects a lackadaisically ordering hand: "The editor, in her carefree way, here and there uses, she says, 'versions that I liked from earlier editions and/or literary journals,' a

method described as 'conscientious inconsistency.' I would call it whim. . . . The promised chronological order is nothing of the sort—the last two-thirds of the juvenilia is printed, with few exceptions, alphabetically by title, a fact the editor has chosen not to mention" (70).

I offer this glimpse at the recent publications to suggest that as we try to collect the body of Moore's work we see that, like the body of her "Jelly-Fish," it may be more slippery than we have acknowledged, "Visible, invisible, / a fluctuating charm." And insofar as we aim at gathering some abiding or fully formed authorial intention in increasingly more complete collections of her poems, we seem to be written into this particular one: "your arm / approaches and it opens / and it closes; you had meant / to catch it and it quivers; / you abandon your intent" (180). This image of a reaching or grasping intention coming just short of its "fluctuating" or ephemeral object recurs throughout Moore's poetry. That we "barely hold on to a single whole poem," that her published work seems to resist any final, authorized form, and that the poem "*as it first appeared*" would prove both evasive and indelible, begins to suggest that this motif doubles as an abiding compositional principle. Reading Moore's "Half Deity," a poem about a butterfly "Half Deity // half worm," Kenneth Burke suggests that the unpromising theme nevertheless fits Moore's odd combination of stylistic strengths, both her "'inconsequential ease' and 'droverlike tenacity.'" Describing the tentative narrative structure of the poem, he offers a figure for the exchange of interest at play around "a fluctuating charm": "in this realm, things reached for will evade, but will follow the hand as it recedes" (98).

What we know of Moore's compositional practice suggests that the movement Burke describes, that of an evasive, charming, or ephemeral object of attention playing just beyond the grasp of the subject, only to "follow the hand as it recedes," or as "you abandon your intent," fairly well describes Moore's reading habits, her negotiation with the famously eclectic mass of materials that make up her poems. In an early letter recounting her first exposure to the New York art world, she describes this interim between first and second readings as a kind of haunting:

> We had a discussion of the word "haunting," both Mr. Stieglitz and Mr. Kerfoot downing me saying that a haunting quality was not the earmark of good art—but of bad art. I said I meant the sort of thing that annoyed you till you had to trace it to the source where you had first encountered it and he said, "Oh that's a different thing—that's another sort of 'haunt.'" (Letters 109)

This other sort of "haunt," the annoyance that would cause one to seek out an original encounter with a work of art, might be brought to bear on the question of Moore's collectability, for Moore's comment on haunting anticipates Howard's response to her later collections, his desire to trace his reading back to an earlier, even a first, encounter. Howard's call for a reprint of each of Moore's books "*as it first appeared*" testifies to the afterlives of these books, their power to "haunt," in Moore's sense of the word, despite, or perhaps because of, Moore's "chopping and changings." Just what might be at stake in this "haunting" for Moore's sense of her own art becomes clearer in comments she drafted decades later:

> When one is attracted to a thing one is subject to its influence. In my own case, I seem to import (incorporate bodily) it seems to me what is too unbearably valuable to let alone (dominates my imagination or ear) (haunting and takes charge of me). . . . Indeed, my thoughts are my reading – what I read and what friends say—apparently contradictory my

> emphatic advice is "Be Yourself." I would answer I suppose I am myself in the way I (take things) employ what I find. (7)[16]

Moore seems to have wondered just how to characterize the kind of "attraction" or "influence" that a text might have. As she ponders the question, the shift in attribution of agency from subject to object grows progressively stronger: from attraction to influence, then importation, bodily incorporation, an unbearable estimation of value, and finally domination and haunting. This kind of exchange can occur between a person and a text, "what I read," or between two people, "what friends say." Moore's advice to "Be Yourself" appears "contradictory" here precisely because of this confusion of agency, that is, confusion about the extent to which the self is unsettled or influenced by the "things" that attract it. This "self" Moore represents as a kind of composite text, "what I read and what friends say." We will have occasion to say more about this question of haunting as the instigation of Moore's writing, but I want to note here that her remark finds an uncanny corroboration in William Carlos Williams's description of her conversation. Trying to describe Moore's peculiar social habits, Williams remembers how "she would laugh with a gesture of withdrawal after making some able assertion as if you yourself had said it and she were agreeing with you" (quoted in Tomlinson 112). Whereas Moore describes as "haunting" the unstable relation between a reader and a text, or between a collector of texts and her collection, Williams's description of her conversation, this nearly simultaneous assertion and withdrawal, repeats the movement Burke describes, of an evasive object eluding the grasp, then following the hand as it recedes or, in this case, laughing as if "she were agreeing with you." Williams's comment even suggests a kind of reversibility at work here. For the subject who can "be

[16] Phrases in parenthesis are possibilities Moore considered upon revision.

herself" only by surrendering agency to her collection, the collection that "takes charge of me," is granted in turn the ability to scatter, to change, to be like the dragon in Chinese mythology that Moore so admired, "of silkworm / size or immense; at times invisible" (303).

II. Scattering

> The most hidden motive of the person who collects can be described as taking up the struggle against dispersion. Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found.
>
> —Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

Early in Moore's career Eliot describes the effect of her observations in a way that links her precision to its scattering effect: "The gift for detailed observation, for finding the exact words for some experience of the eye, is liable to disperse the attention of the relaxed reader" (62). It is, paradoxically, Moore's precision, her "finding the exact words" that causes her reader's "attention" to scatter or "disperse." When she describes, for example, a moth "with backgammon-board wedges interlacing / on the wing," her use of "backgammon-board" as an adjective may be the most "exact" description of these "wedges," but only if our notion of exactitude is inflected by—and this would seem to be implied in Eliot's phrase "experience of the eye"—the challenge posed to objective forms of measurement in an age of technological reproducibility. Her form of looking slows down, then zooms in: "At first I thought a pest / must have alighted on my wrist. / It was a moth, almost an owl, / its wings were furred so well, / with backgammon-board wedges interlacing / on the wing" (276). Moore's first line shows almost no attention on the part of the speaker: "at first I thought a pest / must have alighted on my wrist." Casually

evaluative, calling the moth "a pest," she names it only as that sort of thing to which we would rather not have our attention drawn.[17] But then the image seems to grow. The moth becomes an owl, and we notice, at this distance, its fur. Riveted to what was, at first, a momentary distraction, Moore now magnifies the marks on the wing to the size of a game board. While this form of looking owes something to Moore's early training in biology and an early fascination with optical instruments, the poems do more than magnify. They superimpose images from what seem like entirely incompatible orders of representation. This moth has "backgammon-board wedges interlacing / on the wing— / like cloth of gold in a pattern / of scales with a hair-seal Persian / sheen" (274). Now we seem to be looking at a moth's wing, a backgammon board, and a piece of gold cloth with, if we can picture it, "a hair-seal Persian sheen." What Eliot describes as the poems' scattering effect, their ability to disperse a reader's attention, suggests how thoroughly Moore harnesses the unsettling effects of reproducibility for her compositional practice. The result might be regarded as a corollary to the rule of looking in Moore's poetry. Whereas the poet's speaker seems always to say "even I see too much," the closer she looks at a thing, the more difficult it becomes to grasp any discernable contours. A remark of Benjamin's on photographic reproduction describes what is everywhere implied in Moore's understanding of precision: "With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject." In these "new structural formations," triggered by

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[17] If we hear echoes of her Moore's famous dismissal here, "I too dislike it" (and fourteen lines later: "No wonder we hate poetry") then we might notice that what follows this minimal, dismissive gesture of the mind is, in both cases, a revisiting of attention that seems to halt after each movement, what Moore calls reading: "I, too, dislike it. / Reading it, however, with perfect contempt for it, one discovers in / it, after all, a place for the genuine."

the close-up and the "dynamite of the tenth of a second," we are given the architecture of the optical unconscious, the "far-flung ruins and debris, [in which] we calmly and adventurously go traveling" (Illuminatios 236). Moore approaches the reproductions at the center of her poems to aggravate their scattering effects. "There is something so odd about her technique," Ryan writes, "she commonly looks at something quite remote and static, such as a piece of silver or an illustration … and it explodes in a variety of alarming directions" (173). [18]

That we may never apprehend the "sum" of a Moore poem, that her images "promise specificity," then "dissolve as soon as one tries to visualize them," that they "play just beyond our reach," should lead us to wonder whether the limits of apprehension are not a fault so much as the condition of possibility of Moore's work. Part of the reason we struggle when we try to grasp discrete objects in a Moore poem is that they emerge out of encounters with reproductions, "elephants she had seen in a lecture-film on Ceylon, an icosasphere she had read about in *The New York Times*, a chameleon whose photograph she had seen in *Life*, a fifteenth-century tapestry reproduced on postcards, an exhibit of sixteenth-century Persian treasures" (Schulman 13). But what we find when we begin to read is that the poem's focal distance is not set to coincide with that of her source material. In the first lines of "Nine Nectarines," for example, we seem to be looking at fruit: "Arranged by two's as peaches are, / at intervals that all may live." The poem gradually reveals the physical context in which this fruit is

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[18] Ryan continues: "Yet in another way observation is just the detonator for an explosion of private associations, glittering in their rhetorical arcs, and upon their descent into the reader's brainpan randomly meaningful and meaningless. At the end of this poem, when she announces triumphantly to the tiger, "you / know that it is not necessary to live in order to be alive," I feel like applauding, but I am not sure why. I have spent some time trying to put the pieces of this poem together. I feel sure that it is a triumph, but it's like trying to pack a suitcase in dreams. If I get one piece, I lose another" (174).

set. Moore moves from an image of these nine nectarines in an arrangement necessary for natural reproduction, “that all may live,” to the “Chinese style” of their depiction on a plate, to the “puce-American-Beauty pink” with which an auction catalogue reproduces the photograph that reproduces the plate that reproduces the nectarines. If we look too closely we see the hybrid rose, “American-Beauty,” rather than the “puce-American-Beauty-pink” color of the paint on the plate in the photograph in this catalogue. But we would seem always to be looking too closely, our vision circumscribed by the formats of postcards and catalogues, the second-hand world. Moore’s poem ultimately suggests that the natural world may be too far gone for inquiry: “wild spontaneous fruit was / found in China first. But was it wild?” her speaker asks; “Prudent de Candolle would not say” (208-09). We meet the world as we find it, in this case, in Alphonse de Candolle’s *Origin of Cultivated Plants*, the text Moore reads alongside the auction catalogue, the *New York Sun*, and the *llustrated London News* to compose the poem. In de Candolle’s title Moore finds the intimacy of origins and cultivation, the kind of original artifice she will locate in the “prismatic color” of our first garden, “when Adam was alone” (136).

A first wave of Moore criticism wanted to equate her emphasis on accurate or precise visual description with that of the Imagist project, as if she aims to transmit a sensuous experience unchanged through the medium of her text. John Crowe Ransom calls Moore’s work “the handsomest consequence . . . of the imagist cult of thirty years ago” (quoted in Martin 5). But we are beginning to see how these poems obscure in their very gestures toward clarity. As Stacy Carson Hubbard writes, “for all their faithful documentation of perception, they are often more astigmatic than lucid: they seem to be all foreground, all detail, all strangely cropped objects and oblique angles” (17).

Hubbard's description of Moore's images as "strangely cropped," "all foreground" and "oblique angles" situates the poems within the realm of photography, and the destruction of space in which photography participates, what Benjamin calls the decline of the "here and now." While readings of Moore continue to praise the accuracy of her visual description, it is not the camera's accuracy that proves decisive for Moore's poetics. Rather, it is the camera's ability to take up and to scatter that which it reproduces. In Moore's "astigmatic" images, objects are not "objects," per se, but occasions for discursive layering, repeated acts of indexing and indicating. When "The Steeple-Jack" offers, in one of Moore's inimitable lists, "the tropics at first hand: the trumpet-vine, / fox-glove, giant snap-dragon, a salpiglossis," these plants (as if seen through the "mist" Moore finds in Adam's garden) are "favored by the fog," such that their "first hand" character is "tropic" indeed, in the sense that it is turned or troped, three of the four hiding animals—"fox," "dragon," "pig"—and the fourth a trumpet. Utterly characteristic of Moore's lists, this hidden menagerie indulges her abiding interest in the play between figure and ground, and the camouflage for which she praises the chameleon and all those who, like chameleons, "snap the spectrum up for food" (102). If we read Moore's progression of names with a certain classificatory system in mind, then we know that we are looking at plants. But if we pause in what Randall Jarrell calls this "tropical digression," to peer into the verdure, we had better be prepared to meet giants and dragons. Just as this order of flora seems barely to hold, it aspires to domesticate heavenly bodies as well, "moon-vines trained on fishing twine / at the back door."[19]

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[19] *Complete Poems* 5-6. These lines are omitted from the version of "The Steeple-Jack" that Schulman reproduces.

Hiding animals on the surface of her lists, Moore displays a disposition toward surfaces that we see in an early Benjamin essay on children's books. In the gazing child who enters into the pages of his picture book, who "overcomes the illusory barrier of the book's surface," Benjamin sees the "Taoist vision of perfection come true." The picture puzzle in the book only gradually subjects its "apple" and "airplane" and "ax" to the strictures of classification:

> Under plate A, for example, you will find a higgledy-piggledy still-life that seems very mysterious until you realize what is happening and what Apple, ABC-book, Ape, Airplane, Anchor, Ark, Arm, Armadillo, Aster and Ax are all doing in the same place. Children know such pictures like their own pockets; they have searched through them in the same way and turned them inside out, without forgetting the smallest thread or piece of cloth. (SW 1 436)

Moore's "trumpet-vine, / foxglove, snap-dragon" sustains a classificatory surface tension such that we can skim over the list of plant names without falling into its depths. The picture puzzle from the child's book works the other way around. Riveting him with its images, the book would teach the child to extract himself by mastering a representational code. When Benjamin tells us that "children know such pictures like their own pockets," he indicates how their "reading" is organized. In the confusion of "Ape, Airplane, Anchor, Ark, Arm," we have something like Moore's "trumpet," "vine," "glove," "dragon," "moon," only the child who reads as though he is rifling through his pockets bears allegiance to no single legible surface. He has turned these images "inside out." His reading is dependent on a warped or folded surface, and in this sense anticipates the reading of "dialectical images."[20]

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[20] Benjamin mentions in a footnote that "Words, too can have an aura of their own," and quotes Karl Krauss: "The closer the look one takes at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back" (Illuminations 200). There is a sense in which this distance within proximity describes the kinds of looks to which Moore's poems accustom us. She is particularly fond of the names of flora whose common names

Moore's poem "Bowls" gives some indication of how we might read images that scatter.

Bowls

on the green
with lignum vitae balls and ivory markers,
the pins planted in wild duck formation,
and quickly dispersed—
by this survival of ancient punctilio
in the manner of Chinese lacquer-carving,
layer after layer exposed by certainty of touch and unhurried incision
so that only so much color shall be revealed as is necessary to the picture,
I learn that we are precisionists,
not citizens of Pompeii arrested in action
as a cross-section of one's correspondence would seem to imply.
Renouncing a policy of boorish indifference
to everything that has been said since the days of Matilda,
I shall purchase an etymological dictionary of modern English
that I may understand what is written,
and like the ant and the spider
returning from time to time to headquarters,
shall answer the question
'why do I like winter better than summer?'
and acknowledge that it does not make me sick
to look playwrights and poets and novelists straight in the face—
that I feel just the same;
and I shall write to the publisher of the magazine
which will 'appear the first day of the month
and disappear before one has had time to buy it
unless one takes proper precaution,'
and make an effort to please—
since he who gives quickly gives twice
in nothing so much as in a letter. (154)

The poem's opening image of bowling pins dispersed about the green suggests a kind of scattering, but suggests as well an artistic arrangement such as the image carved into a Chinese lacquer bowl. If "we are precisionists" after the model of Chinese lacquer-

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contain other names, and so some trace of history. There is always more to see, for example, in her "larkspur, blue pincushions, blue pease … aspens, cats' paws, and woolly sunflowers, / fireweed, asters, and Goliath thistles."

carving, precision would seem to have very little to do with objective forms of measurement. Here it involves a coordinated exposure of surfaces, "layer after layer," until the right layers are visible in the right places. What Moore's allusion to Pompeii suggests is that these surfaces, these layers, are saturated with time. Because we are "not citizens of Pompeii arrested in action," our "correspondence" cannot be measured by a simple "cross-section." Correspondence requires a series of exchanges drawn out over a period of time and tends to involve the expectation of a response. A "cross-section of correspondence" would sacrifice the full picture that lacquer carving achieves by exposing many layers at once. It would lack the intricacies apparent in a "wild duck formation," a time-sensitive constellation subject both to its moving element and to a continual rearrangement of the parts. So, too, "an etymological dictionary" counters a "boorish indifference" to the history of language, for it grants simultaneously current words their individual histories and rates of change. Reading with a grasp of etymology is in this sense very much like lacquer carving. This concern with the movement and history of words is brought to bear on the particularities of Moore's publishing world at the end of the poem, where her speaker says she will "write to the publisher of the magazine / which will 'appear the first day of the month / and disappear before one has had time to buy it / unless one takes proper precaution.'" She is speculating on the return of her correspondence. The expressly ephemeral nature of the magazine, its ability to "disappear before one has had time to buy it," requires that its reception be prepared for ahead of time, and "quickly." This is precisely the advice Moore gives when she claims that the composition of poetry requires a "lion's leap." The poet, time-sensitive

"precisionist," knows that "to have started such a long distance ahead makes it possible to be exact" (Prose 396).

III. "Armor seems extra": Armor, Shield, Shock

> Sometimes our attention is arrested strangely and abruptly by an idea, a recollection, a corner of some piece of furniture. All at once, it seems as though we were seeing something for the first time that we have seen a thousand times; or we perceive the coming of age—the puberty of an impression.
>
> —Paul Valéry, "Abrupt Changes in a Selfsame Thing"

When Benjamin claims that the experience of the urban mass was indispensable to Baudelaire's poetic project, that being jostled by a crowd might have been the most significant experience of Baudelaire's life, he is returning to the question about the "integrity of an experience that is ephemeral" raised in his early critique of Kant. The problem leads him back to Freud's description in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of consciousness as a screen or shield protecting the mind from external stimuli. While "this protective shield is supplied with its own store of energy," stimuli that exceed the conscious mind's registry, its capacity to represent and place objects before a subject, take the form of "shock experience," a store of experience only brought to consciousness once it has been recollected or recovered in hindsight. Benjamin indicates the significance of shock experience for literary production in Proustian terms, as the data of involuntary memory, for "only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *mémoire involontaire*" (Illuminations 161). He goes on to note a like-minded approach

in Valéry, whose interest in "the special functioning of psychic mechanisms under present-day conditions" leads him to describe "recollection" as "an elemental phenomenon which aims at giving us the time for organizing the reception of stimuli which we initially lacked" (Illuminations 161-62).[21]

Sensuous description in Moore's poetry everywhere guards against the hyper-reception of stimuli that Freud, Valéry and Benjamin figure as overtaxing the conscious mind's resources. Moreover, in Moore's most impressive feats of observation, in her most tortured subordinations of syntax and ungainly adjectival phrases, one feels the effort required to render the sensuous world through a linguistic medium as well as the limits of her encyclopedic range. For all the praise given to Moore's eye, to the precision with which she catalogues "the glaze on a / katydid-wing / subdivided by sun / till the nettings are legion," the act of looking in a Moore poem leaves us with the impression not only that, as William Logan suggests, "she could start almost anywhere," that the mind might be "enchanted" by anything, including the depiction of a kiwi on a can of shoe polish, but that the anywhere she starts is itself a space that can be subdivided infinitely, that its "nettings are legion." The kiwi's "rain-shawl / of haired feathers," no doubt brings other shawls to mind, other feathers. The mind, furthermore, does not need any empirical stimulus; it "has memory's ear / that can hear without / having to hear" and "memory's eye" as well (260). Her descriptions seem to insist that one can only begin to register the abundance of a visual world that circulates in the form of postcards and photographs, nature films and broadcasts of *The Magic Flute* on network television. If

[21] This organizing power of recollection has consequences for our conception of time. It should not be confused with conscious acts of the voluntary memory. It is more akin to rituals of remembrance. Benjamin quotes Reik: "the function of remembrance [*Gedächtnis*] is the protection of impressions; memory [*Erinnerung*] aims at their disintegration. Remembrance is essentially conservative, memory is destructive" (Illuminations 160).

reading Moore gives one the impression, in John Ashbery's words, "that life is softly exploding around us, within easy reach," it is precisely our proximity to so much liveliness, to a visual world that collapses distance through endless reproductions, which gluts the senses (88). In an early poem, "Old Tiger," Moore's speaker acknowledges the inexhaustible nature of her enterprise. Addressing a tiger who has "that eye which is characteristic / of all accurate observers," she pronounces the rule of looking in her poems: "you // see more than I see but even I / see too much" (132). Before comparing the speaker's visual prowess and that of the old tiger, the poem offers a partial catalogue of the kinds of details that might grab the tiger's attention, then breaks off to question his indifference to all of them: "You are right about it; that wary, / presumptuous baboon is nothing to you; and the chimpanzee? / An exemplary hind leg hanging like a plummet at the end of a / string—the tufts of fur depressed like grass / on which something heavy has been lying—nominal ears of black glass—what is there to look at?" Posed with a mild sarcasm, the question interrupts Moore's flow of meticulous description—the limp, heavy swinging of the chimpanzee's arms, the exact impression on its fur—visual juxtapositions that could, as with all of her looking, we begin to feel, go on indefinitely. For the eye prone to such minute precision, nearly everything must be left out, and as he ignores the other animals that Moore describes in her opening lines, this tiger does exactly that, so much so that he has become bored. Of a particularly discerning breed, "so / constituted that opposition is pastime and struggle is meat," this tiger will not allow his attention to be "duped by that which is pleasant," for he is, in the words of Moore's poem "The Hero," "not out / seeing a sight but the rock / crystal thing to see" (133, 188). Seeming to disdain those more demonstrative animals, this tiger's "passion" lies in "concealment."

Though her speaker lectures him about what seems like a haughty detachment from his environment, the "self-appointedly sublime disgust" of "the profusely lettered, // the intentionally hirsute," there is nevertheless a profound affinity between his vision, a vision that takes the form of combat, "opposition," and "struggle," and the athletic metaphorical efforts Moore's poems require in order to apprehend and fix the particulars of the sensuous world (133).

Turning to another carnivorous feline in her essay "Feeling and Precision," Moore appropriates Wallace Stevens's comparison of poetry to a lion and insists that its precision is in vain if it comes without "impact." While, according to Stevens, "poetry can kill a man," Moore assures us that "the lion's leap would be mitigated almost to harmlessness if the lion were clawless, so precision is both impact and exactitude." Precision's "impact," for Moore, always requires a "leap." It must surprise, even frighten or startle us. And to make this leap, the lion, or poet, must prepare well ahead of time: "to have started such a long distance ahead makes it possible to be exact" (Prose 396). Precision requires both impact and preparation, but, crucially, it also requires a momentary lapse or leap, a pouncing that seems to come from out of sight. It is in the context of these formulations that we can consider the obsession with armor in Moore's work, both her penchant for depicting armored animals, and the ways in which the poems might be said to shield themselves by deflecting their readers, for while a certain segment of Moore's critics treats these armored animals as figures for the poet's timid or guarded personality, a sign of her reluctance to engage with a culture of which she can be disapproving, I want to invert the terms of this argument and suggest that shielding can be understood as a form of receptivity in Moore's poetry, that "The Student" who "is too

reclusive for / some things to seem to touch / him; not because he / has no feeling but because he has so much" models a kind of hyper-receptivity that can be mistaken for mere defense (102).

Following Freud's description of subjective conscious experience as a shield, Benjamin depicts Baudelaire's writing process as an ongoing combat with the urban mass, his words as weapons: "This crowd . . . is imprinted on his creativity as a hidden figure . . . We may discern the image of the fencer in it; the blows he deals are designed to open a path through the crowd for him" (Illuminations 165). Benjamin considers the particular strain on the language Baudelaire uses as evidence of this kind of active defense. He notes Gide's attention to "the interstices between image and idea, word and thing, which are the real site of Baudelaire's poetic excitation," then Rivière's description of "the subterranean shocks by which Baudelaire's poetry is shaken; it is as though they caused words to collapse" (Illuminations 165). Language as a provisional defense against shock, as an expedient to fend off the agitations of a crowd, leaves on the reader an impression of its provisional character, its vulnerability to collapse.[22] We might extend the claim to include Moore's images. Her famous observations brace themselves against this manifold, the "too much" that her speaker claims "even I see" in "Old Tiger." In a late poem, "The Web One Weaves of Italy," the mass media's ability to overcome distance and concentrate a glut of tourist attractions "grows till it is not what but which, / blurred by too much" (288). In Moore's relentlessly meticulous attempts to index her menagerie, we hear the "excitation" that Gide finds in the "interstices" between "word and thing," just as we hear the threat of collapse. She describes the frigate pelican, "this

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[22] Coincidentally, Susan Sontag ventures a similar claim about Benjamin's own prose when she suggests that "his major essays seem to end just in time, before they self-destruct" (398).

hell-diver, frigate-bird, hurricane- / bird, unless swift is the proper word / for him, the storm omen when he flies close to the waves" (204). In "An Octopus" she asks, "is 'tree' the word for these things / 'flat on the ground like vines'? / some 'bent in a half-circle with branches on one side / suggesting dust-brushes, not trees" (172). She describes the pangolin as an "ant- and stone-swallowing uninjurable artichoke" (225). And finally, in "Half-Diety" she names the "Equine irascible / unwormlike unteachable butterfly- / zebra!" (220) Moore generates rhythmic and grammatical energy through these repeated stabs that would name and fix the objects of her vision. Her strings of description, fending off the nominal familiarity by which sensuous multiplicity is reduced to a thing, straddle a barely discernable distinction between the name and the unbounded field, between the "pangolin" and the "ant- and stone- swallowing uninjurable artichoke." Of course Moore's attempts at naming fail to actually capture their objects; as William Logan puts it, "things in the net of her descriptions were not caught, but released" (69). These discursive riots are quelled as we reach the conscious mind's limit to handling the shocks of stimuli: "Baudelaire has portrayed this condition in a harsh image. He speaks of a duel in which the artist, just before being beaten, screams in fright. This duel is the creative process itself." "Since he is himself exposed to fright," Benjamin writes, "it is not unusual for Baudelaire to occasion fright" (163). So Kenneth Burke remembers of Moore, who "by the gentle mastery of her ways of writing, had terrified me over and over again." (quoted in Howard 1).

Moore's poems begin with reproductions, repetitions, recurrences. The "haunting" quality of a text leaves her to assume radically provisional subject positions as she negotiates with her sources: "I suppose I am myself in the way I (take things) use

what I find." Moore echoes this sentiment in an interview as she tries to account for the genesis of a poem, a genesis that includes necessary lapses or blank spots, moments when the poem's progress is checked. After a period of abandonment, she must be "startled" back to a source:

> An attitude, physical or mental—a thought suggested by reading or in conversation—recurs with insistence. A few words coincident with the initial suggestion, suggest other words. Upon scrutiny, these words seem to have distorted the concept. The effort to effect a unit—in this case a poem—is perhaps abandoned. If the original, propelling sentiment reasserts itself with sufficient liveliness, a truer progress almost invariably accompanies it; and associated detail, adding impact to the concept, precipitates an acceptable development. To illustrate: a suit of armor is impressively poetic. The movable parts suggest the wearer; one is reminded of the armadillo and recalls the beauty of the ancient testudo. The idea of conflict, however, counteracts that of romance, and the subject is abandoned. However, the image lingers. Presently one encounters the iguana and is startled by the paradox of its docility in conjunction with its horrific aspect. The concept has been revived—of an armor in which beauty outweighs the thought of painful self-protectiveness. The emended theme compels development. (Prose 643)

Agency evacuates this passage. Something recurs. That Moore might have difficulty saying just what it is, or choosing for the subject of her first sentence between "an attitude, physical or mental—a thought suggested by reading or in conversation" supports the drift of the entire passage, if only on a second reading. That is to say, if we are willing to grant that whatever suggests itself to Moore as the source of a poem, after being abandoned for a time, "reasserts itself with sufficient liveliness" on some new occasion, and only then achieves its "acceptable development," then we can understand how it should be difficult for her to say just what the occasion was. Occasions only resolve themselves in hindsight. In her example, the iguana startles the poet into recalling the conjunction of armor and armadillo, casting all three into a constellation that

can, "presently," be read.[23] It is crucial that we acknowledge the element of chance here, registered in Moore's qualifying condition: "if the original, propelling sentiment reasserts itself." In this submission of the entire set of operations to chance, the chance, for example, that the sight of an iguana might conjure up a past encounter that had seemed to hold a certain poetic potential, Moore's recovery of abandoned items draws its connection to that of Proust, for whom the encounter with a past "somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object … depends entirely on chance" (quoted in Illuminations 158).

While the past is recovered through chance encounters, this recovery can be precluded by the premature categorizations of consciousness. Recalling how Proust, unable to produce vivid memories of the past voluntarily, has to wait for it to emerge through happenstance, Benjamin describes the "*mémoire volontaire*," as "a registry providing the object with a classificatory number behind which it disappears." This registry treats experience in the most reductive, positivistic terms; saying only, "'So now we've been there.' ('I've had an experience.')" (Arcades 211). Moore approaches her reading with a similar wariness. She stores up bits of text in her notebooks as if digesting any of them too quickly could cancel the latent period that a genuine reading requires. In Proustian terms, a sojourn in the involuntary memory gives experience an opportunity to accrue significance. Benjamin describes auratic experience as depending on this kind of accrual, "the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, tend to cluster

[23] Moore's dynamic language, her "startling," "propulsion," and "impact," along with her images of the suit of armor and the armadillo give the passage a rhetorical register within reach of Benjamin's description of the poet who must fence with the mass. From an almost clinical remove we hear how "the effort to effect a unit—in this case a poem—is perhaps abandoned." That poetic composition is merely a "case" within this broader narrative of encounter, and a case of which it seems difficult to say whether or not it is ever actually abandoned, or can be abandoned, suggests that we might do well to take seriously Moore's inability, finally, to say whether she was or wasn't writing poetry.

around the object of a perception" (Illuminations 186). Moore echoes this language of "clustering" when she describes the involuntary propulsion of her stanzas, the way that "words in my stanzas simply cluster like chromosomes" (Jane Howard *Life*). Moore's example of her encounter with an iguana is a case in point. She is "startled" to have it call to mind earlier encounters, earlier images that, though they have been "abandoned" by the poet, nevertheless "linger," to be brought to mind involuntarily as associations with the new image. Between the first promising but abandoned encounter—an encounter Moore seemed to make every time she read anything and tucked it away in her files—and the chance recovery in a moment of surprise or startling, experience waits in a space of awareness just out of the conscious mind's reach. "A sort of productive disorder is the canon of the *mémoire involontaire*," Benjamin writes, "as it is the canon of the collector" (Arcades 211). Sarah Ley Roff draws a connection between Benjamin and Freud that helps us to define this zone of attention: "Benjamin correctly diagnosed a phenomenon many readers of Freud have observed, his removal of functions of awareness from consciousness and their relocation to what he terms the 'preconscious,' a sort of vestibule area between the unconscious and the preconscious where functions of censorship actually take place" (117). What Roff calls "a sort of vestibule area" is the indispensable space of not-entirely-conscious awareness from which Moore's materials emerge. She copies lines from her daily reading into notebooks with the expectation that their significance, merely hinted upon a first encounter, will become legible as other contexts prompt her to return to them. Bonnie Costello notes how Moore will "suddenly" superimpose a prior encounter with a work of art onto her present object of attention: "in thinking of the pangolin, for instance, she will suddenly imagine 'Gargallo's hollow iron

head' or 'the Westminster Abbey Thomas of Leighton Wrought-Iron vine,' or in thinking of imperial display she will refer to 'Lord Nelson's Revolving Diamond Rosette" (Imaginary 192).[24] These sudden recoveries must be involuntary. In a late interview Moore insists, "People ask me, 'How do you think of things to write about?' I don't. *They* think of *me*. They become *irresistible*" (Prose 663, original emphasis). Willing to speculate on the potential value of an encounter with an object or a text, with objects treated as text, Moore criticizes the world weariness of the "old tiger" who, though he has "that fixed, abstracted lizardlike expression of / the eye which is characteristic / of all accurate observers," is too willing to regard texts as exhaustible: "You have 'read Dante's Hell // till you are familiar with it'—till / the whole surface has become so polished as to afford no little / seam or irregularity at which to catch" (133). This assurance of an indefinite deferral of familiarity, of a "little / seam or irregularity" in the polished surface of a text at which a reader might be arrested or "catch," is for Moore the precondition for writing, the starting or startling that initiates a composition. It functions like the steady pulse of shocks that Benjamin finds at the center of Baudelaire's work.

Freud's work on shock drew heavily on what he observed in soldiers returning from the First World War. I want to turn now to a pair of early Moore poems written in the shadow of this war, poems that take up the question of masses and their movement. Then I will return to Weber's reading of Benjamin to suggest how Moore's own negotiation with mass media might be understood as one that depends on a kind of retreat, her perpetual withdrawal. Moore's comment on the "formed and mobilized

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[24] "A comment in a family letter, a remark in a news column, review, or journal, a photograph or postcard (often not documented in her notes) would send Moore off on a rapid chain of abstract associations—to an epigram read two years earlier, a remark made by a friend in her childhood, a vase described in an auction column" (Costello, Marianne 5).

masses" not of the thirties, but of 1918, more specifically, of the mobilization of the mass of American troops for the First World War, is recorded in a poem published in *Observations* entitled "Reinforcements." It is through a certain relation to experience that she figures the first two lines:

> The vestibule to experience is not to
> Be exalted into epic grandeur. These men are going
> to their work with this idea, advancing like a school of fish through
>
> still water—waiting to change the course or dismiss
> the idea of movement, till forced to. The words of the Greeks
> ring in our ears, but they are vain in comparison with a sight like this.
>
> The pulse of intention does not move so that one
> can see it, and moral machinery is not labeled, but
> the future of time is determined by the power of volition.

The poem's architectural metaphor, "the vestibule to experience," imagines experience as needing some preparatory waiting area. Not the appointed or holy space itself, the "vestibule" marks a transitional zone through which one passes en route to "experience." In this waiting room, time is given the chance to fold over itself, as a blank experience, an experience of nothing, a shock, is recorded, to become legible, if ever, in hindsight. But this vestibule "is not to / Be exalted." The men "advancing like a school of fish," waiting to change course "til forced to," would seem to be troops parading in preparation for deployment. The poem is a commentary on the kinds of movement that a mass can assume, and it critiques the ordered, uniform movement of a troop battalion. Its very regimentation gives it a false show of purpose. "A sight like this," a sight that intends to make visible and comprehensible the resolve of a national body, attempts to show the solidarity of a mass in its organization and synchronization. While Fascism, according to Benjamin, tries to reinstate aura by giving the masses expression, a face and a voice,

through the depiction of large crowds and mass rallies, the passage through a vestibule that is not "exalted," a kind of non-space, conceives of the movement of a mass according to a different principle entirely, what Moore here calls a "pulse." A pulse "does not move so that one / can see it." Moore points at the mass without actually depicting it. Her demonstrative pronouns indicate something, but almost as if unable to make out just what it is: "these men," "their work," "this idea," "a sight like this." What men? What work? What sight?

The poem's last line, "the future of time is determined by the power of volition," makes a claim that is easy to overlook. It does not say that "the future is determined" but that "the future of time is determined." It would seem that the very form of time has its own history, a history that Moore's poem wants to acknowledge. Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire might be helpful here because it is a particular relation to time that characterizes the shock rendered by the ellipses in Baudelaire's "To a Passerby." After his glance at the woman in the street, the speaker's look is not reciprocated. Hers are "eyes that do not see." As such, Weber suggests, they are linked to the eye, "to which people relate increasingly in the age of technical reproducibility," the mechanical eye of the camera. This eye does strange things to time, according to Weber: "The German word for such 'still photos'—*Momentaufnahmen*—indicates that what is ultimately arrested, 'taken up,' broken down, spliced back together again and then let loose . . . is the *moment* itself. The 'time' of reproducibility is that of this 'posthumously shocked,' immobilized, dispersed, recollected, and finally forgotten moment, ever *on the verge*, always coming to pass" (100). The paraded "reinforcements" in Moore's poem give back to the crowd an image of itself as organized, uniform, and immediately comprehensible.

In so doing, they gloss over all that is messy, unintentional, and incomprehensible in the commitment to large-scale military deployment. They are too clearly "labeled," "exalted" with an "epic grandeur" false to the imperceptible pulses with which masses actually move, "nervous impulses" that Benjamin likens to "the energy from a battery" (175). With regard to Moore's career, by contrast, her rise to prominence in the eyes of the mass media assumes a different form. As she comes increasingly to relate to the eye of the camera, an eye that would turn her into a scattering, ephemeral image, Moore begins to fulfill a dream articulated in a very early poem titled, with an uncanny Baudelarian echo, "Ennui":

> He often expressed
> A curious wish,
> To be interchangeably
> Man and fish;
> To nibble the bait
> Off the hook,
> Said he,
> And then slip away
> Like a ghost
> In the sea. (12)

To take the lure, then slip away like a ghost, disappearing into the massive movement of the sea, is to be both collected and dispersed, subject to the wants of the flesh and unbounded by the body. This is the desire Moore identifies with Baudelaire. More importantly, it is the wish that will shape her career as she wades into the moving body of the mass media, flirting with celebrity.

Benjamin sees the camera as offering a deadly exchange: "What was inevitably felt to be inhuman, one might even say deadly, in daguerreotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze" (Illuminations 187-88). In Moore's early poem "A Grave," she describes a man

looking into the sea, a moving mass that, like the camera, does not return the gaze, but takes up, immobilizes, then scatters whatever it looks at. The poem begins with an obscured scene:

> A Grave
>
> Man looking into the sea,
> taking the view from those who have as much right to it as you have to it
> yourself,
> it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,
> but you cannot stand in the middle of this;
> the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.

"A Grave" is occasioned, in at least two senses, by the kind of jostling that Benjamin identifies as the most significant experience in Baudelaire's life. Certainly the entry of Moore's brother Warner into the war as a navy chaplain, a move that upset the family's security, can be linked to what many readers have felt as the poem's underlying anxiety. But its more immediate occasion, a literal jostling Marianne and her mother received from a stranger, is related to Moore's compositional principles, for the poem begins with a displaced look. "As for a grave," Moore writes, "it has a significance strongly apart from the literal origin, which was a man who placed himself between my mother and me, and surf we were watching from a 'middle' ledge of rocks on Monhegan Island after a storm. ('Don't be annoyed,' my mother said. 'It is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing')" (Prose 643). What we see in the first line of the poem, so characteristic of Moore's observations, is not a view of the sea itself, but a view of someone else's view of the sea. Lest we simply ignore this man in the way, the second line presses the issue, insisting that he is "taking the view from those who have as much right to it as you have to it yourself." This displacement of our "view" in a moment of jostling—three on

Monhegan Island was a crowd that day—has a disorienting effect. In this sense it does what mass media's reproductive technologies always do. It offers a second-hand or distanced view, like the view given by "tele-vision," an apparatus designed for seeing at a distance. The poem's strange explanation, "it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing," besides merely quoting Moore's mother, seems deliberately to confuse a vantage point with an object of vision, in this case the sea, as if there were some question as to whether one looking at the sea is actually standing in the sea at the same time. Saving us from vertigo is Moore's response: "But you cannot stand in the middle of this."

By the end of the poem, the sea, this moving mass with its "networks" hiding a "phalanx," threatens "man," or "human nature," with a literal distraction. It threatens to pull him apart, to scatter him. This deceptively calm surface, "reserved" in its "contours, saying nothing," even "under the pulsation of lighthouses and noise of bell-buoys, / advances as usual, looking as if it were not that ocean in which dropped things are bound to sink— / in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition nor consciousness" (145). In its dissembling, in its "looking as if," Moore's sea, now "ocean," hides its two most alarming characteristics, both of which betray the intimate relation between this massive body and the mass-like movement of the urban crowd. But in order to see how "looking into the sea" here is like Baudelaire's looking into the crowd, we need to notice another of Benjamin's descriptions of aura, one framed around various kinds of looks: "The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return" (Illuminations 188). This look of reciprocation, in which an auratic object seems to return the human gaze, undergoes in the movement of the Parisian mass a kind of

evacuation: "the expectation roused by the look of the human eye is not fulfilled. Baudelaire describes eyes of which one is inclined to say that they have lost their ability to look" (Illuminations 189). He goes on to describe the look that takes its place, the look of Baudelaire's "satyrs and nymphs" who are "no longer members of the family of man." The "man looking into the sea" in "A Grave" does receive a look in return from the sea, but it is one doubly devoid of reciprocation:

> the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look.
> There are others besides you who have worn that look—
> whose expression is no longer a protest; the fish no longer investigate
> them
> for their bones have not lasted. (145)

As if to be ignored by the sea, then by fish, were not enough, the look of a "man looking into the sea," is returned in the form of effacement. The sea, "a collector," takes up his look and keeps it.

And yet, just as Baudelaire's apostrophe would re-inscribe the gaze he draws from the crowd, abyssal gaze of the passer-by, so Moore reconstructs what was obstructed from view as a muted and timeless seaside scene, placing each visual element in harmony with the next as though the poem had not already called into question the very possibility of securing such a view:

> The wrinkles progress among themselves in a phalanx—beautiful under
> networks of foam,
> and fade breathlessly while the sea rustles in and out of the seaweed;
> the birds swim through the air at top speed, emitting cat-calls as
> heretofore—
> the tortoise-shell scourges about the feet of the cliffs, in motion beneath
> them;
> and the ocean, under the pulsation of lighthouses and the noise of bell-
> buoys,
> advances as usual, looking as if it were not that ocean in which dropped
> things are bound to sink—

> in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition nor
> consciousness. (145)

All the danger is no doubt still here in the "phalanx," and the "breathless" wrinkles. Birds "swim" through a sea that reaches the sky. And there are human signs of danger—lighthouses and bell-buoys—in an ocean that "advances." But Moore's language re-inscribes the "rapacious" look of the sea within an intelligible, pacifying temporal narrative. This ocean advances "as usual"; these birds call "as heretofore." She nearly domesticates what has come again to resemble something almost habitable, something like that other town that she assures us "could not be dangerous," that "Dürer would have seen a reason / for living in." It is in the nonchalance of her demonstrative, "that ocean," that we are assured of recognition, assured that we do in fact know what we are looking at. This is "that ocean in which dropped things are bound to sink," in the middle of which we "cannot stand." Even if it refuses any acknowledgement of the fact, refuses to look like itself, indeed *because* this ocean refuses to look like itself, we recognize it, for the defining element of this moving, amorphous mass is self-differentiation. Herein it betrays its structural affinity with reproducibility, the principle according to which a thing can be made to take leave of itself. This ocean looks "as if." "As if, as if, it is all ifs; we are at / much unease" (255).

If, finally, it is Moore's refusal to look like herself that causes so many of her best readers to frown at her late career, and if this defacement or disfiguring would seem to occur just as her most public, unmistakable face emerges everywhere, "at fashion shows, applauding Vladimir Horowitz's fifth encore, unmasking at Truman Capote's ball," then we might say that she has in some sense realized her dream of disappearing into the sea. What Kenneth Burke identified as one of Moore's peculiar motifs, the movement

whereby an object can withdraw from one's grasp, then "follow the hand as it recedes," seems almost to anticipate her disappearance into the massive and moving elements of the popular media. And yet this disappearance, to judge by our response to Moore's fame until now, is precisely what turns her into a kind of ghost, giving her means to haunt. Benjamin remarked of Engel's dismay at the bustle of London streets that since "the writer came from a Germany that was still provincial; he may never have faced the temptation to lose himself in a stream of people" (Illuminations 167). Moore, in her most visible, ephemeral, "massive" appearance, that is to say, on the Today Show, a program that in its very title aspires to make the present visible to itself, responds to the patronizing question of why she likes to wear big hats with a perfectly natural and perfectly duplicitous, "because they help to cover my face." In one sense, her response seems to portend Richard Howard's lament over the disfiguration of the young Moore at the hands of the costumed celebrity, for certainly the unprecedented visibility of this High Modernist and the ensuing fear that she was becoming more watched than read has everything to do with her cape and tricorn hat. But there is another sense in which we might take seriously the claim that Moore's conspicuous hats, her "costume," her cutesy manner on the Today Show, indeed her reproduction on thousands of television screens, help her to cover her face.

One of Moore's last published poems, "The Magician's Retreat," spends its entire fifteen lines describing a house that stands as a figure of perpetual withdrawal:

The Magician's Retreat

of moderate height,
(I have seen it)
cloudy but bright inside

like a moonstone,
while a yellow glow
from a shutter-crack shone,
and a blue glow from the lamppost
close to the front door.
It left nothing of which to complain,
nothing to obtain,
consummately plain.

A black tree mass rose at the back
almost touching the eaves
with the definiteness of Magritte,
was above all discreet.

The poem marks an appropriate close to Moore's career because it can help us handle the posthumous shock that her late celebrity inflicted on her early readers, readers who regarded Moore's work as invulnerable to anything like a mass reception. To that end, I want to suggest that this house, as "retreat," performs a kind of inversion. In his essay on children's books, Benjamin describes the child who searches a picture puzzle as though turning his pocket inside out, "without forgetting the smallest thread or piece of cloth." Moore's house turns a certain fabric inside out as well, for it inverts the process by which the camera takes up and reproduces whatever passes before its eye. The magician's retreat is not the dark container into which light passes momentarily through an aperture, but the space where "a yellow glow / from a shutter-crack shone." Rather than capturing light from outside, the opening of this "shutter" allows light to emanate, and the terms of the camera's capture are reversed. The negative space, the space of exposure, surrounds the lit house. What shines from inside is the magician's glow, a perpetual flash that compels one to say "(I have seen it)." The parenthetical phrase is odd. It seems almost unnecessary, gratuitous, as it interrupts our gaze at the "yellow glow." The "I" seems to want to underwrite the scene, injecting a point of view, taking it away from us, not letting

us forget that this is all second-hand, that we are watching at a distance. And yet, this quick aside registers what we should by now be prepared to expect whenever we read a Moore poem. It marks the slight turn involved in each deferral to a prior act of witness, each reading of a reproduction. It is the "seam" Moore admonished the "Old Tiger" for not catching, a seam that startles and sparks interest, prompts one to go back and look again. The seam is evidence of both a splice and a stitch in time, a fold in one of time's "invisibly executed pockets" (Poems 341). To make the magician's retreat, to retreat to this space of light, is to dwell in a proliferation of images that perpetually withdraw from that which they reproduce, to hide in the infinite divisibility of space. But it is also, of course, to become most visible, to assume a habit or habitat that is "cloudy but bright inside," something like the bright mist that marks Moore's entry into public visibility, namely, the George Platt Lynes photograph reproduced on the cover of her *Selected Poems* in 1935, reproduced again in the review of the volume for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and again on the cover of the *Complete Poems*, a Moore we seem to see everywhere, whose eyes would return our gaze, and on whose head sit misty clouds of light.

CHAPTER TWO

On Keeping Time:
Elizabeth Bishop and the Half-Life of Letters

Now can you see the monument?
—Elizabeth Bishop

I have endless patience.
—Elizabeth Bishop

Facing her landlocked audience in Norman, Oklahoma as the first American and first woman recognized with the Neudstadt International Prize, Elizabeth Bishop glances back over her career and likens herself to the bird in her poem "Sandpiper." Well aware that "every so often the world is bound to shake," this bird runs along the edge of the beach in "a state of controlled panic": "His beak is focused; he is preoccupied // looking for something, something, something" (131).[25] Given the many first-hand accounts of Bishop's acute discomfort at public events such as this one, her comparison seems particularly apt, for this sandpiper is both frantic and calm, scattered and collected. Indeed, to be simultaneously "focused" and "preoccupied" is to exercise a remarkable form of attention. Somehow this bird remains receptive to "something" in the sand despite constant interruptions from the sea: "The roaring alongside he takes for granted"

[25] A draft of Bishop's acceptance speech is reprinted in Millier, 517.

(131). Looking back to a short story Bishop published in the late 1930's, "The Sea & Its Shore," in which another sandpiper appears, "rushing distractedly this way and that," I want to suggest that this skittering along the beach marks a kind of movement that Bishop's poems will return to again and again, indeed that it names distraction as the sign under which her poetry negotiates its fraught relation to experience.

After a wave of critical books written in the late 1980's and early 1990's, Langdon Hammer notes a tendency to treat Bishop's work as a narrative of personal and artistic progress. The tripartite structures that organize Thomas Travisano's *Her Artistic Development* and Robert Dale Parker's *The Unbeliever*, for example, show Bishop gradually moving past her dreamy and hermetic early poems to poems about geography and place and, finally, to the great poems of memory that recast events from Bishop's life in Nova Scotia, New England, and Brazil. *Geography III*, Bishop's last book, marks the height of her achievement because it begins to close the gap between her life and her writing, and because it reconciles this poet to so much early trauma. Assuming, as Hammer puts it, "that important poetry in our time is autobiographical," this critical narrative reflects a bias held by many of Bishop's contemporaries that she consistently resisted, for it places a premium on poetry which purports to render the individual life and unique experience of the poet (New 140). What these readings omit is the broader context from which Bishop asks how we might conceive of our having experience at all. That is to say, in the wake of large-scale industrial production and the rise of mass forms of media, the dearth of narratable experience is hardly confined to those who have, as Bishop wryly admitted she had, "a prize poetic childhood." Never simply available, never simply something one has, experience, in Bishop's writing, can seem elusive, even

a matter of chance, because it assumes a form inflected by the distractions of the mass, both the urban mass of passersby and the mass of printed material rolling off the popular press. After an iteration of blanks—"something, something, something"—experience "crops up," Bishop will say, according to "a calendar we cannot control."

I. "Our presses turn out too much paper"

Written in 1937, "The Sea and Its Shore" introduces Edwin Boomer, a man who "lived the most literary life possible" (Prose 172). "Appointed to keep the sand free from papers," Boomer wanders about the public beach at night, gathering scraps left during the day, sorting and reading some, and eventually burning them all in his large wire basket. Granting Bishop's wry humor, I nevertheless want to entertain the suggestion that Boomer's is a "literary life," or, both more and less than that, "the most literary life possible." The qualification in Bishop's phrasing registers an ambivalence that the remainder of her narrative will sustain. Thus, we are never given to know whether Boomer's is the achievement of an ideal literary life or simply the closest thing to a life like the "perfect! But—impossible" one Bishop imagines in the "proto-dream-house" we never reach at the end of the beach in "The End of March." Curiously, both Boomer's ragpicking life and the imaginary life in the poem are bound to the image of a particular kind of house. The "proto-dream-house" in "The End of March" is the setting for a literary retirement uniquely suited to Bishop's fancy, a house where one can "look through binoculars, read boring books, / old, long, long books, and write down useless notes." Binoculars, boredom, useless notes—certainly this is Bishop's fantastic retirement, a retirement that would seem to merit this equivocal recognition, "most

literary life possible." Boomer's house, really more of a shack, also gives form to a subtle but certain musing on the possibility of a literary life. We are told of this "crypto-dream-house":

> It was more like the idea of a house than a real one. It could have stood at either end of a scale of houses. It could have been a child's perfect playhouse, or an adult's ideal house—since everything that makes most houses nuisances had been done away with. It was a shelter, but not for living in, for thinking in. It was, to the ordinary house, what the ceremonial thinking cap is to the ordinary hat. (Prose 172)

Boomer's house exerts a kind of gravitational pull on the narrative. Five consecutive sentences beginning with "it" approach the house with a sustained stutter. Both a "shelter" and a kind of clothing, habitat and habit, Boomer's house is "ceremonial" rather than "ordinary," for "thinking" rather than "living." Bishop's meticulously inscrutable measurements tell us that this house "could have stood" at either end of a scale of houses; it is "perfect" for a child, "ideal" for an adult, and has none of the "nuisances" that houses tend to have. With no door in the door frame, no windows, and nothing inside, it provides the most tenuous delineation of an interior space. A kind of monk's retreat—for Boomer "might almost have been said to have joined the priesthood"—it must, above all, be kept free of sand and litter. As the story ends, Bishop draws the house a final time: "Let us leave him in his house, at four one morning, his reading selected, the conflagration all over, the lantern shining clearly. It is an extremely picturesque scene, in some way like a Rembrandt, but in many ways not" (Prose 180). The chiaroscuro effects of old master painting cast a delicate glow back over the narrative, reflecting the folk tale atmosphere of the story's opening images, where we see Boomer with his sack and staff, his head "in a small cloud of light made by his lantern" (Prose 172). And yet, Bishop's last phrase deliberately disavows these trappings; the image of Boomer is "in some ways

like a Rembrandt, but in many ways not."[26] Boomer is not a seventeenth century figure, and the parameters of his job put him squarely on our side of electric lighting, amidst the explosion of print material that threatens to render these older forms of representation obsolete. If we look again at the "proto-dream-house" in "The End of March," we see there, too, that the house is equipped with electricity; "at the back another wire / limply leashes the whole affair" (180). Backing self-consciously away from Boomer's house, we have not interrupted his reading—he is still there in his pool of lantern light—but we get the sense that we could have.

If Bishop is exploring here the terms according to which a "literary life" is possible, the threat to the literary seems to come by way of the mass media. Boomer works in the wake of this mass, and his job requires that he respond to its form and tempo. Printing that cannot be incorporated entirely according to natural rhythms leaves the public beach littered:

> Of course, according to the laws of nature, a beach should be able to keep itself clean, as cats do. We have all observed:
>
> *The moving waters at their priest-like task*
> *Of pure ablution round earth's human shore*.
>
> But the tempo of modern life is too rapid. Our presses turn out too much paper covered with print, which somehow makes its way to our seas and their shores, for nature to take care of herself.
> So Mr. Boomer, Edwin Boomer, might almost have been said to have joined the 'priesthood.' (Prose 172)

[26] Bonnie Costello argues that the image of "a Rembrandt" serves a unifying function in the narrative in contrast to the overwhelming discursive multiplicity that Boomer's beach has become, that Boomer is now "'picturesque' rather textual, an icon rather than an inscription, not transparent but cogent" (Questions 187). Yet, when Costello quotes Bishop's sentence she leaves out the last phrase, "but in many ways not." I am particularly interested in Bishop's disclaimer, in her decision to give discursive multiplicity the last word.

A supplement to the balance of natural and human worlds, Boomer does what the beach should be able to do for itself after its crowds have gone home. He carries out his "literary life" in the temporal interval between the rhythm of the press, of "modern life," and the natural rhythm of the sea, the "laws of nature." Caught between these two, Boomer walks with the "jerky gait" of the ragpicker.[27] Comprising all manner of high and low culture— bits of personal letters, newspaper advertisements, poems, a stray passage from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*—Boomer's reading matter hovers ontologically between text and litter. Ephemeral and scattered, this mass of paper assumes a form that threatens in turn to scatter—to literally "distract" or pull apart—its reader. Holding himself together, Boomer sorts, somewhat comically, the scraps intended for him, "instructions or warnings" that refer to his life, from those intended for other people, and those about which he cannot tell. Of the scraps that Boomer decides are intended for him, Bishop includes this suggestive bit from Coleridge, a warning that hints at her story's larger stakes: "The habit of perusing periodical works may properly be added to Averrhoe's catalogue of ANTI-MNEMONICS, or weakeners of the memory. Also 'eating of unripe fruit; gazing on the clouds and on movable things suspended in the air'" (176). Coleridge's passage links the form of reading prompted by the structure of periodicals to a weakening of the memory. He describes the movement of periodical readers through a text as a "habit of perusing." His phrase is telling. "To peruse" usually means "to read thoroughly," "to examine in detail," but it is sometimes, perhaps incorrectly, used to name what would seem like the opposite, a kind of glancing or

[27] Cf. Benjamin's description in a short note for *The Arcades Project*, a note that Boomer would be liable to take as a warning intended for himself: "The bearing of the modern hero, as modeled on the ragpicker: his 'jerky gait,' the necessary isolation in which he goes about his business, the interest he takes in the refuse and detritus of the great city" (368).

absent-minded attention to a text.[28] The phrase "habit of perusing" would seem to suggest the latter form of attention, since to do something out of "habit" is to do it without careful deliberation. And yet, there may be a sense in which the two uses of "peruse" could be said to agree, a sense in which one can be riveted to a text in a distracted or absent-minded way. Some texts are not read so much as devoured, gobbled up. The possibility of a literary life for Boomer, I want to suggest, hinges on his "habit of perusing," his ability to follow the distractions of the periodical form with considerable feats of concentration. Bishop indicates that he cannot do it sitting down: "No poet, novelist, or critic, even one who bends over his desk for eight hours a day, could imagine the intensity of his concentration on the life of letters" (Prose 172). Whose "life" is referred to here? While "life of letters" might refer to Boomer's life, whatever kind of "literary life" he can be said to live, it also seems to grant the physical texts a kind of life, a life that depends on their slow death or decay—a kind of half-life—of their own.

Just what kind of life do these letters have? In their scattering, swirling movements, unforeseeable juxtapositions, and various physical states, these papers epitomize the condition of artifacts that will again and again engage Bishop's reading. "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and,'" they resemble the unlikely jumble of objects, partial objects, and objects in a state of decay to which the speakers in her poems are riveted. Victoria Harrison notes Bishop's "musing in her 1935 journal about the mysterious life of things stuck together in a mail-order catalogue and fantasizing an attic

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[28] Here is the score according to the American Heritage Dictionary: "*Usage Note*: *Peruse* has long meant "to read thoroughly" and is often used loosely when one could use the word *read* instead, as in *The librarians checked to see which titles had been perused in the last month and which been left untouched.* Seventy percent of the Usage Panel rejected this example in our 1999 survey. Sometimes people use it to mean "to glance over, skim," as in *I only had a moment to peruse the manual quickly,* but this usage is widely considered an error. In a 1988 survey, 66 percent of the Panel found it unacceptable, and in 1999, 58 percent still rejected it."

room where the smells, colors, and textures of her life's things would decay together to produce oddly new combinations" (5). "If one had such a place to throw things into," Bishop writes in her notebook, "like a sort of extra brain, and a chair in the middle of it to go and sit on once in a while, it might be a great help – particularly as it all decayed and fell together and took on a general *odor*" (quoted in Harrison 218). Part of what would "be a great help" here is the opportunity to revisit those things that cannot be given a full measure of attention immediately. In these early journal entries, Bishop's fascination with decay, with things that have become worn out or superannuated, is also an anticipation of the gestalt that forms over time, once things are allowed to steep. Incidental and indirect confrontation with these objects, merely sitting among them "once in a while," would seem to do what the brain cannot do directly. One can begin to see just how important the room—any kind of minimal spatial delineation—is for Bishop's thinking when she imagines "an extra brain" with a single chair inside.

A villanelle entitled "Verdigris," written in the late 1950's and never published during Bishop's lifetime, revisits the question of decay, now figured as the patina that objects acquire if neglected over time. The first stanza shows Bishop still thinking about the catalogue as a peculiar representational space, one that pries things from the context in which they were produced and sees to their productive afterlives: "The catalogues will tell you that they mean / the Chinese bronzes were like fresh-turned loam. / The time to watch for is when Time grows green" (Edgar 186). The patina on Chinese bronzes, marks of oxidation in the metal, gives them the richness of "fresh-turned loam," a mixture of clay and decaying organic matter. This image of turned-over earth, an image buried in the poet's work of turning over verses, points to the relation between this

poem's subject and its recycled French form. The villanelle's alternating refrains are well-suited to a meditation on the accumulating richness of things that resurface after being lost for a time. Told that *The New Yorker* decided not to publish the poem, Bishop wrote back to her editor, Katharine White, with a mixture of understanding and odd exuberance: "Please don't feel badly … It was just one of those hunches that I guess didn't work—& on studying it some more I think probably in order to make the meaning clear it will have to be turned into a *double* villanelle!" (original emphasis, quoted in Edgar 186) We know that Bishop, a successful writer of sonnets, ballads, and sestinas, wanted for years to work up a villanelle, and she seems to admit that this poem simply "didn't work." But her speculation here has something fiendishly clever about it. Essentially, she is suggesting that in order for this villanelle to "become clear" the entire poem needs to be repeated. "Turned into a *double* villanelle," it would accumulate a value that was not evident upon its first appearance. Whether or not she made good on this bet is probably impossible to say, but it should be noted that the one villanelle Bishop did publish in her lifetime (probably the most widely known of the twentieth century), is devoted to the question of lost things. And one of the lessons "One Art" bravely tries to teach is that the claims made from its speaker's present, "I shan't have lied," must be sounded as though from the future's past. The second refrain of "Verdigris" imagines "Time" itself as subject to a kind of weathering. Vigilance is the stance her stanza recommends, the stance that her speaker espouses at the end of "The Monument" where we are told to "watch it closely." "Monuments" and "moments," like "mammoths" and "man-moths," even "shadows" and "shallows" conduct mysterious exchanges for a poet inclined to watch her letters. In an undergraduate paper that we will turn to shortly,

Bishop suggests this kind of exchange as a way to revise one of Modernism's most often cited formulations. There she suggests replacing the word "monument" with "moment" in Eliot's famous passage from "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "The existing monuments [read moments] form an ideal order among themselves …" (Dimensions 99). In a surreptitious chiastic exchange, moments become monuments; time is embedded in the spaces of things, and monuments in turn are saturated by time—"Time turns green."

This vigilance toward time's physical marks helps to indicate what is at stake on Boomer's public beach. As he gathers the litter blowing about, Boomer gives his most rapt attention to the physicality of the texts themselves: their color, shape, and movement. Imminently unstable objects, these discarded bits from the popular press—crumpled, folded, yellowing, in various states of decay—register first as physical objects, as paper. He notices "even before the wars and murders, effects of yellowed corners on white pages, and outer pages contrasting with inner ones," and he watches these papers scatter: "the papers had no discernible goal, no brain, no feeling of race or group. They soared up, fell down, could not decide, hesitated …The fold in the middle of large news sheets acted as a kind of spine, but the wings were not coordinated. Tabloids flew slightly better than full-sized sheets. Small rumpled scraps were most fantastic" (Prose 174). Facing a mass of materials like the one Bishop imagines in a cluttered attic room, Boomer responds to these scraps much as Bishop imagines herself responding; he constructs a few "oddly new combinations" of his own. He finds a newspaper item about a woman sleeping in a hole as a form of protest, "until the Public Social Service Company abandons the idea of setting a pole there," then, three nights later, continues the narrative sequence with a description from a book: "Her ladyship's assumption was that she kept,

at every moment of her life, every advantage" (Prose 176). "It might be two nights more, or two weeks, however, before he would find the next step in this particular sequence" (Prose 176). By imagining how Boomer might read, Bishop begins to devise a strategy with which to respond to the proliferation of texts coming from the mass media. "Stuck together," these stories, like the catalogue pictures in an attic room, prompt a form of reading that depends on the possibility of citation, removing a passage from the tedium of its original context and allowing its new surroundings to lend it a certain surprise or shock value.

In the short story titled "In Prison," written just before "The Sea & Its Shore," Bishop's narrator advocates a similar reading technique for his imagined twelve by six foot room. Most prisoners are expected to read "the Everyman's Library," a sequence whose name suggests its entrenchment within official culture, but he proposes that his reading be different, even perverse:

> I hope I am not being too reactionary when I say that my one desire is to be given one very dull book to read, the duller the better. A book, moreover, on a subject completely foreign to me; perhaps the second volume, if the first would familiarize me too well with the terms and the purpose of the work. Then I shall be able to experience with a free conscience the pleasure, perverse, I suppose, of interpreting it not at all according to its intent. Because I share with Valéry's M. Teste the 'knowledge that our thoughts are reflected back to us, too much so, through expressions made by others.' . . . Perhaps it will be a book on the cure of a disease, or an industrial technique—but no, even to try to imagine the subject would be to spoil the sensation of wave-like freshness I hope to receive when it is first placed in my hands. (Prose 188)

Citing "M. Teste," Bishop draws out the correspondence between her narrator's imagined reading practice, a practice that depends for its "wave-like freshness" on citation, and Valéry's appreciation of the function of shock. "The impressions and sense perceptions

of man," Valéry writes, "actually belong in the category of surprises; they are evidence of an insufficiency in man" (quoted in Illuminations 161). Benjamin claims that Valéry's interest in the "special functioning of psychic mechanisms under present-day conditions" makes him "the only author who goes back directly to Baudelaire" (Illuminations 161). In his refusal to anticipate the content of his reading and his hope that the strictures of a prison cell—or even the second volume of a work—will enable him to avoid any familiarity with its "terms" and "purpose," Bishop's narrator espouses a reading practice amenable to this line of Valéry's thinking. Indebted to Valéry and to Baudelaire as well, this narrator, created by the poet who insisted that the one indispensable quality for a poem is "surprise," suggests how her poetry will take up the question that Benjamin finds at the center of Baudelaire's work, namely, "how lyric poetry can have as its basis an experience for which the shock experience has become the norm" (Illuminations 162).

"The Sea & Its Shore" might be read as an experiment on the model of Bishop's imagined attic room, for it devises a space in which the encounter with texts is guaranteed to proceed in random sequence. Each page of Boomer's reading comes to him divorced from its original context, in a moment of shock or surprise, and because he spends his nights chasing these blowing pages around the beach, their fugitive movements determine his movements as well. Unlike the scholar who "bends over his desk for eight hours a day," Boomer exercises his concentration in drifting, irregular sallies. Wielding his staff with its "long wire nail" in the end, he counters the flying scraps with a series of stabs. On particularly windy nights he becomes "more like a hunter than a collector" (Prose 174). Benjamin has detected in Baudelaire's poems the image of a fencer, thrusting his way through a crowd of words and fragments, the beginnings of lines in the deserted city

streets. The figure applies to Boomer as well: "Sometimes he transfixed one worthless or unprinted paper after another on the nail, until it was full from what might be called the hilt to the point" (Prose 173). As Baudelaire "wrests" from these scraps his "poetic booty," so Boomer, once he sets fire to his captive papers, waves them above his head "like paid bills," something Baudelaire, constantly moving about Paris to avoid his debts ("If God or my creditors allow," he exclaims in a letter to his mother), was never able to do. Still, Boomer's victory gesture only confirms his poverty, and, in what may be an explicit nod to Baudelaire, Bishop has him stuff his coat with papers during the winter months to keep warm (Prose 173). While this itinerant movement paces both Boomer's and Baudelaire's work habits, it seems to describe Bishop's as well. She explains in a late interview: "Well, you get a place all set up, as I've done only one time in my life, which was in Brazil. You have your books and pencils and papers ready. Then you find yourself writing some of your best lines standing up in the kitchen putting them on the back of an old envelope. This happened to me over and over" (Monteiro 104). In an interview with George Starbuck, Bishop makes a similar observation about Marianne Moore: "[Moore] had a clip-board that she carried around the house to work on a poem while she was washing dishes, dusting, etc" (EBH 326). Benjamin records similar testimony made about Baudelaire: "For my part, I saw him composing verses on the run while he was out in the streets; I never saw him seated before a ream of paper" (Arcades 273). A line of Benjamin's describing this movement might just as well refer to Boomer: "The 'jerky gait' of the ragpicker is not necessarily due to the effect of alcohol. Every few minutes, he must stop to gather refuse, which he throws into his wicker basket" (Prose 364).

Boomer's is a wire rather than a wicker basket, and he is "usually not very drunk" by the time he starts reading. Nevertheless, his work proceeds by way of elaborate digression and constant interruption. In this distracted, stuttering movement, Bishop models the form of concentration suited to the mass of papers pouring off the press. Her penultimate paragraph reminds us that "the intensity of [Boomer's] concentration," is ultimately beside the point: "the point was that everything had to be burned at last. . . . Burning paper was his occupation, by which he made his living" (Prose 179). It is in this assurance that Boomer's reading may amount to nothing that Bishop's admiration for him resides, for the very irrelevance of Boomer's attention marks it as the kind of attention Bishop most admires. It is here that we can measure Boomer's proximity to his maker, more decisively than in his drinking or in the similarity of their names.[29] His is the "perfectly useless concentration" that endears Bishop to the prose of Darwin, patron saint of beach combers. As Zachariah Pickard has argued, Bishop's attraction to the work of the natural historian was fueled by Darwin's willingness to accumulate minutia with painstaking care, but without any clear or immediate sense of outcome. "It seems only to have gradually occurred to him," Francis Darwin writes of his father, "that he would ever be more than a collector of specimens and facts, of which the great men were to make use." The naturalist, in a passage heavily marked in Bishop's copy, calls himself "a complete millionaire in odd and curious little facts," a "millionaire," that is, in things of uncertain worth, oddities, curiosities (Rognoni 241). In his habitual movements, his wandering after papers that "had no discernable goal," Boomer maintains against the mass a bearing that Bishop's poetry will emulate. But because the object of his attention

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[29] As many commentators have noted, "Boomer" is an alternate, phonetic spelling of Bishop's mother's maiden name, "Bulmer." Edwin and Elizabeth also share first and last initials.

is not an object, per se, because it is an amorphous, moving, scattering mass, the kind of attention he pays cannot be considered "concentration" in any ordinary sense.

If we follow for a moment another beach comber, the sandpiper, itself a remarkably literary bird, we see that its attention shares certain qualities with that of Boomer:

> The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
> and that every so often the world is bound to shake.
> He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
> in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.
>
> The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
> of interrupting water comes and goes
> and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
> He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.
>
> —Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
> where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
> rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
> he stares at the dragging grains.
>
> The world is a mist. And then the world is
> minute and vast and clear. The tide
> is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
> His beak is focused; he is preoccupied,
>
> looking for something, something, something.
> Poor bird, he is obsessed!
> The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,
> mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst. (131)

Bishop sets the poem's apocalyptic atmosphere with considerable levity. As we saw in Moore's "Old Tiger," so here an asymptotically strict economy of sensuous perception governs the gaze. "Sandpiper" begins by withholding attention, ignoring almost everything: "The roaring alongside he takes for granted." What follows is a complex nexus of attention and distraction. The bird, "finical," "awkward," runs in "a state of controlled panic" as the earth, in the form of shifting sand, is repeatedly pulled out from

under him. With the phrase "on his left," the poem offers a moment's orientation before "a sheet / of interrupting water comes and goes." Figuring the ocean's water as a "sheet," Bishop likens its distracting movement to that of the swirling paper on Boomer's beach.[30] Both physical supports are dubious. Despite these interruptions, the second stanza's final line propels the sandpiper forward with the same cartoonish double start that got him through the first: "He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes." Fixed attention to these toes would seem to be this bird's only means to stave off vertigo and get "through it." Now, with the poem's subject bird both split from and riveted to his own body, Bishop begins to exercise her considerable facility for overlapping figures and grounds. After the stanza break comes a sudden aside, signaled by the dash, and then a revision. This sandpiper seems not to be watching his toes after all. He is " —Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them." Whereas the second stanza's "toes" are figures moving over a sandy ground, once the poem's attention is held to the figure—once the bird starts to stare at his feet—these toes effectively stop, and the ground begins to move. We seem to be still very much within the world of cartoons. With her phrase, "spaces of sand," Bishop suspends us in her "watery dazzling dialectic" of figure and ground. What was the negative visual "space" of the sand, the ground between the bird's toes, emerges as a multitude of new moving figures, "black, white, tan, and gray, / mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst." Moreover, the word "sand" itself now hovers between singular and plural, the undifferentiated singular ground and the "millions of grains" that compose it. And the shift is performed on a phonemic level as well. We can hear, as the

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[30] In the posthumously published poem "Key West," Bishop uses a similar figure to describe "the surrounding water, like sheets of carbon paper, / used and reused" (Edgar 51).

Atlantic “drains,” the cumulative sound of the sand breaking down into its innumerable “dragging grains.”

“A student of Blake,” this sandpiper knows that the universe is visible in a grain of sand, and he is determined to find it. Just as the poem’s focus narrows to the smallest grains of sand, and just as Bishop’s parenthetical assures us that there is “no detail too small,” we suddenly encounter “the Atlantic.” Attention to minutia requires that one block out something vast and omnipresent, in this case the roaring of the ocean and the constant interrupting sheets of water, and yet at the same time this blocking out seems to be the enabling condition for the reception of some vast receding mass, in this case the ocean. Bishop’s language makes clear that the sandpiper’s most “obsessed” acts of attention are indistinguishable from distraction: “His beak is focused; he is preoccupied.” And there is plenty to distract him. If, borrowing Boomer’s perverse reading methods, we move from this sandpiper’s shore to his public beach and stick the two together, we see that not only the “sheet / of interrupting water” but “the sand itself, if he picked some of it up and held it close to one eye, looked a little like printed paper, ground up and chewed” (179).

II. “Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box”

One of Benjamin’s touchstones for thinking about “reception in a state of distraction” and one that Bishop’s letters tell us she happened to have in mind as she wrote “The Sea & Its Shore,” is the fiction and composition theory of Poe. Of particular interest to Benjamin is Poe’s tale “The Man of the Crowd,” a tale that begins when the

narrator, poring over advertisements in a London Coffee-House, looks up periodically to see the bustling passersby in the street. As he describes the scene, Poe imprints upon the movements of the crowd certain marks of London's industrialization. Their interactions are automatic: "When impeded in their progress, these people suddenly ceased muttering, but redoubled their gesticulations, and awaited, with an absent and overdone smile upon the lips, the course of the persons impeding them. If jostled, they bowed profusely to the jostlers" (389). These jostling movements, Benjamin remarks, are "less the movements of the people going about their business than the movements of the machines they operate" (Arcades 337). From a stationary position behind the coffee shop window, Poe's narrator watches the crowds pass, gradually narrowing his focus. Beginning with an "abstract and generalizing" attention to the "aggregate relations" of the masses, then "descend[ing] to details … the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression," he is ultimately drawn into the crowd by a particular passerby, a decrepit man whose countenance, the narrator says, "arrested and absorbed my whole attention" (389, 392). Riveted to this figure and suddenly swept up in the swirl of the crowd's movements, the narrator winds about the city for the remainder of the story, doubles back to where he started, abandons his pursuit in exhaustion, and "as the shades of the second evening came on," concludes by declaring the ultimate illegibility of the face which was object of his attention: "*er lasst sich nicht lesen"* ["it does not allow itself to be read"] (396).

While working on "The Sea & Its Shore," Bishop mentions in a letter to Frani Blough that her reading of Poe has prompted her to develop her own compositional theory: "Lately I've been doing nothing much but reread Poe, and evolve from Poe—plus

something of Sir Thomas Browne, etc.—a new Theory-of-the-Story-All-My-Own. It's the 'proliferal' style, I believe, and you will shortly see some of the results" (One 71). In a letter written three days later to Marianne Moore, Bishop refers to "In Prison," as "the first conscious attempt at something according to a *theory* I've been thinking up … out of a combination of Poe's theories and reading 17th century prose! I am writing another one now which I hope you will like better" (One 73). What exactly, one might ask, is a "proliferal style"? "Prolific" will become a fraught word for Bishop later in her career as she contemplates her successively slimmer volumes of poetry, *Geography III* adding only nine poems to her total. Might a "proliferal" style compensate for the proliferation of poems Bishop never saw? There is little in the published biography to suggest that she ever claimed to have made such a trade. Nevertheless, we have seen how these two stories, "In Prison" and "The Sea & Its Shore," take relentless proliferation as a given, then make it their task to find a form of reception, a method of reading, equal to it.

In "The Poetic Principle" Poe offers an account of aesthetic reception that suggests more specifically what his theories might have to do with Bishop's "proliferal" style. Assuming that "all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient," Poe argues that the "effect" of a poem is always limited by a reader's attention span, a span he estimates at about half an hour. Alternating periods of "excitement" and "depression" set the pace at which we can respond to "poetical effects," and any piece of writing sustained for too long necessarily produces a surplus, a kind of waste or litter, that fails to leave any "impression" on its reader. Using *Paradise Lost* as an example, Poe argues that the impression it leaves, if we try to sustain a reading of the entire poem, is limited to every other book. Attention flags, then, after an interval, recovers again. We would do well, if

we must read the poem as a whole, to read it a second time, beginning with the second book. Taking into account the subjective limits of attention, Poe's theory effectively situates all texts within this economy of "psychal" rhythms. For all of the poet's preparatory calculations, his text leaves an impression on its reader only if it catches him at the right time. Thus, on principle, "a long poem does not exist" (1431).[31] Consistent with this argument is Poe's explanation in "Philosophy of Composition" of what he calls backward writing, in which the ultimate effect of a story must be determined before any of its parts can be written: "It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents . . . tend to the development of the intention" (1373). The suggestion seems to be that a writer might counter the inevitable tendency of his readers to become distracted by directing all the elements of the writing to a single predetermined effect. Only with this effect "constantly in view" can he hope to keep their minds' eyes occupied.

One recent collection of Bishop's poems—itself a motley assortment of "unpublished poems, drafts, and fragments"—draws its title from a draft of a poem she never published, "Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box." Setting Poe next to a box invented for the mechanical reproduction of lyrics, the title suggests that Bishop, too, envisioned readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties, moreover, that she saw in Poe's theories an attempt to engage and allay these difficulties. Of these readers Benjamin writes, "will power and the ability to concentrate are not their strong points;

[31] Baudelaire seems to dedicate *Paris Spleen* with this principle in mind: "We can cut wherever we please, I my dreaming, you your manuscript, the reader his reading; for I do not keep the reader's restive mind hanging in suspense on the threads of an interminable and superfluous plot. Take away one vertebra and the two ends of this tortuous fantasy come together again without pain. Chop it into numerous pieces and you will see that each one can get along alone" (ix).

what they prefer is sensual pleasures; they are familiar with the 'spleen' which kills receptiveness" (Illuminations 155). Written, it seems, in a streak of spleen, "Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box" measures Poe's theory of the poetic effect against the twentieth century's embrace of other calculated forms of experience, superimposing the mechanical motions of the juke-box with drunken attempts to kindle romance in a honky-tonk bar.

Easily through the darkened room
the juke-box burns; the music falls
Starlight, *La Conga*, all the dance-halls
in the block of honkey-tonks,
cavities in our waning moon,
strung with bottles and blue lights
and silvered coconuts and conches.

blue as gas,
blue as the pupil
of a blind man's eye

As easily as the music falls,
the nickels fall into the slots,
the drinks like lonely water-falls
in night descend the separate throats,
and the hands fall on one another
[down] darker darkness under
tablecloths and all descends,
descends, falls,—much as we envision
the helpless earthward fall of love
descending from the head and eye
down to the hands, and heart, and down.
The music pretends to laugh and weep
while it descends to drink and murder.
The burning box can keep the measure
strict, always, and the down-beat.

Poe said that poetry was *exact*.
But pleasures are mechanical
and know beforehand what they want
and know exactly what they want.
Do they obtain that single effect
that can be calculated like alcohol
or like the response to the nickel?
—how long does the music burn?
like poetry, or all your horror
half as exact as horror here?

Bishop's final stanza turns suddenly to Poe, as if he might offer some counsel, some stance from which to combat the ennui of seedy American bars. But Poe presides over this scene from the outset, for it is his elaborate plotting of "The Raven" to attain "that single effect," his hundred lines measured to do their work in less than half an hour, which prompts Bishop's harrowing reflection on the mechanization of human relations. "The burning box can keep the measure / strict, always, and the down-beat." Everything is on the downbeat, on a kind of endless descent, in this poem: "As easily as the music falls, / the nickels fall into the slots, / the drinks like lonely water-falls / in night descend the separate throats." With the image of the nickel falling into a slot, Bishop subtly undercuts the safety of Poe's calculations, for while this "burning box" cranks out its lyrics, it doubles as a slot machine. Its effects are a matter of chance. In the poem's allusion to gambling, and in its image of hands falling like nickels, Bishop recalls Baudelaire's "The Gaming Table," where fingers "fumbling in pockets" are "fevered with Hell's last disgraces." Benjamin likens the movements of these hands to the discreet motions of the "wage slave in a factory": "gambling even contains the workman's gesture. . . . the jolt in the movement of a machine is like the so-called *coup* is a game of chance . . . the drudgery of the laborer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler" (Illuminations 177). Like gambling and factory labor, conjuring "the helpless earthward fall of love" with nickels in a jukebox is a form of experience divorced from all continuity, tradition, and practice. It is also a sign of what Benjamin detects in Baudelaire's "To a Passerby," "the stigmata which life in a metropolis inflicts upon love" (Illuminations 169).

Bishop spent all of five days doing factory work in Key West, taking apart and reassembling binocular lenses until adverse reactions to the cleaning chemicals forced her to quit. It was around this time that she also came to know the honky-tonks at night. In her draft of "Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box" the two come together. The automated movements of factory labor replicate themselves in the feeding of the jukebox-cum-slot machine, the "burning box" that renders the lover's and gambler's passions interchangeable. As the nickels fall in the poem, so hands are said to "fall on one another." Benjamin describes how gambling, in which the outcome of a game in no way depends on the one prior, annihilates the possibility of *Erfahrung*, or "long experience": "the mechanism to which the participants in a game of chance entrust themselves seizes them body and soul, so that even in their private sphere, and no matter how agitated they may be, they are capable only of a reflex action. They behave like the pedestrians in Poe's story. They live their lives as automatons . . . characters who have completely liquidated their memories" (Illuminations 178). Familiar with this automated seizure of body and soul, "that single effect / that can be calculated like alcohol / or like the response to the nickel," Bishop's speaker delivers what would seem to be the only response available to her, an appeal to immediate amnesiac experience, *Erlebnis*—"how long does the music burn?" The poem ends, then, with a question of sheer quantity, an arch capitulation to the evisceration of experience by the strictures of mechanical measure. An *ars poetica*, this draft is also a game of one-upsmanship, doubling down on Poe's calculations by subjecting exactitude itself to a kind of measure. Is "all your horror," her speaker asks, "half as exact as horror here?" The poem ends, appropriately, "here," with the appeal to an immediate present that evokes, for Bishop's reader, a

palpable absence. Reaching for the dénouement that Poe would have the writer keep "always in view," Bishop repeats the sound of "horror" in the near-rhyme "here," an echo of its implicit absent commentary, "nevermore." Horror here, horror in the refrains of the jukebox, coaxed by a succession of hands dropping nickels—the image recalls the pleasure in melancholy, what Poe called "that species of despair which delights in self-torture." It is with this "tone," this "effect," in view that his student in "The Raven" keeps asking questions to which he already knows the answer. Now Bishop's speaker, in a fit of spleen, would turn to Poe and ask: "How long does the music burn?"

III. "Hideous Calendars"

In a pair of essays written while she was still an undergraduate at Vassar, Bishop outlines a theory of what she calls "experience-time," a "time pattern" that would combine an unconscious register of events with their recovery through the memory's involuntary reflexes. "Is it possible," Bishop asks, "that there may be a sort of *experience-time*, or the time pattern in which realities reach us, quite different from the hour after hour, day after day kind?" (Time's 119) Subtler than the "day after day kind," events in "experience-time" unfold according to unpredictable temporal sequences. They are marked by temporary blanks, failures of receptivity, and sudden unexpected recoveries. In "Dimensions for a Novel," Bishop describes how experience can seem to differ from itself, such that an event does not "take place" immediately:

> We have all had the experience of apparently escaping the emotional results of an event, of feeling no joy or sorrow where joy or sorrow was to be expected, and then suddenly having the proper emotion appear several hours or even days later. The experience could not really have been counted chronologically as having taken place, surely, until this emotion belonging to it had been felt. The crises of our lives do not come, I think, accurately dated; they crop up unexpected and out of turn, and somehow or other arrange themselves according to a calendar we cannot control. If I have a 'feeling' that something is going to happen, and it does, then the feeling proper to that experience has come too early—its proper place was afterwards. If I suffer a terrible loss and do not realize it till several years later among different surroundings, then the important fact is not the original loss so much as the circumstances of the new surroundings which succeeded in letting the loss through to my consciousness. (100)

Bishop would remark years later that she was "a little embarrassed about having to go to Brazil to experience total recall about Nova Scotia; geography must be more mysterious than we think" (quoted in Quinn 306). So, in this passage, "hours" turn to "days" then to "several years" before "the original loss" registers consciously among unexpected surroundings. At stake here is what "counts" as experience, when it counts, or, when it "could … have been counted chronologically as having taken place." Because the event and the "feeling proper to" it refuse to follow a linear temporal sequence, Bishop's verb tenses strain to register the difference, the warps and folds in a "calendar we cannot control." This calendar anticipates a number of other figures Bishop will use to represent nonlinear temporal sequences or the disjunction of "emotional results" from their putative causes: the "ignorant" clock faces with their "histrionic hands" in "Paris 7 A.M.," the clever joking almanac in "Sestina," and the "hideous calendar" of "Argument." Given Bishop's sensitivity to the ways in which "experience" seems to elude us, or we to "escape" it, it is worth noting how she works her way rhetorically into the passage by claiming a kind of kinship: "We have all had the experience of" an experience that

doesn't seem like an "experience," that seems like a place holder for an experience that will "crop up" later, "unexpected and out of turn."[32] To claim, as Bishop does, that "we have all had" an experience of the poverty of experience is to offer this second order experience as compensation for the loss of the first.

"Time's Andromedas," also written while Bishop was at Vassar, narrates a sequence in which we can detect the kind of "time pattern" that Bishop describes, a pattern in which a blank or empty passage is followed by a sudden startling recognition. The blank passage in this case is a passage from a novel:

> One afternoon last fall I was studying very hard, bending over my book with my back to the light of the high double windows. Concentration was so difficult that I had dug myself a sort of little black cave into the subject I was reading, and there I burrowed and scratched, like the Count of Monte Cristo, expecting Heaven knows what sudden revelation. My own thoughts, conflicting with those of the book, were making such a wordy racket that I heard and saw nothing – until the page before my eyes blushed pink. I was startled, then realized that there must be a sunset at my back, and waited a minute trying to guess the color of it from the color of the little reflection. As I waited I heard a multitude of small sounds, and knew simultaneously that I had been hearing them all along,—sounds high in the air, of a faintly rhythmic irregularity, yet resembling the retreat of innumerable small waves, lake-waves, rustling on sand. (102)

Perhaps this sequence is becoming familiar. Bishop's reader must ignore the "wordy racket" in her head and pay attention to the words on the page. Her failed attempt to concentrate gives way suddenly to her rapt attention to the physical changes in the medium; the book "blushed pink." Only now does she recognize that she has been receptive to something else, though unconsciously, the whole time: the sound of birds,

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[32] This claim, the assumption of a shared experience, is a rhetorical move proper to what Benjamin would call a storytelling culture. When he argues, in "The Storyteller," that our novel-writing culture is "poorer" in experience, that we don't have experience in the way a former generation had it, he is measuring our distance from the kind of collective claim that Bishop's opening rhetorical move makes. "It is as if," Benjamin writes, "something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences" (Illuminations 83).

rather, their "multitude of small sounds." The procession of these sounds is received—"I had been hearing them all along"—but from behind this reader's back. Recognizing them, she ignores her book, glances back over her shoulder, and begins to watch the movement of the birds. Here she sees a pulsating movement, a movement with gaps in tempo: "The interspaces moved in pulsation too, catching up and continuing the motion of the wings in wakes, carrying it on, as the rest in music does—not a blankness but a space as musical as sound" (Time's 102-03).[33] Pulsation, subsiding, a wake of rest: each names a blank space—"something, something, something"—no less a part of the pattern than the birds themselves. And yet, even this turn is a form of digression, for once Bishop's reader gives her full attention to the birds, she finds reflected there the mass-like movement which the essay begins by not following, the movement of the novel's prose: "Although such comparisons are dangerous and all prove wrong, if pushed very far, the flight of the birds did give me a sort of guess at what I felt about the *time* of certain novels and could not make clear to myself" (Time's 104).

The significance of the "rest" cannot be overstated for Bishop's poetry. These blanks in the movement of the migrating birds, blanks that Bishop compares to rests in musical notation, are spaces reserved for "catching up," "carrying it on," and "continuing." They show up between the movements of individual birds, since "some moved a little slower than others," then between groups of birds, "each taking four or five minutes to fly over," and finally between successive migrations made in successive years, migrations that were as "mathematically regular as the planets" (Time's 102-03). From these observations Bishop concludes that "the flying birds were setting up, far over my head, a sort of time-pattern" (Time's 103). Robert Lowell, in a review that met with

[33] That the graphic representation of a rest in music resembles a bird would not have been lost on Bishop.

Bishop's rare approval, describes a similar dynamic of motion and rest in her first book *North & South*. The poems, according to Lowell's early assessment, oscillate between "something in motion, weary but persisting, almost always failing and on the point of disintegrating," and "terminus: rest, sleep, fulfillment or death" (EBH 186-87). The blanks in this "time-pattern" have a corollary in the red letter days on a calendar, days of "completing time" for "catching up" and "carrying it on." Proust hears these days signaled in certain phrases—phrases like "one evening"—when they occur in Baudelaire's poetry. They are what Benjamin calls "days of recollection, not marked by any experience. They are not connected with other days, but stand out from time. As for their substance, Baudelaire has defined it in the notion of the *correspondences* . . . a concept of experience which includes ritual elements" (Illuminations 181). Bishop's essay nudges toward a ritualistic register as the entire bird migration resolves itself into a kind of rest, what Bishop calls "a static fact of the world": "Yet all this motion with its effect of precision, of *passing* the time along, as the clock passes it along from minute to minute, was to result in the end in a thing so inevitable, so absolute, as to mean nothing connected with the passage of time at all—a static fact of the world, the birds here or there, always; a fact that may hurry the seasons along for us, but as far as bird migration goes, stands still and infinite" (Time's 103, original emphasis). As an apprehension of the birds' physical movement leads her to the "static fact" of migration, Bishop considers just how to account for the double nature of an event that, unfolding in time, nevertheless seems to refer to a timeless arrangement: "I could have said the whole thing stood quite still, or happened, to misuse that curious expression, in no time. What went to make up this peculiar passing of *another* time, and why did I become conscious of the essential

motionlessness of any *other* time? I tried to answer from the birds, in ancient augury fashion, before I turned back to the books again" (Time's 104). Folded within the motion of the birds, within their time pattern, is "*another* time," static or motionless.

In "Dimensions for a Novel," Bishop show that her attempt to read—not the book but the birds—in "ancient augury fashion" is no hoax. Indeed, she admits to her own sensitivity to "coincidences" that we tend to regard as accidental and meaningless:

> Cross-references, echoes, cycles, take on in their lowest forms, the name of "superstitions," and an author who wrote a novel filled with such might be called either a primitive or, worse still, a mystic. But I have always felt a certain amount of respect for superstitions and coincidences; the fact that a friend's birthday falls on the same day as my own impresses me; always I am startled when something I have dreamed comes true, or someone I have been thinking of arrives on the scene. I have always looked askance at the theory of irreversibility. The point is: the moments I have spoken of occur so sharply, so minutely that one cannot say whether the recognition comes from the outside or the inside, whether the event or the thought strikes, and spreads its net over past and sometimes future events or thoughts. Over all the novels I can think of the author has waved a little wand of attention, he holds it in one position, whereas within the shiftings produced by the present over the past is this other shifting, rhythmical perhaps, of the moments themselves. (99-100)

"Coincidences," the apprehension of which may seem "superstitious," "primitive," or "mystical," lead Bishop to articulate a theory of experience, or "experience-time," grounded in what she describes here as certain piercing moments of "recognition." Flashing up out of constantly shifting configurations of moments, coincidence "strikes" in such a way as to upset any clear distinction between subject and object. Its occurrence "sharply" and "minutely" punctures the self's fabric, such that Bishop's "I," confidently in control of the rest of the passage, becomes a "one": "one cannot say whether the recognition comes from the outside or the inside." Who (or what) recognizes whom (or what) "one cannot say." This shift from "I" to "one" marks the most startling and most

often remarked moment of recognition in Bishop's poetry as well, as a six-year-old "Elizabeth" in "In the Waiting Room" hears and then recognizes "the family voice" inside her own throat: "But I felt: you are an *I*, / you are an *Elizabeth*, / you are one of *them*. / *Why* should you be one, too?" (160-61 original emphasis) The social stakes underlying the poem and binding the speaker to a community, as "Elizabeth" counters "the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world" by recognizing "what similarities . . . / held us all together / or made us all just one," hinge on the moment of "recognition" that Bishop describes in her essay. A similar moment of recognition comes in "The Moose" as the passengers on the bus ride from Nova Scotia begin to fall asleep:

> In the creakings and noises,
> an old conversation
> —not concerning us,
> but recognizable, somewhere,
> back in the bus:
> Grandparents' voices
>
> uninterruptedly
> talking, in Eternity:
> names being mentioned,
> things cleared up finally;
> what he said, what she said,
> who got pensioned;
>
> deaths, deaths and sicknesses;
> the year he remarried;
> the year (something) happened. (171-72)

The voices, "talking in Eternity," casually and "finally" reassemble the calendar.[34] Bishop carefully puts these voices "somewhere." Occasions of "coincidence"—recognitions drawn out of a constant shifting of moments—have an explicitly literary

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[34] Something similar happens in "Under the Window: Ouro Prêto" when "simple" "conversations" are overheard at the fountain "where the world still stops." "Here comes that old man with the stick and sack, / meandering again." "'She's been in labor now two days,' 'Transistors / cost too much.' 'For lunch we took advantage / of the poor duck the dog decapitated.' // The seven ages of man are talkative / and soiled and thirsty" (153-54).

provenance too. In Bishop's essay, she models her shifting order of moments on the shifting order of monuments in Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," a shifting that would involve participation in the past through an unraveling of the subject, what Eliot calls "extinction." That "Elizabeth," in "In the Waiting Room," can only describe her participation in a tradition or a family—the "similarities— / boots, hands, the family voice"—as "unlikely" ("I didn't know any / word for it") perhaps explains why Bishop can afford "a certain amount of respect" for "superstitions" and "coincidences," for their "likeness" or similarity can be had by trusting to "unlikely" chance; these things appear despite infinitesimal odds, far worse than those of the gambler.

Because Bishop is quite frank about the reach of her theory of "experience-time" and what it seems to share with astrological reading, I want to notice how this form of "recognition" approaches a practice of reading that Benjamin attributes to "the mimetic faculty." This faculty, an ability to produce similarities, must have been in decline since the time of the ancients, for, as Benjamin writes, "clearly the observable world of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples" (Reflections 334).[35] The mimetic faculty works by perceiving similarities prior to language, "from the entrails, the stars, or dances" (Reflections 336). When Benjamin adopts this practice of reading in his use of constellations, they register the dynamism of temporal experience as Bishop's

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[35]Rolf Tiedemann claims that for Benjamin "experience rests on the ability to produce and perceive similarities," and there is evidence to suggest that this notion dates back to some of Benjamin's earliest writings (Arcades 934). Gershom Scholem recounts Benjamin's thinking about the mimetic faculty as early as 1918 in language that echoes Bishop's description of perceiving coincidences: "[Benjamin] read me a long sketch about dream and clairvoyance, in which he also attempted to formulate the laws which dominated the world of pre-mythic spirits. . . . Already at that time he was occupied with thoughts about perception as reading of the configurations of surfaces – just as primeval man regarded the world about him and the sky" (75). Related here would be the forms of knowledge Benjamin lists in the essay on "The Coming Philosophy," the knowledge of madmen and mystics.

"experience-time" would have it, what she calls the "shifting … of the moments themselves." What Benjamin calls the "now-time" of the "dialectical image," "shot through with chips of Messianic time," gives rise to a momentarily apprehensible image in a flash, an "image of petrified unrest" (Arcades 325-6).[36] His language combines dynamism and stasis, "unrest" and "petrifaction":

> For the historical index of images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding 'to legibility' constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each 'now' is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. (Arcades 462-63)

Benjamin's formulation is notoriously obscure. Nevertheless, we can begin to follow the movement of his figures. He clearly rejects a linear relation between past and present, whereby either merely "casts its light" on the other. The subvention of the third, crucial to the form of a constellation, enables the relation between the first two terms to be set in time and in motion. Bishop offers a more mundane example of thirdness in "Dimensions for a Novel": "This is Sunday. If I try to think of Friday I cannot recreate Friday pure and simple, exactly as it was. It has been changed for me by the intervening Saturday. . . . A constant process of adjustment is going on about the past—every ingredient dropped into it from the present must affect the whole" (97). Friday and the intervening Saturday

[36] "Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (Illuminations 263).

form a relation that is itself related to the present moment, Sunday.[37] Bishop's concept of "experience-time" shares with Benjamin's theory of reading dialectical images the conviction that the past cannot be definitively measured by the instruments of the present because the present's instruments are themselves the products of the past.[38] Bishop shows us these instruments piling up in the third stanza of "Argument," then hints at the speculative stance toward history that this accumulation implies: "And think / of all those cluttered instruments, / one to a fact, / canceling each other's experience; / how they were / like some hideous calendar / 'Compliments of Never & Forever, Inc'" (81). Turning into clutter, these instruments begin to measure time according to Bishop's fantasy of the attic room, where smells, colors, and textures would decay together, where "time turns green."

The literary models available to Bishop at the time she wrote "Dimension for a Novel" seem to her insufficient representations of the complexity of memory's relation to experience. Of particular interest to my reading of Bishop alongside Benjamin is her critique of Proust, who, according to Bishop, "picks one moment of observation and shows the whole past in the terminology of that particular moment." And while "this method achieves, perhaps, the 'conformity between the old and the new,' … since the conformity itself must be ever-changing, the truth of it, the thing I would like to get at, is the ever-changing expression for it" (Dimensions 98). Her critique seems to aim at

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[37] Costello rightly notes the echo of Eliot's catalyst metaphor. I would just note the different metaphorical register here. "Ingredient" situates us in the kitchen, rather than the laboratory, and looks forward to another figure for days adding their presents to a cumulative experience of the past: the almanac in "Sestina" that drops its moons in the child's crayon garden. What it means to plant these days, or to "plant tears"—seems to be intimated by her earlier descriptions of "experience-time."

[38] Benjamin was inclined to cite Goethe's axiom: "nothing that has had a great effect can really be judged any longer." Bishop would be more likely to quote a similar statement by Eliot: "Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know" (6).

unsettling an ease of access to the *durée*, for it is the settled position from which Proust achieves this "conformity between the old and the new," what Bishop calls the "thought *backwards* from a sitting posture," rather than the thought "struck off, spark-like, from the present" to which she objects (Andromedas, original emphasis 111).[39] If one can produce an image of the past in the form of a leisurely retrospective, Bishop seems to suggest, then that image must be regarded with suspicion. This insight begins to account for certain overt gestures in Bishop's poetry that have come to seem perfectly natural: her tendency to pause, or stutter, to correct herself in the middle of a line, lending the poem the feel of a mind in action, a quality she admired in Hopkins and Herbert. For all Bishop's studied appeals to the simple fact of an event—"that was exactly how it happened"—Bishop scholarship has learned to treat the literal or "straight" reading itself as a trope.[40] To Randall Jarrell's claim that "all her poems have written underneath '*I have seen it*'" we need to add the first stanza of "Santarém": "Of course I may be remembering it all wrong / after, after—how many years?" (185). Despite her criticism of the posture with which he seems to return to images of the past, what Bishop does share with Proust is an insistence on surprise, the involuntary character of the encounter that enables one to form an image of the past. "According to Proust," Benjamin writes, "it is a matter of chance whether an individual forms an image of himself, whether he can take hold of his experience" (Illuminations 158).[41]

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[39] It is Wyndham Lewis's bitter response to the "ravages of time" that he felt resulted from Bergson's philosophy and Bishop's "own growing sense of its difficulties in any literary connection" that lead her to the title for "Time's Andromedas" (119).
[40] See, for example, Edelman.
[41] That Proust celebrates Baudelaire's ability to pursue "*correspondences* with such leisurely care, fastidiously and yet nonchalantly—in a woman's smell, for instance, in the fragrance of her hair or her breasts," that he counts only the successes registered in *Les Fleur du Mal* without equal regard for the bouts of spleen during which, in Benjamin's words, "there is no aura" and "no breath of prehistory surrounds" the passing moment, suggests perhaps how Bishop can find in Proust's recollections the leisure she never felt

Bishop provides a more ordinary context, one she admits may seem obscure, in which to understand this "interplay of influence between present and past":

> When you see someone for the first time, in the blank moment just before or during a hand-shake, this knowledge of them slips into the mind and no matter what you may learn of them later this is always the first fact about them: a knowledge of recognition which when compared to the things you may learn later is much the more amazing. The connection between this and my idea of the interplay of influence between present and past may seem at first a little obscure, but in reality the latter depends directly upon it. I can think of the existing moments which make up their 'ideal order' as existing first of all as these moments of recognition. From a vacant pinpoint of certainty start out these geometrically accurate lines, star-beams, pricking out the past, or present, or casting ahead into the future. (Dimensions 99)

I have tried to suggest that Bishop's thinking about moments of recognition, "coincidences" or "spark-like" "flashes," conceives of experience as a means of understanding an individual's relation to a collective. Here she turns to the minimal instance of social exchange—the handshake—as a model of the preparation for an experience that will take the form of recognition. Bishop is careful to distinguish between two different kinds of knowledge here—a knowledge of facts and a knowledge of recognition—and the act of recognizing someone, she claims, is "much the more amazing" than any of the "things you may learn later" about them. This knowledge that makes a person recognizable is not acquired consciously and deliberately. Rather, it "slips into the mind" in a "blank moment," a blinking or blacking out that is the prerequisite for a certain later illumination. What registers immediately as a blank, a "vacant pinpoint of certainty," figures, by the end of Bishop's sentence, as a flash,

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she had. Bishop does make one exception in her critique of contemporary novels, and here the significance of Poe emerges again: "It seems almost too simple to say that in the existing novel the ending throws back no light on the beginning, but (excepting of course the rough example of the detective story!) I think it is true" (Dimensions 97).

"starbeams, pricking out the past, or present, or casting ahead to the future." This description accords with a passage from Benjamin's "One-Way Street" that grounds auratic experience in an instance of social exchange, an exchange he figures as explosive:

> Ordnance:
>
> I had arrived in Riga to visit a woman friend. Her house, the town, the language were unfamiliar to me. Nobody was expecting me; no one knew me. For two hours I walked the streets in solitude. Never again have I seen them so. From every gate a flame darted; each cornerstone sprayed sparks, and every streetcar came toward me like a fire engine. For she might have stepped out of the gateway, around the corner, been sitting in the streetcar. But of the two of us, I had to be, at any price, the first to see the other. For had she touched me with the match of her eyes, I would have gone up like a powder keg. (SW 1 461)

Benjamin goes to great links to insist that Riga is a place in which recognition is all but impossible, in which "nobody was expecting me; no one knew me." The possibility of taking part in any collective here seems to be preempted by the city's utter unfamiliarity. No gate or cornerstone or streetcar is likely to return the traveler's gaze. Yet, the one exception renders these impossibly long odds irrelevant. An appointed recognition in the gaze of this "woman friend," in "the match of her eyes," is the one "vacant pinpoint of certainty" from which "star-beams" will issue. He wanders the streets with the utmost vigilance. That he must recognize her before she can recognize him testifies to the perilous distinction between the self and the other. Surely Benjamin's narrative owes something to Baudelaire, who also figures these flashing eyes as incendiary: "She is beautiful and more than beautiful. She is surprising. … like a lightning flash, her glance illuminates: it is an explosion in the dark" (Paris 78).

Bishop devises a narrative of recognition, "Arrival at Santos," to open her third book, *Questions of Travel*. The first three stanzas attempt a kind of survey:

> Here is a coast; here is a harbor;
> here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:
> impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying mountains,
> sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,
>
> with a little church on top of one. And warehouses,
> some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,
> and some tall, uncertain palms. Oh, tourist,
> is this how this country is going to answer you
>
> and your immodest demands for a different world,
> and a better life, and complete comprehension
> of both at last, and immediately,
> after eighteen days of suspension? (89)

Santos refuses its presence. Bishop's demonstrative stutter, "Here is a coast; here is a harbor; / here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery," mocks the traveler's disbelief in having arrived, that is to say, in having to accept the impossible exchange of an anticipated ideal place for this actual one. Her speaker does not recognize what she came for, and "this country" is not going to "answer" to the holy splendor that the name "Santos" promises. The traveler's gaze, now ravenous after its "meager diet of horizon," meets a studied artificiality, "some scenery." "Sad and harsh," "frivolous," "feeble," "uncertain," even perhaps "self-pitying," this place manifests the same embarrassment that led to the "demands for a different world" at home.[42] In her sustained treatment of travel—beginning with early poems like "The Map" and "The Imaginary Iceberg," and extending through *Geography III*—Bishop never loses sight of its potential and actual disappointments. "Questions of Travel" will turn on the tourist's giddiness with disillusion to ask: "What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life / in our bodies, we are determined to rush / to see the sun the other way around?" (93) In her appreciation of the threat of sameness, of mere repetition, we can mark one of Bishop's

[42] "What's wrong with self-pity, anyway," Bishop's Crusoe will ask, 'Pity should begin at home'" (163).

many debts to Baudelaire. Between anticipation and the event, between the "Invitation to the Voyage" and the "The Voyage" itself, the world becomes "monotonous and small" (184). Desire for the new, the "sumptuous weather" imagined in the distance of the horizon, never comes without the specter of endless repetition. Even "the Seven Wonders of the World," so we hear in "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," are "tired / and a touch familiar" (57).

"Arrival at Santos" shuffles us back from this brooding with a familiar imperative in the fourth stanza:

> Finish your breakfast. The tender is coming,
> a strange and ancient craft, flying a strange and brilliant rag.
> So that's the flag. I never saw it before.
> I somehow never thought of there *being* a flag,
>
> but of course there was, all along. And coins, I presume,
> and paper money; they remain to be seen.
> And gingerly now we climb down the ladder backward,
> myself and a fellow passenger named Miss Breen,
>
> descending into the midst of twenty-six freighters
> waiting to be loaded with green coffee beans.
> Please, boy, do be more careful with that boat hook!
> Watch out! Oh! It has caught Miss Breen's
>
> skirt! There! Miss Breen is about seventy,
> a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall,
> with beautiful bright blue eyes and a kind expression.
> Her home, when she is at home, is in Glen Fall
>
> s, New York. There. We are settled.
> The customs officials will speak English, we hope,
> and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes.
> Ports are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap,
>
> but they seldom seem to care what impression they make,
> or, like this, only attempt, since it does not matter,
> the unassertive colors of soap, or postage stamps—
> wasting away like the former, slipping the way the latter

> do when we mail the letters we wrote on the boat,
> either because the glue here is very inferior
> or because of the heat. We leave Santos at once;
> we are driving to the interior. (89-90)

Only after acknowledging the saturation of this place with its own cultural codes, its own symbolic economies, does the poem register a submission to the opacity of "Santos." The travelers' full frontal approach to "some scenery" gives way to an admission of less visible forms of exchange, foreign "coins" and "paper money" that, though there "all along," "remain to be seen." As the poem's tone shifts, its travelers turn around: "And gingerly now we climb down the ladder backward." The awkward gestures required to disembark expose the speaker and her "fellow passenger," Miss Breen, to a subtly sexualized menace. A boy working the freighters wields his boat hook too carelessly among these skirted women, putting some of the first world's decorum at stake. Yet, another form of exposure lurks in Bishop's phrase "fellow passenger," for Miss Breen, "a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall," cuts a decidedly masculine figure. If her shape and occupation make her a kind of "fellow," there is a suggestion, in her "beautiful bright blue eyes," that she is recognized by this poet's speaker as a "fellow" lesbian as well. This pairing of masculine traits and female passengers is reflected formally by alternating masculine and feminine rhymes, none of them subtle, throughout. Once Miss Breen's skirt is "caught," there appears to be a corresponding rupture in the narrative fabric. "There" marks, first, a moment of danger, potential violence. After "There!" the poem abandons the narration of immediate action, the boy's hook catching Miss Breen's skirt, and gives a detached, calm, retrospective description. The tone shifts drastically. After hearing that "Miss Breen" is seventy and a retired lieutenant, we hear a repetition of something familiar: "Her home, when she is at home, is in Glens Fall // s, New York."

Then, with another "There. We are settled." Whereas "here" marked the disappointment of arrival, two "there's" escort Bishop's reader from the shock of violent conflict to the calm "settling" of a new continent, "There. We are settled. / The customs officials will speak English, we hope / and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes."

The word "tender" is asked to do an extraordinary amount of work in this poem. On the simplest level of narrative "tender" names the kind of boat that takes the passengers from the larger ship to the port. It gets one not just from here to there, from one culture to another, but from the poem's opening demonstrations of tedious familiarity—"here is a coast; here is a harbor; / here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery"—to its sudden encounter with alterity, "There!" "Tender" is also a name, of course, for currency, the "coins" and "paper money" of the local economy. These signs and symbols serve as markers of value, but markers that must be recognized, just as the "rag" must be recognized to serve as a "flag." "Tender" thus names a more general form of exchange built on the collective recognition of symbols. The poem also names the "tender" explicitly as "a strange and ancient craft," the kind of craft that poetry could be said to exemplify. But Bishop's adjectives, "strange" and "ancient," suggest more specifically the craft of reading "in ancient augury fashion" seen in her undergraduate papers, through the recognition of certain alignments of stars or "coincidences," "pricking out the past, or present, or casting ahead into the future." These "moments of recognition," Bishop argues, "[slip] into the mind" in the form of blanks. So, too, the poem blacks out the narrative as the two passengers make their acquaintance with the South American continent for the first time. "Arrival at Santos" omits any account of her travelers' passage in the tender. The poem moves from the frightful disembarking—

through an account of Miss Breen's past and home—to a more comfortable position at "customs." According to one narrative trajectory, Bishop's travelers spend the majority of the seventh stanza in the tender, moving from the ship to customs. But with the sudden "there!" the poem's action is blacked out, and the stanza's space given over to the recognition of Miss Breen as having a proper place—a home, a job, and a past. "Pricking out the past," Bishop's stanza serves as the room she imagined that an extra brain would provide. It is something like the attic space with a chair inside, a "great help," where one could go and sit for a while, and see how the past "decayed and fell together." Steering the poem aside to visit Miss Breen's past, her home in Glen Falls, and to save her from the embarrassment of the boat hook, Bishop shows again how "moments of recognition" are the grounds for binding the individual to a collective. In a place where recognition is all but impossible, the tender assumes considerable emotional responsibilities as well, the responsibility to tend her, Miss Breen, and the transformation of a suddenly dire vigilance "Watch out! … There!" to the soothing recovery, "there … there."

This form of editing, splicing the legible coordinates into an uncertain sequence of events, crops up in one of Bishop's early notebooks. There she imagines how the "constant adjustment" of past and present, the continuous reflection of each in light of the other, might be checked or arrested with a mechanical supplement to the human mind: "Mechanical devices it would be useful for the mind to possess: 1. A motion-picture camera for taking 'stills.' 2. A gadget rolling the mind to turn back to the 'identical spot,' make the necessary connections, & turn ahead—as with the typewriter" (quoted in Costello, Questions 176). Bishop's fantasy of a mind that might record like a motion-picture camera, then revisit and "correct" its contents like a typewriter roller, suggests

how the mass media's techniques offer a form of experience equal to all of their proliferation. These machines would mark and revisit what passes before the mind too quickly, rendering blanks or blurs—"something, something, something"—legible by allowing one to return to them, to recognize them in hindsight. It is as if, through the machine's ability to record, the transactions between past and present continue to flit by, only they leave a kind of carbon copy. These mechanical supplements do not make ephemeral events immediately legible, but they provide for a potential legibility; the typewriter script will be available for "correction" once we know how the correct version of the script should read. Years later Bishop suggests that the mind is indeed capable of revisiting its records when she recounts how the genesis of a poem can involve what seemed like a lapse or failure of reception, but has actually been an extended period of latency: "A poem may be inspired by something that happened 20 years ago but until I've written it, I may not have realized that at the time I was greatly moved. I think you have to trust that the eye and mind are constantly recording, and be patient enough for them to reveal what they have observed" (100).[43] Bishop's trust that the mind is "constantly recording" even though its film may require decades in the darkroom before it reveals something momentous, again puts her in the position of star-gazer, waiting for an event distant in space and time to reach the ken of an observer.

The flash of recognition, of similarity or coincidence, for both Benjamin and Bishop can occur as a particular encounter with language. Indeed, "dialectical images,"

[43] Commenting on "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," Ashbery suggests how this attitude on the part of the writer might be necessary for the reader as well: "After twenty years (the poem first appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1948) I am unable to exhaust the meaning and mysteries of its concluding line: 'And looked and looked our infant sight away,' and I suspect that its secret has very much to do with the nature of Miss Bishop's poetry. Looking, or attention, will absorb the object with its meaning. Henry James advises us to 'be one of those on whom nothing is lost,' without specifying how this is to be accomplished. Miss Bishop, at the end of her poem 'The Monument,' … is a little more specific: 'Watch it closely,' she tells us" (EBH 204).

Benjamin claims, are always encountered in language. I have already suggested one instance in which Bishop recognizes coincidence in language, in her reading of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where she sees in the word "monument" the word "moment," and the relation between past and present seems to her to become clear. Another occurs, famously, as the genesis of "The Man-Moth," when a typo in the newspaper turns "mammoth" into "manmoth." Bishop describes the event (when she finally admits to it) in good-humored and overblown terms: "The misprint seemed meant for me," she claims, "an oracle spoke from the pages of the *New York Times*, kindly explaining New York City to me, at least for the moment." But then she goes on, broadening and qualifying her claim: "one is offered such oracular statements all the time, but often misses them, gets lazy about writing them out in detail" (quoted in EBH 286). In a late poem entitled "The Wit," Bishop draws out the work required to recognize coincidence in language:

> "Wait. Let me think a minute," you said.
> And in the minute we saw:
> Eve and Newton with an apple apiece,
> and Moses with the Law,
> Socrates, who scratched his curly head,
> and many more from Greece,
> all coming hurrying up to now,
> bid by your crinkled brow.
>
> But then you made a brilliant pun.
> We gave a thunderclap of laughter.
> Flustered, your helpers vanished one by one;
> and through the conversational spaces, after,
> we caught,—back, back, far, far, —
> the glinting birthday of a fractious star. (199)

Bishop's title recalls an older and more specific use of the term "wit," one closer to the wit of the Metaphysical poets. "Wit" names a person who quickly grasps similarities, and underlying the poem is the etymological link between "wit" and knowledge. Johnson's 1755 dictionary—itself an archive of linguistic coincidence—defines "wit" as "the powers of the mind; the mental faculties; the intellects." To describe someone as a "wit" in a poem written in 1956 is to recall the shifts in the word's usage, to point to the time embedded within its letters. The poem begins with a near echo of "wit"—"wait"—reminding us that to be a "wit" one must be quick, or quick-witted, and that wit always involves an acute sense of timing. Then the poem's "we" holds a six-line vigil, waiting and watching, hoping to observe the conjunction of two bodies. What we see as we wait is a succession of creases in the forehead, the marks of thinkers—Eve with the fruit of knowledge, Newton, Moses, Socrates—as they "hurry up to now." All of human history is lightly compressed within this sonnet's octet until the turn triggers an instance of linguistic coincidence, a "brilliant pun," that flashes out to "a thunderclap of laughter." In this astrological event, the "birthday of a fractious star," we can see here how Bishop's "respect" for birthdays, "cross-references, echoes, cycles," includes the coincidences embedded in language. "—Back, back, far, far,—" a "starbeam" is "pricking out the past, or present, or casting ahead into the future." The image of the crinkling forehead draws out the etymological link between star and brow, recalling the folk tradition of reading one's fate on the forehead. Charting this star between dashes, Bishop enacts formally the repetition that is the condition of possibility of recognition, of any apprehension of similarity or coincidence. Recognition depends on repetition, and repetition on recognition[44] This principle is sounded in Bishop's "North Haven" as the

[44] The coincidence of the two, recognition and repetition, is, according to Benveniste, the founding of the

repetitions of Nature come each time with a difference: "Nature repeats herself, or almost does: / *repeat*, *repeat*, *repeat*; *revise*, *revise*, *revise*" (188).

IV. "The bight is littered with old correspondences."

Asked in a 1978 interview why her poems always seem to look at objects as if returning to them or seeing them for a second time, Bishop admits to being what she calls "very object-struck" (100). Nevertheless, Nathan A Scott locates at the center of her poetics a formulation he cites from Robbe-Grillet: "Man looks at the world, and the world does not look back at him" (121). Between these two claims we can situate Benjamin's discourse of aura. "To perceive the aura of an object we look at," Benjamin writes, "means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return" (Illuminations 188). The effects on the structure of perception that Benjamin attributes to the pace of large-scale industrialization, the replacement of the unique art work with a mass-like proliferation of copies, the destruction of distance—all are comprised under the phenomenon Benjamin describes as the decline of aura. An encounter with auratic objects retains a trace of the ritualistic or religious practice in which the earliest forms of art were used. "Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word," Benjamin writes, "certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals … kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered

semiotic: "The difference between recognition and understanding entails two separate faculties of the mind: the ability to perceive a correspondence between what is there and what has been there before, and the ability to perceive the meaning of a new enunciation" (quoted in Agamben 62).

recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime" (Illuminations 159). Whereas the auratic object measures its history in the distance from which it looks back—in the marks of the potter's hand or the stamps added to traditional Chinese paintings to mark their passage from owner to owner—as aura declines, the art work's cult or ritual value is replaced by display value, a measure of the erosion of distance. Baudelaire encounters this phenomenon in the glassed-over eyes of prostitutes in the streets of Paris, lit like shop windows offering their wares. They do not return the poet's gaze.

No aspect of Bishop's work has drawn more attention than her "famous eye." Bishop was drawn to gazes, but also to gilding, glazes, and worlds under glass. The earliest critical praise for her descriptive powers has come to seem to later scholarship belittling or patronizing, if not simply irrelevant.[45] A connoisseur not of visions—"'visions' is / too serious a word"—but of "looks," Bishop was fascinated with her maternal grandmother's glass eye and planned for years to use it as the title of a collection. Paired with the real one, this glass eye might serve as an emblem for the oscillation between a look that looks back and one that doesn't. Versions of this figure are inscribed over and over again in Bishop's poems and prose: in "The Sea & Its Shore" Boomer saves a scrap of advertising for "JOKE SPECS WITH SHIFTING EYES" (177); the "Gentleman of Shallot"—half mirror, half man—prompts the opening question "which eye's his eye," as one is only glass (9); in "The Fish" the animal's eye "shifted a little, but not / to return my stare" (43); at the end of "Love Lies Sleeping" we see a

[45] Robert Pinsky, for example, notes that "It is ironic that Bishop is often praised, sometimes faintly, for having a loving eye toward the world; it is a matter of her mind, not her eye, and the process is equally as embattled or resistant as it is loving" (EBH 56).

cityscape reflected in a pair of dead eyes (17); in "Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box" Bishop describes the bar's lights as "blue as gas, / blue as the pupil / of a blind man's eye" (49); oil "flashes or looks upward brokenly" in "Under the Window: Ouro Prêto." Occasionally, the eyes in Bishop's poems do look back. In "Letter to N.Y." the taxi "meter glares like a moral owl" (80). Part III of "Four Poems" ends with a familiar look from the forest. Time turns from "wasted, wasted minutes" to something else when "these minutes' host / emerges": "And while the fireflies / are failing to illuminate these nightmare trees / might they not be his green gay eyes" (78). Perhaps the most striking example of an unreciprocated look comes in "Crusoe in England," where Bishop describes Crusoe's knife, drained of its life. Back in England, Crusoe misses his island:

> I'm bored, too, drinking my real tea,
> surrounded by uninteresting lumber.
> The knife there on the shelf—
> it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
> It lived. How many years did I
> beg it, implore it, not to break?
> I knew each nick and scratch by heart,
> the bluish blade, the broken tip,
> the lines of wood-grain on the handle …
> Now it won't look at me at all.
> The living soul has dribbled away.
> My eyes rest on it and pass on.
>
> The local museum's asked me to
> leave everything to them. (166)

The ennui of England's empty time settles around Crusoe. The knife that "reeked of meaning" now "won't look at me at all." With years tucked in its nicks and scratches, Crusoe's knife undergoes the shift from ritual value, a value supported by the accrual and transmission of experience, to display value, the value the knife will have for the local museum. Perhaps it should be unsurprising that Bishop should attend so carefully to the

difference between values grounded in ritual, memory, and practice, and the relatively shallow appeal of the new surface display, for the ability to distinguish between these registers is what affected Bishop so much in Marianne Moore's eye: "Although her tone is frequently light or ironic the total effect is of such ritualistic solemnity that I feel in reading her one should constantly bear in mind the secondary and frequently somber meaning of the title of her first book: *Observations*" (EBH 279). The significance of this reading of Moore's title can only be gauged if we recall that the objects of Moore's "observations," as we saw in the previous chapter, are always reproductions, precisely the kind of object that, according to Benjamin, accelerates the decline of aura. And yet, her treatment of these things—postcards, newspaper clippings, mechanical toy birds—lends them a "ritualistic solemnity" that was not lost on Bishop.

Bishop wrote one poem that announces itself as a kind of ritual. In it is her only explicit allusion to Baudelaire.

The Bight

[*On my birthday*]

At low tide like this how sheer the water is.
White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare
and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches.
Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,
the water in the bight doesn't wet anything,
the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.
One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire
one could probably hear it turning to marimba music.
The little ocher dredge at work off the end of the dock
already plays the dry perfectly off-beat claves.
The birds are outsize. Pelicans crash
into this peculiar gas unnecessarily hard,
it seems to me, like pickaxes,
rarely coming up with anything to show for it,

> and going off with humorous elbowings.
> Black-and-white man-of-war birds soar
> on impalpable drafts
> and open their tails like scissors on the curves
> or tense them like wishbones, till they tremble.
> The frowsy sponge boats keep coming in
> with the obliging air of retrievers,
> bristling with jackstraw gaffs and hooks
> and decorated with bobbles of sponges.
> There is a fence of chicken wire along the dock
> where, glinting like little plowshares,
> the blue-gray shark tails are hung up to dry
> for the Chinese-restaurant trade.
> Some of the little white boats are still piled up
> against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in,
> and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm,
> like torn-open, unanswered letters.
> The bight is littered with old correspondences.
> Click. Click. Goes the dredge,
> and brings up a dripping jawful of marl.
> All the untidy activity continues,
> awful but cheerful. (60-1)

The "low tide" in the bight, nearly transparent, cannot cover the "ribs of marl" glaring up from out of its depths. The boats are dry, the pilings "dry as matches," and "the water in the bight doesn't wet anything." Turning to gas, this tide is on the verge of explosion. On this speaker's birthday, the combustible atmosphere is fueled by the potential for correspondence, for recognition, the look back that would have sent Benjamin's speaker "up like a powder keg," the "now" that Benjamin describes as "charged to the bursting point with time." In her studied off-hand manner, Bishop invites Baudelaire into the poem as if merely to dismiss him, to suggest that there is no "marimba music" here. But then "the little ocher dredge at work off the end of the dock / already plays the perfectly off-beat claves." "Claves," either a pair of hardwood percussion sticks or the syncopated pattern they make, might be drumming up some birthday music after all. "Perfectly off-beat," they set the unsteady tempo that, like the "faintly rhythmic irregularity" of birds

behind Bishop's back in "Time's Andromedas," may "already" have been audible for some time now. "Clave" is also an archaic past tense form of "cleave," a word whose opposite meanings, either "to cling to" or "to divide," begin to get at the double and contradictory movement that is the burden of this poem. The former sense of "cleave," "to cling to" or "to stick to," describes the clustering of associations around the things this speaker looks at, beginning with the "ocher dredge" at the end of the dock. As Bishop's description of the bight continues, the images are stuck to her workspace; "drafts" and "scissors" and "unopened letters," even the "Click. Click" of her typewriter, look back from the seascape. Answering letters after "the last bad storm," a kind of work with which Bishop was no doubt too familiar, requires that this writer "dredge" up much that she would rather not. Evident everywhere in the physical landscape are projections of a struggle to "come up with anything to show for" all the digging and diving and retrieving going on about the bight, all this "untidy activity." But the second sense of "cleave," echoed by the pelicans crashing "unnecessarily hard," and "little white boats" that are smashed or "stove in," interrupts the circuit of correspondence. Clinging gives way to splitting, tearing, and smashing. The "torn-open, unanswered letters" may never be answered. The reflections of the landscape, reciprocating looks that mirror for the speaker some otherwise inaccessible part of her mind, are subject to an unsteady temporal narrative. "Perfectly offbeat music" signals a correspondence left to chance. Bishop's speaker acknowledged this possibility in "Arrival at Santos," when she imagined the postage stamps not sticking to "the letters we wrote on the boat" because of inferior glue. Here the boats "bristling with jackstraw gaffs and hooks" are even more uncertain conveyances than those we saw in the earlier poem. "Not yet salvaged," they may never

be salvaged. The poem treats these correspondences in the subjunctive mood, as parts of a possible or potential future, for Bishop acknowledges that the synaesthetic transformation of water to gas to marimba music always involves an encounter with past moments and their shifting rhythms. These encounters are never guaranteed. Salvage must come from what Benjamin calls the "dense medium" of the memory, and "the bight is littered with old correspondences," scraps of a past that may or may not be redeemed by the poet. Working out the relation between Bishop's poems and her letters, Langdon Hammer argues that "correspondence is the model for an imaginative ideal" in Bishop's work, that she was "interested in the fact that once a letter is sent, the letter writer becomes a reader waiting for a response" (Useless 173). The personal letter participates in an uncertain narrative, and it introduces a waiting area in which the poet looks forward to a response. Watching and waiting for correspondences, coincidences, ideal orders of moments, Bishop spends her birthday in the seat of the astrologer. In this sense, "The Bight" picks up where "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" left off, one page earlier, with the disappointed traveler's question, "Why couldn't we have seen / this old Nativity while we were at it?" Not one of the wise men in the Christmas story, he has not been given to see constellations, oracles, divinely appointed conjunctions.

We left Boomer in his house several pages back, reading by the light of his lantern. I want to return now to his public beach and try to read the last scrap he picks up there:

Much as a one-eyed room, hung all with night,
Only that side, which adverse to the eye
Gives but one narrow passage to the light,
Is spread with some white shining tapestry,
An hundred shapes that through the flit airs stray,
Rush boldly in, crowding that narrow way;

And on that bright-faced wall obscurely dancing play. (178)

All of the scraps Bishop picks from Boomer's beach comment in some way on his practice of reading, but this passage is a particularly fortuitous find. The stanza is taken from Phineas Fletcher's 1633 poem, "The Purple Island," an allegory in twelve cantos and one of the last examples of a correspondence poem written in English. Grounded in the belief that the universe was created in the image of god and that this image is repeated throughout all of nature, Fletcher's poem maps the human anatomy in allegorical terms, each body part corresponding to parts of the national body of England and to parts of the natural world. Fletcher's poem would appeal to Bishop for at least two reasons. On a stylistic level, his use of the metaphysical conceit is unsurpassed. Fletcher demonstrates such violent yoking of images that the poem has been accused of incoherence.[46] He describes the eyes, for example, as two towers, surrounded by the walls of the eyelids, and guarded by eyelashes in the form of spearmen's pikes. There is, in such "unlikely" configurations, a contingency that Bishop admits to having respect for. Moreover, she would be drawn to Fletcher's considerable knowledge of optics, and the one stanza (the one room) she leaves on Boomer's beach comes from Fletcher's description of the innermost parts of the eye, where the eye reputedly meets the brain. This "one-eyed room," letting through its "narrow passage" a crowd of "an hundred shapes," would have a particular appeal for Bishop, for it bears a relation to the image Bishop used to describe the way her brain should work. That is to say, even after Fletcher passes through the last of the eye's six walls, he figures its innermost workings as a space somehow external to the body—a room that admits passage—something like the "extra room" in the brain that Bishop said she would like to go and sit in once in a while. Boomer's response to the

[46] See the introduction by Daniel Gustav Anderson.

stanza is to identify it as one of that category of scraps intended for him: "That sounded like something he had experienced. First his house seemed to him to be the 'one-eyed room, hung all with night,' and then it was his whole life at night on the shore." The resemblance continues until the poem's allegorical vision begins to creep behind Boomer's eyes:

> First the papers blowing in the air, then what was printed on them, were the 'hundred shapes.' . . .
>
> But what did these things mean?
>
> Either because of the insect armies of type so constantly besieging his eyes, or because it was really so, the world, the whole world he saw, came before many years to seem printed too.
>
> Boomer held up his lantern and watched a sandpiper rushing distractedly this way and that. It looked, to his strained eyesight, like a point of punctuation against the "rounded, rolling waves." (Prose 178)

Boomer adapts to the mass of papers "constantly besieging his eyes" by regarding "the whole world" as an endless succession of printed signs, what Bishop describes elsewhere as "God's spreading fingerprint." What these "armies of type" initiate in Boomer is a form of typological thinking, such that even those scraps he cannot decipher, those that "bewildered him completely," are saved in the hope that they will become legible at some point in the future. Everywhere Boomer holds his lantern now he sees text. It is as though he is facing the wall on which "an hundred shapes" "obscurely dancing play." Boomer is receptive to these figures, but not because he faces them directly. He encounters them as though each was projected from some point behind his back, flashing out of the past to be recognized on the wall in front of him. Sitting in his "one-eyed room, hung all with night," he resembles nothing so much as that "absent-minded" examiner that Benjamin saw as the model for a kind of "reception in a state of distraction," the audience in a movie house.

Bishop represents Boomer's house as doing for Boomer what Benjamin claims architecture has always done for the masses. "Architecture," Benjamin writes, "has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction" (Illuminations 239). He goes on to describe just what this kind of reception would involve:

> Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception—or rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. The latter, too, occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion. (Illuminations 240)

Habit is the repetition necessary to recognition, the "incidental" attention that the extra room in Bishop's brain would afford those things she decided to throw there. Boomer's beach functions like this kind of space, housing the "fitful illumination" of his nightly fires (Prose 173). It is what makes his "life," his literary life, possible:

> On nights that Boomer was most drunk, the sea was of gasoline, terribly dangerous. He glanced at it fearfully over his shoulder between every sentence he read, and built his fire far back on the beach. It was brilliant, oily, and explosive. He was foolish enough then to think that it might ignite and destroy his only means of making a living. (Prose 174)

Boomer's reading is punctuated at every turn by the threat of explosion. Continually glancing back over his shoulder, he keeps the vigil that Bishop's speaker in "The Bight" will keep on her birthday, waiting for some constellation to align itself, smelling the water in the bight turning to gas, hearing the "offbeat claves" as they drum up marimba music. The threat of the explosion for Boomer, like the threat of explosion at the bight, is the threat of a moment in which meaning becomes immanent, in which all the old

correspondences littering the sea and its shore are salvaged. At the very least, it would destroy Boomer's "means of making a living." Staved off with good humor by Bishop's sandpiper as he runs in a "state of controlled panic," this moment would make reading impossible. It would turn the birds' periods, his punctuation marks, his rests, into a full stop.

CHAPTER THREE

Moving Through Merrill's Houses:

"The blind spot of where we are"

> So, yes, I keep on the move, always hoping for a novel experience, always coming face-to-face with what I've known all my life.
>
> —James Merrill, 1993 interview

James Merrill's 1982 article "Acoustical Chambers" opens with a meditation on rooms:

> Interior spaces, the shape and correlation of rooms in a house, have always appealed to me. Trying for a blank mind, I catch myself instead revisiting a childhood bedroom on Long Island. Recently, on giving up the house in Greece where I'd lived for much of the previous fifteen years, it wasn't so much the fine view it commanded or the human comedies it had witnessed that I felt deprived of; rather, I missed the hairpin turn of the staircase underfoot, the height of our kitchen ceiling, the low door ducked through in order to enter a rooftop laundry room that had become my study. (Prose 3)

No one will be shocked to hear James Merrill recalling the strict forms of his house in Athens. Apt to meet the most exacting structural demands with contortionist feats of prosody and syntax, to wriggle his way down the "glass chimney of a villanelle," Merrill says he took "instinctively" to "quatrains, to octaves and sestets," "stanza" being "after all the Italian word for 'room'" (Prose 3). Certainly the alliance of architecture and verse form has not gone unremarked in Merrill scholarship—indeed his name is rarely invoked

without some mention of his preference for working “indoors”—but what I want to notice here is the way in which the definitions of architectural space, “the shape and correlation of rooms in a house,” prompt Merrill to describe a peculiar form of attention.[47] Recounting how events in his Greek house prove less memorable than the formal features of the house itself, Merrill marks a distinction between objects of vision, “the fine view” and “the human comedies it had witnessed,” and structures likely to receive only an incidental form of notice. The turn of the stairs, the height of the ceiling, and the door ducked through are registered through kinaesthesia and proprioception, nonconscious perceptions of the body’s movement and position in space. Near the end of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin makes rather large claims for this form of attention as it pertains to the reception of architecture, citing architecture as the “prototype” of an art form that will help solve particularly modern tasks facing the “human sensory apparatus,” tasks which “cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone” (Illuminations 240). Whereas “contemplation” or concentration might suffice to apprehend the traditional, singular, stable art object, the more comprehensive, if less obvious, demands that architecture makes on the “human sensory apparatus” seem to Benjamin to approximate those made by reproducible forms of art such as photography and film. Tending to scatter, even disappear, these forms require what he calls “reception in a state of distraction.” The tasks that architecture might help to solve, according to Benjamin, are not grasped with the quick comprehension that optical means promise. Rather, they are “mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation” (Illuminations 240). I

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[47] In the first book-length study of Merrill, Ross Labrie notes that “houses are a seminal symbol in Merrill’s work” (53). See also Kalstone 85-90; McClatchy 79-88; and Yenser 87-88.

begin this reading of Merrill with Benjamin's speculations because they help to contextualize part of what distinguishes Merrill as a poet: his conviction, evident everywhere in the poems, that our most lasting forms of experience cannot be seized immediately, that they are "mastered gradually" through "habit." The retarding force of these terms in Benjamin's formulation counters the flitting, fleeting, ephemeral character of the urban life that met Baudelaire on the streets of nineteenth-century Paris. So Merrill's life-long commitment to traditional verse forms, structures inhabited through painstaking apprenticeship, bears an intimate relation to the dizzying character of his twentieth-century experience as well. Whereas various strands of twentieth-century American poetics—Imagist and Objectivist among them— would devise techniques to maximize "optical means" such that "contemplation" might be brought to a point of immediacy or pure presence, Merrill's sense of the immediate present as blank, blinding, or blacked out drives a speculative economy of experience in his poems, one in which experience must be both underwritten by the past and leveraged against the future if it is to be had at all.

Part of what Merrill's passage above seems to imply is that the mind can search through rooms recorded involuntarily.[48] Registered gradually, by force of habit, while one's attention is occupied elsewhere (by "the fine view" or "human comedies"), these structures may remain dormant, even inaccessible to deliberate attempts at recollection. On occasions when they do assert themselves, they can scatter the subject. "Trying for a blank mind," Merrill writes, "I catch myself instead revisiting a childhood bedroom." It

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[48] In *Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life*, Steven Johnson notes evolutionary biology's explanation for this kind of phenomenon, "that the seat of long-term memory in the brain, the hippocampus, originally evolved as a cognitive mapmaking tool, helping our ancestors get their bearings in complex natural environments" (100).

is as if the mind, relieved of any deliberate object of focus, falls back on its own clandestine navigational operations, memories that give the subject a sense of place. There is a slight note of reprimand here. The meditative practitioner has tried and failed to achieve a "blank" mind, a kind of perfect attention. One of his minds wanders off, "revisiting a childhood bedroom," and the other goes wandering after. And yet, the conjunction registered in the phrase "I catch myself" marks a serendipitous form of reception, a moment in which one is suddenly both the subject and object of attention. Merrill will come to rely on this form of reception, even adopting a compositional strategy that mimics the movement described above, the movement from the vacancy of a "blank mind" to the sudden return of familiar structures, passages he knows by heart. Faced with an "impasse" in composition, Merrill says he will try to "imagine an analogy with musical form":

> For instance, in "The Thousand and Second Night" the last thing I had to write was the passage at the end of section three beginning "Love, Warmth." I had no idea how to write it; I thought I would do it in free verse and made all kinds of beginnings, before the six-line stanza finally evolved. But the moment for which I'm most grateful is in the third of those five stanzas, when it came to me to make the meter trochaic rather than iambic—a stroke I associated quite arbitrarily with that moment at the end of the rondo of the "Waldstein" Sonata, where the tempo is suddenly doubled or halved (I'm not sure which), and it goes twice as fast. "An Urban Convalescence" is in the form of an introduction and allegro. In between comes a trill (on the word "cold"), an organ point (following "self-knowledge"), then the rhymes, the quatrains begin, in 4 / 4 time, as it were. Need I say how subjective this all is? (Prose 54-55)

Two different kinds of memory are at work here. Episodic memory, a subset of declarative memory, enables the poet to tell *what happened*, to recount a narrative encoded and reproduced through discourse: "I had to write . . . the passage at the end . . . I thought I would do it in free verse and made all kinds of beginnings . . . it came to me to

make the meter trochaic." But the event this passage describes, the recollection of certain musical structures that propel the poem to its final form, involves Merrill's use of procedural memory. Unlike declarative memories which pertain to facts and events, procedural memories store the knowledge needed to perform tasks. Haptic functions such as riding a bike, walking, and throwing a ball depend on procedural knowledge, as does playing the "Waldstein" Sonata or, say, making the hairpin turn on a staircase. As these examples might suggest, the contents of procedural memory can be difficult to formulate in language. (Try to tell someone *how* to balance, for example.) Furthermore, procedural memories are not subject to forgetting or loss in the way that declarative memories are. Oliver Sacks has written at length about patients who, having lost all access to declarative memories due to neurological injury and utterly unable to recall events of even the previous hour or minute, can still complete certain habitual tasks: dressing themselves, tying their shoes, making a pot of coffee, or—more impressively and more relevant here—playing piano sonatas.[49] "Certainly I cared about music," Merrill admits in a 1968 interview, "long before I cared about literature" (Prose 54).

When he draws on his memory of musical structures to navigate a compositional "impasse," Merrill is drawing on a form of procedural memory analogous to the one that leads him under the low door of his Greek laundry-room-cum-study after he has moved away from the house.[50] His multiple false starts, "all kinds of beginnings," suggest that what the poem lacks is not intensity of effort or concentration but a rest or reprieve, even a shift of agency away from the person of the poet, a shift we hear in the choice of

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[49] Sacks 8-22.

[50] When JM recalls these cramped quarters again in *Sandover*, he hints humorously at the physical demands they make on one who would cross this threshold : "Through gloom / Midway upstairs, on reaching / The portal of this slowly / Brimming, costive diverticulum / One risks his neck to leave, / We risk out wits to enter" (431).

pronouns: "I had no idea . . . I thought I would do it . . . it came to me." Eventually, Merrill moves through the poem's "impasse" as though he were moving through an architectural passage—a vestibule, threshold, or doorway—whose contours are apprehended incidentally in passing, as one crosses under, over, or through them. That the "hairpin turn" or "low door ducked through," never studied deliberately, manage to imprint themselves indelibly in the mind exemplifies what a growing body of empirical studies has come to suggest, namely, that the acquisition of certain forms of procedural knowledge can be accelerated under conditions of distraction. Moreover, that Merrill finishes his poem with the "Waldstein" Sonata playing in his head supports the corollary, that the application of procedural knowledge can be aided by distraction as well.[51]

If we turn to the particular stanzas Merrill cites from "The Thousand and Second Night," a poem Stephen Yenser has called "a tour de force of interruption," we find a veritable object lesson in the twining of distraction and memory (120). In the second sextain of the poem's third section, the section Merrill had such trouble finishing, we are suddenly floating on a "gulf," lulled by the water's rhythm into a state of serenity from which we almost lose sight of the supreme impasse intimated in the poem's title. Approaching what sounds like a moment of climax, a point of absolute mental vacancy, Merrill orchestrates his prosodic shift ("where the tempo . . . goes twice as fast"), then pauses to register a slight distraction, a "thin, black dawn" on the horizon. Creeping up like "a risen brow," this dawn triggers the memory that stitches together the poem's five sections, sections that Merrill will later say "seemed rather unrelated poems" (Prose 54). It is a memory inscribed in certain habitual movements of the body, consolidated by the

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[51] See, for example, Lewicki.

kind of steady attention one pays to a hypnotist's watch, that is to say, to a steady sequence of distractions. Here are the stanzas from section three:

> The lips part. The plume trembles. You're afloat
> Upon the breathing, all-reflecting deep.
> The past recedes and twinkles, falls asleep.
> Fear is unworthy, say the stars by rote;
> What destinations have been yours till now
> Unworthy, says the leaping prow.
>
> O skimmer of deep blue
> Volumes fraught with rhyme and reason,
> Once the phosphorescent meshes loosen
> And the objects of your quest slip through,
> Almost you can overlook a risen
> Brow, a thin, black dawn on the horizon. (183)

Merrill intones his "you" in a hazy universal invitation, a call to relaxation and a loosening of the mind's "meshes." The frenetic traveler's schedule with which the poem began has been put aside. Time retreats. The past "recedes" and "falls asleep." "Stars" and "leaping prow" speak as if from a nursery rhyme. These twinkling arbiters of fate assure us "by rote" that "fear is unworthy," the prow that our previous "destinations" are "unworthy." If we have any destination at all "now," it must be that of eternal sleep, the "black dawn" just over the horizon. A "plume trembles" as if to measure our last breaths. Quickening the tempo, Merrill's trochees drive the poem through the latter stanza, until his two anapestic substitutions slow the fourth line down, causing us to linger over "objects" and "quest," all-encompassing terms for the goal-oriented activity of the mind soon to be abandoned. Nearing a complete loss of orientation, intention, and purpose, we are on the brink of oceanic consciousness.

"Almost" brings us back from the brink. The image "almost" overlooked, "a risen / Brow, a thin, black dawn on the horizon," serves as a timely distraction. We do

not quite overlook death's impending arrival, and the next stanzas return to land and to the liveliest of human culture, Carnival's "sumptuous farewells / To flesh." But just how did we get here? In Merrill's baroque figural economy, this black dawn is both the imminent death against which Scheherazade wagers her fictions and, as we will see, a landmark, an assurance that the "gulf" is not in fact a gulf, but a passage. Just before we sink, as "the objects of your quest" nearly slip through a net of light on the ocean's surface, the lure into the blank of an absolute present, an immediate "now," is figured as a catch almost lost. Yet, as Merrill, "trying for a blank mind," catches himself revisiting a childhood bedroom, so the mind comes up with something here, a kind of archetypal childhood room that Merrill has carefully prepared us for in the poem's first section. There, as his speaker narrowly escapes the "tomb" of a Turkish bath, showing some "sign of life," he pauses above another body of water, "midway across the bridge" between ancient and modern Istanbul to recall "an infantile / Memory":

> On the crest of her wrist, by the black watered silk of the watchband, his grandmother had a wen, a hard mauve bubble up from which bristled three or four white hairs. How often he had lain in her lap and been lulled to a rhythm easily the whole world's then—the yellowish sparkle of a ring marking its outer limit, while in the foreground, silhouetted like the mosque of Suleiman the Magnificent, mass and minarets felt by someone fallen asleep on the deck of his moored caïque, that principal landmark's rise and fall distinguished, from any other, her beloved hand. (178)

Liquid imagery—the grandmother's "watered silk," her "hard mauve bubble," the "crest of her wrist"—anticipates both the rocking of the sleeper's caïque and, later, our rocking "afloat / Upon the breathing, all-reflecting deep." So, too, the "yellowish sparkle" of her ring, marking the world's "limit," prefigures the twinkle of the stars and their counsel not to fear. Lulled by a rhythm "easily the whole world's," the child keeps his bearings by watching the wen on his grandmother's wrist. As its "three or four white hairs" bob up

and down, he fixates on this “landmark,” all the while absorbing the rhythm of his body’s own movement. The grandmother’s wen distinguishes her hand from any other, reassuring the child that this is a world he knows already, but something challenges the subjective enclosure of the scene. Merrill’s lavish simile yokes the exceedingly private, familial perception of the hairs on the grandmother’s wen to the minarets of the most public of Suleiman’s buildings, a mosque that would orient the entire known world.[52] Eventually it will be overlaid with an image of the dawn, the oldest and most familiar marker, but a dawn that is “black,” a harbinger of the unknown. When, in the poem’s third section, the “risen / Brow” of a “thin black dawn” appears just above the horizon, it is an image of death, certainly, but it is also a repetition of the image of Suleiman’s mosque, “felt’ by the sleeping sailor. And, surely, it is a repetition of the image of the grandmother’s wen, a point of orientation, a bauble even, on which the infant mind can seize while his body navigates the rocking world of sleep, a world charted already in the amniotic waters of his first room, yet to be felt again in his passage over Lethe. Merrill’s intermediary figure, nearly asleep on the gulf, bridges the two worlds—child’s drowsy security and traveler’s restlessness— much as Istanbul bridges “The passive Orient and our frantic West.” The “catch” that nearly slips through the mind’s meshes, the “black dawn,” joins the image of death and the mark of the aged body to a kind of primeval enclosure, the grandmother’s body felt as the rocking lap of the world. To remember this world, this room, is to undergo a moment of recognition that gives “you” (a “you” now

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[52] This idiosyncratic double exposure both confirms and cancels the singularity of the grandmother’s hand. In this sense it recalls Benjamin’s interest in the form of a work of art received by a collective in a state of distraction. Architecture is the “prototype” of this form. The sleeper on his caïque notices the building in incidental fashion; he is even said to “feel” it. To be reminded by its four minarets of the four stray hairs on one’s grandmother’s wen, however, is to interpolate the very public image of the mosque into the private inventory of the subject. Compare Benjamin’s mapping of the city in “A Berlin Chronicle,” *Reflections* 3-60.

rendered anonymous) back to yourself, just in time to navigate another impasse, the inevitable dance with death, Carnival's man in a skeleton suit.

Read in the context of the entire poem, the catch is a form of recognition that makes a certain kind of experience, Benjamin's *Erfahrung* or "long experience," available at all. The poem's first section, "RIGOR VITAE," begins with the "absurd complaint" that "the whole right half / of my face refuses to move" (176). As Yenser notes, this "'complaint' has its existential side" (126). Worse than the physical paralysis of the face, a curable case of Bell's palsy, is the bout of ennui afflicting the poem's travelling speaker. Novelty fails to excite; travel disappoints; and in his callous middle-age he sees "the vain // Flippant unfeeling monster I now am" (180). Back home, physical malady cured, he is greeted by three good friends in as many months; "You were nice, James," they say, "before your trip" (180). Out of Merrill's array of figures for the traveler's rift between body and soul, I want to notice just one here, a quotation from Germaine Nahman in the poem's third section that contrasts this world-weary body, bereft of felt experience, to the infant's body, a body imagined as one with the soul. Nahman describes how the infant's "transports went beyond what passes, now, for sensation," then compares the libertine's nightly labors in "search of his soul" to the "gross experience"—"drugs, drills, bombardments"—inflicted on "Earth's mature body" for "a stale *frisson.*" The resulting "natural calamities (tumor and apoplexy no less than flood and volcano) may at last be hailed as positive reassurances, perverse if you like, of life in the old girl yet" (182). Perhaps Bell's palsy is a sign of life after all, a measure of experience in the felt absence of novelty, of movement in the very face of paralysis. If so, we might finally read the "risen brow" as a literal description, perverse if you like, of

the slightest facial movement, the cocking of a single eyebrow in recognition of some distraction on the horizon, something outside the self that leaves the mind to search its most deeply ingrained, *in-fant*, wordless, memories, memories just as impossible to articulate as they are to forget. In this movement is the twinge of recognition by which "you" catch yourself, cradled in the rhythm of some earliest movements of the body, endlessly rocking.

I. "The House"

> As for that mysterious House whose walls the natural world decorates, it varies with the temper of its occupant. . . . We had forgotten, for a while, that landscapes were already interiors.
>
> —James Merrill, "Barbara Kassel"

Set at the end of *First Poems*, "The House" gives some indication of Merrill's early investment in architectural figures as models for the recursive structure of experience. Having received very little critical attention, it may be the least memorable house in Merrill's oeuvre. Whereas other houses— "18 West 11th Street," the house destroyed by the Weathermen's bomb; Merrill's house on Water Street in Stonington; his childhood house depicted in "The Broken Home"; and his house in Athens—conjure memories of notable events, "The House," nearly void of human traces, explores the architectural structure as a threshold or crossing, a passage that regulates memory and forgetting, and so makes traces possible.

The House

Whose west walls take the sunset like a blow
Will have turned the other cheek by morning, though
The long night falls between, as wise men know:

Wherein the wind, that daily we forgot,
Comes mixed with rain and, while we seek it not,
Appears against our faces to have sought

The contours of a listener in night air,
His profile bent as from pale windows where
Soberly once he learned what houses were.

Those darkening reaches, crimsoned with a dust
No longer earth's, but of the vanishing West,
Can stir a planet nearly dispossessed,

And quicken interest in the avid vein
That dyes a man's heart ruddier far than stain
Of day does finial, cornice and windowpane:

So that whoever strolls on his launched lawn
At dusk, the hour of recompense, alone,
May stumbling on a sunken boundary stone

The loss of deed and structure apprehend.
And we who homeless toward such houses wend
May find we have dwelt elsewhere. Scholar and friend,

After the twelve bright houses that each day
Presume to flatter what we most display,
Night is a cold house, a narrow doorway.

This door to no key opens, those to brass.
Behind it, warning of a deep excess,
The winds are. I have entered, nevertheless,

And seen the wet-faced sleepers the winds take
To heart; have felt their dreadful profits break
Beyond my seeing: at a glance they wake. (50)

"The House" typifies Merrill's early hermetic style. Indeed Hermes—god of thresholds and crossings—is all but named in the "sunken boundary stone" of the sixth

stanza. As if under his watch, the poem seizes on measurements and lines of demarcation: walls of the house, edges of the lawn, contours of the face, the human profile, and the time of day signaled in “darkening reaches” of the west. Working on two vastly different scales with a kind of mythological double focus, Merrill’s diction pits cosmic events, the turning of the planet and the setting of the sun, against comparatively miniscule human interests, the dyeing of man’s heart and the wending of the homeless. The poem seems to be driven by the threat of disorientation, “the loss of deed and structure,” as human and natural worlds merge uneasily. The house is a guarantee of structure, order, comprehensibility. While the sun hits the house, the human world remains protected from the elements. But when the wind strikes the face, they converge. “Darkening reaches” of dusk are felt as a ritual of dispossession, but through a kind of self-conscious, almost reluctant, pathetic fallacy. Sunset can “quicken” human “interest” and “[dye] a man’s heart . . . far” *more* than it stirs the Earth. And while the solitary figure in the sixth stanza “strolls” sure-footed across his lawn, the lawn itself is “launched,” circling the sun at 30,000 kilometers per second. Holding these perspectives in tension, “The House” seems to ponder the threat of transcendental homelessness, a “sober” thought that registers with ontological gravity in the statement “once he learned what houses were.”

One way to meet the threats of homelessness, disorientation, and “the loss of deed and structure,” is to take the broadest possible view of human events. Anticipating Merrill’s later commitment to extravagant cosmological systems, “The House” hints at an astrological practice that would chart events according to the sun’s passage through sections of the ecliptic. In keeping with the poem’s mythological focus, these “twelve

bright houses" of the sun, purported to determine personality, to "flatter what we most display," would offer a fantastically comprehensive system of measurement from one's moment of birth, a system that the stars know "by rote." To follow a horoscope or an astrological chart is to insist that "the world is wide, and yet it is like a home." (Lukács 29). Yet, from its first stanza, Merrill's poem is less concerned with the day's intelligible experience than it is with imagining the "night" during which the sun is in no house. It is this long night, after all, that "wise men know": "After the twelve bright houses that each day / Presume to flatter what we most display, / Night is a cold house, a narrow doorway." Passing through this doorway "nevertheless," Merrill's spectral speaker enters a space not governed according to the sun's flattering measurements. Night's house, full of winds, turns interior into exterior, and the passage through its "narrow doorway" threatens to erase the external markers of the self, "what we most display." Yet it is precisely here that the poem's "I" emerges, as if to suggest that the subject is constituted by gaps in experience, passages through the dark, events lived out in dreams.

Just what the speaker finds on the other side of this door is by no means clear. Merrill may have in mind a number of mythological references. The absence of sunlight suggests the house of sleep from Book 11 of *The Metamorphosis*, a house shrouded in perpetual darkness, where "No phoebus entered . . . with morning light, / No noons nor reddening twilights touched the floors" (316). The "wet-faced sleepers" bear some resemblance to the seven sleepers of legend who, after spending years asleep in a cave, wake to think they have slept for a day. This discrepancy between the actual and the perceived time lapsed during their sleep might help us make sense of the "deep excess" in the room of winds or of "their dreadful profits." However, in a letter to David Kalstone,

Merrill offers another explanation of these sleepers: they are "something like the sleeping furies at the beginning of 'The Eumenides'—only as embodiments of the suffering they bring. An early example of elements braved?" (Kalstone 89). In the opening of Aeschylus's play, Apollo charges Hermes to accompany Orestes in flight from the furies who would kill him in return for killing his own mother, Clytemnestra. Merrill's poem (and his volume) ends with a moment of reciprocation, a glance returned by the waking sleepers. Read in the context of Aeschylus's play, this look means death, and the placement of the poem at the end of the volume reinforces this reading with a resounding silence.[53] Curiously, Merrill singled out the poem from among the many densely wrought pieces of his first collection, remarking in an interview that he felt "humanly" involved in it, that "'real' experience had grazed [it], somehow" (Prose 65). Given Timothy Materer's recent efforts to trace coded references to Merrill's own mother throughout *First Poems*, it is tempting to wonder whether very particular domestic troubles lurk behind this poem's concern with homelessness and the "loss of deed and structure."[54] Without any sure biographical key, however, one can still note the impact of these furies. Embodiments of vengeance, they lie ready to renege on the act of forgiveness, the turning of the other cheek described in the poem's opening lines, turning instead their "dreadful profits" with a sudden comeuppance, an imminent reciprocation. Whereas Aeschylus's play begins with Clytemnestra's urgent and repeated calls to the

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[53] In *Five Temperaments* Kalstone offers this suggestive description of Merrill's use of domestic arrangements: "Over the years Merrill's poems have used the objects and stages of daily life, the arrangements of civilized behavior, almost as if he expected to waken sleeping presences and take by surprise the myths he lives by" (83). Whether Kalstone might have in mind the close of "The House" here is probably impossible to say, but the description seems to grant an afterlife to its "wet-faced sleepers."
[54] See Materer 150-73.

slumbering furies, "Awake and hear—for mine own soul I cry— / Awake ye powers of hell," the furies in Merrill's poem seem to be only napping; "at a glance they wake."

Merrill's first three stanzas argue that "wise men know" something that "daily we forgot," that "the long night" between dusk and dawn is full of wind and rain. Exposure to the elements is a matter of "daily," habitual forgetting. Living in houses affords one a partial, screened, and ordered experience. The mild violence of the poem's warm opening sunset, a "blow" met with impunity, sets up an economy in which deeds are unrequited, suffering forgotten. Night somehow cancels the day's debts. Waking up, one forgets the loss suffered, at least until the slant of light at dusk "dyes a man's heart" again. But the night elements' aggression, "while we seek it not," wants to be felt "against our faces" in the sting of wind and rain. No sooner does Merrill set his solitary "listener" outside against the driving rain than he shuffles him back in the house. He appears in profile, "bent *as from pale windows* where / Soberly once he learned what houses were." Leaning into the night air from the safety and sobriety of his room, now partially exposed to the elements, he surveys the house as if from outside. Learning "what houses were" apparently requires that one straddle their edges, lean out of windows, stumble over boundary stones. These liminal positions demonstrate how domestic economies work, how they register, regulate, and shelter what comes in and goes out. In this sense Merrill's house stands, at least in part, as a figure for figuration itself, for the symbolic economies on which our safe, partial accounts of experience depend. A running concern with profit and loss, audible in the proliferation of economic language ("dispossessed," "interest," "recompense," "deed," "profits") keeps us always

within earshot of "economy's" etymological root in the Greek *oikonomiā*, the management of the household.

Night keeps its own accounts. After the eerie description of night as "a cold house, a narrow doorway," the poem hesitates at the door, a door which "to no key opens," suggesting a fundamental incompatibility between day's sheltering charity—our familiar symbolic economies—and the "deep excess" and "dreadful profits" of the poem's sleepers whose work is done at night. The "wet-faced sleepers" work in a windy world of dreams. They are the mind's clearing house, consolidating knowledge gleaned from experience not categorized according to our familiar measurements. Had Merrill written the poem decades later, after his jaunt through the latest scientific literature, these furies might have been made to embody the furious neuronal firing in the brain during REM sleep.[55] His seventh stanza describes the uncanny ("unheimlich" or "un-home-ly") orientation that nonconscious forms of knowledge acquisition can produce: "we who homeless toward such houses wend / May find we have dwelt elsewhere." Structures in which we dwell, passages through which experience imprints itself upon us, may not be readily available to the conscious mind. Conversely, the house of which we are aware may not be the one in which we live.

In his epic trilogy, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Merrill plays with the Jungian equation of God and the Unconscious, figuring the unconscious as a "home" of which we're not aware: "Jung says—or if he doesn't, all but does— / That God and the Unconscious are one. Hm. / The lapse that tides us over, hither, yon; / Tide that laps us home away from home" (74). In the chiasmus, figure of crossing and crossing over,

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[55] For one account of REM sleep's role in the consolidation of memory and procedural knowledge, see Kavi.

"God" and "the Unconscious" perform the work of Hermes the psychopomp, providing safe passage over a "lapse," even a river of forgetting. The passage from *Ephraim* continues with more than a stumbling over a boundary stone:

> Onstage, the sudden trap about to yawn—
> Darkness impenetrable, pit wherein
> Two grapplers lock, pale skin and copper skin.
> Impenetrable brilliance, topmost panes
> Catching the sunset, of a house gone black . . .
> (original ellipses 74)

"Lapse" of the unconscious, fall through the floor, exit from the "stage" of Merrill's "Divine Comedies": these blackouts mark the temporary end of the Ouija sessions as JM and DJ leave their house in Athens. Falling into the darkness below the stage's trap door, JM begins a wrestling match with his angel, Ephraim, a match that sets the familiar spirit's heavenly words, transcribed in the Athens house, against the poet's own. Just as the sunset catches the "topmost panes" of a house, echoing the image with which "The House" began, the scene fades to black with ellipses. Balancing the "impenetrable" darkness of the trap door's depth with the "impenetrable" light catching the house's highest windows, Merrill imagines these two impenetrabilities as a pair of "grapplers," two sides of the poet himself: body's blind debt to the earth, mind's heavenly visitations.

II. "A Tenancy"

> One way would be to begin, before ever leaving home, with some anticipatory jottings such as these. . . . This is Peru—a déjà vu to be revised henceforth like galleys from the printer, in solitary pleasure and exasperation.
>
> —James Merrill, "Peru: The Landscape Game"

At the end of *Water Street*, the volume often cited as a harbinger of Merrill's mature work, "A Tenancy" records a pact at the center of the poet's career, his grand "bargain" with the "source of light." If *Water Street* marks a shift in Merrill's writing, a deliberate effort to include the "life lived" and "love spent" that seem at times absent from the dense and distant poems of his first two volumes, then its last poem might be read as the book's envoy.[56] It begins with the speaker, a seasoned poet himself, remembering the afternoon in which his younger, more exuberant self suffers a vocational crisis: "Something in the light of this March afternoon / Recalls that first and dazzling one / Of 1946" (168). The easy temporal shift of these opening lines shows how delicately recollection can be triggered. Recognizing "something" in the quality of light, yet unable to articulate just what it is, the poet catches himself revisiting this earlier afternoon in another room. For the next four verse paragraphs the poem will inhabit these two rooms simultaneously, superimposing on the speaker's present room (blacked out for now) a rented apartment full of handed-down things. During the "dazzling" afternoon of 1946, the younger poet settles into this room, eager to exercise his powers of

[56] *First Poems* has been called many things: "static" and "decorative" (Sastri); "emeralds," "sapphires," and "pearls" (Howard). Richard Howard describes Merrill's later poems as getting "into the stream of occurrence," dismissing "jewels and emblems in favor of happenings" (Alone 330).

poetic reception. But he finds himself at a loss, lacking the experience that would transform his surroundings into the replete and speaking world he had been given to expect: "I sat elated / In my old clothes, head cocked for the kind of sound / That is recognized only when heard" (168). The moment of recognition with which the poem begins, a moment in which "something in the light" transports the poet to a familiar world rich with detail, is just the kind of moment that the younger poet expects here. Poised in a heightened state of attention, he perceives, instead of the expected sound, a landscape of silence and blank, blinding brightness: "a fresh snowfall muffled the road, unplowed / To leave blanker and brighter / The bright, blank page turned overnight" (168). While these chiastic lines reflect the turning page in the piling of snow on snow, the comparison of snow to page, and the blankness of both, hints that this poem will have something to say about the frustrated task of composition. All this dazzling light is refracted through the prism of memory, and "A Tenancy" will ultimately hold an important place in Merrill's work because it takes this moment of frustration, a moment in which nothing happens, and makes it the experience on which the rest of his work will depend.

As the second verse paragraph sketches in more of the scene, something similar happens:

> A yellow pencil in midair
> Kept sketching unfamiliar numerals,
> The 9 and 6 forming a stereoscope
> Through which to seize the Real
> Old-Fashioned Winter of my landlord's phrase,
> Through which the ponderous *idées reçues*
> Of oak, velour, crochet, also the mantel's
> Baby figures, value told me
> In some detail at the outset, might be plumbed
> For signs I should not know until I saw them. (168)

These "unfamiliar numerals" swirling in the air suggest a symbolic economy askew. Though their "value" has been given explicitly already, the objects in this room offer no legible sign to the poet. Despite his plumbing gaze, they fail to register. Merrill's line break emphasizes the naïveté of the younger poet who would "seize the Real" through *idées reçues* and the hackneyed language of his landlord.[57] It would seem that the physical objects themselves, despite their weighty and lush materials, "oak, velour, crochet," yield none of the rich associations this poet would extract from them, none of the aura that their position on the mantel leads him to expect. Things that would be taken for signs remain mere objects—inert, stubborn, mute. Not until the third verse paragraph does the scene begin to reflect back to the poet something of his state of mind:

> But the objects, innocent
> (As we all once were) of annual depreciation,
> The more I looked grew shallower,
> Pined under a luminous plaid robe
> Thrown over us by the twin mullions, sashes,
> And unequal oblong panes
> Of windows and storm windows. These,
> Washed in a rage, then left to dry unpolished,
> Projected onto the inmost wall
> Ghosts of the storm, like pebbles under water. (168)

As the young poet gazes at the mantel, the poem's focus shifts from the discrete objects on display there to the light streaming through the window. Objects grow "shallower," but the room gains depth. "Twin mullions" that were beneath notice, behind the speaker's back as it were, now score the room with shadows. Spots and streaks left on the windows become ghostly projections. This shift in focus, from the things contained

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[57] If we hear an allusion to Flaubert's *Le Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues* then the young man's belated position relative to language and culture becomes even more pronounced.

in a room to the contours of the room itself, corresponds to a shift from the solely optical contemplation, the plumbing gaze of the poem's first two verse paragraphs, to a broader, more subtle register of the body's position in space, working below the poet's threshold of awareness. It is not so much that the young poet suddenly has eyes in the back of his head as that he reaches the limits of his conscious perception. He begins, like Merrill's eponymous flaking speaker in the poem "Mirror," to "suspect looks from behind, where nothing is, cool gazes / Through the blind flaws of my mind" (83). The shift corresponds as well to the emergence of a distanced temporal perspective in the poem (audible especially in the older poet's crack about "annual depreciation"), the "stereoscope" through which the poem's two rooms, and two afternoons, bring into focus an experience that was at first remarkable only for not happening. From the perspective of the younger poet, the first two verse paragraphs describe a subject's frustrated encounter with discrete objects, objects that do not return his gaze, but with the sudden prominence of the room's walls and windows, structures now holding him in place, the poet becomes both subject and object, mingling with the "baby figures" on the mantel, of which he has become one. This change registers in the poem's shifting pronouns as the "plaid robe" of shadows is "thrown over *us*." Only now do the walls of the room begin to reflect images with emotional resonance. Whereas the poet had declared himself "elated" in the opening verse paragraph, the room now reflects more accurately his somber, even wounded state. This method of looking to the setting is one that Merrill explicitly endorses in an interview: "You hardly ever need to *state* your feelings. The point is to feel and keep the eyes open. Then what you feel is expressed, is mimed back at you by the scene. A room,

a landscape. I'd go a step further. We don't *know* what we feel until we see it distanced by this kind of translation" (Prose 82).

The state of mind reflected in this room—a state the younger poet seems indeed not to know he is in— issues from these "ghosts of the storm," spots and streaks left on the windowpanes that will be echoed by the "dried stains / Of light on my own cheeks" in the next verse paragraph (169). That these marks appear on "the inmost wall" indicates how intimately the surrounding space of the room has come to reflect the psychic life of the poem's speaker. An emotional weight now creeps into the diction; the mantel's objects "pine" under the light, and the window's "panes" echo "pains." In the "unequal oblong panes / Of windows and storm windows," Merrill offers an image of the imperfect fit between their receptive and protective surfaces (168). If this room has come to reflect a "state of mind," then the image suggests as well the imperfect fit between the receptive and protective faculties of the mind itself, the gap that leads to shock or trauma. Events not fully accounted for, "left to dry unpolished," (in Freudian terms, not deflected by the "shield" of "consciousness") now cast their shadows over everything. The storm window's streaks, "projected onto the inmost wall," turn the room into a theater of past experience. Those blank images with which the poem began—the bright snow, the "page turned overnight"—give way, in time, to a magic lantern show.

Now that the poem's focus has shifted from figure to ground and from object to room, the wallpaper itself marks an accrual of "a quarter century" that this poet is ready to part with:

> And indeed, from within, ripples
> Of heat had begun visibly bearing up and away
> The bouquets and wreaths of a quarter century.
> Let them go, what did I want with them?

> It was time to change that wallpaper!
> Brittle, sallow in the new radiance,
> Time to set the last wreath floating out
> Above the dead, to sweep up flowers. (168-69)

Like those dated objects on the mantel that refuse to speak to the poet, this floral-patterned paper reflects the laurels of a literary inheritance taken for granted, another mantle handed down. But the changing light, the "new radiance" cast about the room, makes its "bouquets" and "wreaths" look "brittle, sallow" and lifeless, and the wreaths are left to float away with the dead they honored. Wallpaper serves a subtle structural function in the poem as well, troubling the distinction between figure and ground. Perpetually overlooked, it is most deeply familiar—and most affecting, to judge by Merrill's exclamation point—for being so. If the "ripples of heat" causing it to bubble up seem to come "from within" the poet as well, then perhaps it is because his own emotional patterns are coming to the fore. What does he see in these patterns? Lack of experience, lost opportunities for love. Stripping wallpaper leaves both room and poet bare, bereft of old patterns from which to work, open to new ones.

As this younger poet arrives at an experiential crisis, unable to make out signs in the valuables entrusted to him, unable to put to use the stale flowers on the walls, he responds not with greater concentration, but with willed suspension, an orchestrated delay. This delay takes the speculative form of a loan or lease, an agreement whereby the poet is invested with sufficient experience (from "the source of light") in exchange for his work. "Given a few years more / (Seven or ten or, what seemed vast, fifteen) / To spend in love, in a country not at war, / I would give in return / All I had" (169). In this bargain Merrill acknowledges the speculative nature of experience, the extent to which the recognition that the poet wants from the world, the kind of recognition with which this

poem begins, must be prepared for at considerable expense. Time must be spent. "Tenancy," then, is the governing metaphor for the poet's apprenticeship, his lease on love and life, and his exposure to events that will not make sense until they are recognized in hindsight. After this lease is drawn, the poem pivots on a one-line verse paragraph, a condensation of fifteen years into a single, blacked-out, unconscious present: "I did not even feel the time expire" (169). On the other side of the lease, "today, in this new room," Merrill resumes the present tense narrative with which the poem started, a present now steeped in the past. The second room comes into focus for the first time, and we see its "view / Of housetops, treetops, the walls bare" (169). The form of reception that hinged, for the younger poet, on moments of sudden recognition, "the kind of sound / That is recognized only when heard," or the "signs I should not know until I saw them," comes more easily to the mature poet, for he regards the objects in this room not as the solid or stable repositories that can be transferred immediately, the heavy or "ponderous" oak and velour whose "values" are "told at the outset," but as occasions for reckoning values that accrue over time, forms with which to measure both past and future. This speculative stance is reflected in his description of the furniture: "A changing light is deepening, is changing / To a gilt ballroom chair a chair / Bound to break under someone before long" (169). Unlike the oak in the rented room, this old furniture draws together past and future, recalling experience lived through and looking ahead to its own demise. And with the reappearance of the ballroom chair, the poem revisits the dance whose end left stains on the younger poet's cheeks. What happens to the furniture happens to the poet's body as well. The body is a changing figure, a temporary placeholder, its experience a kind of tenancy: "The body that lived through that day / And the sufficient

love and relative peace / Of those short years, is now not mine" (169). Body becomes house, the temporary residence of that "leaner veteran," of love and war, the soul that "will rise to face / Partners not recognized / Until drunk young again and gowned in changing / Flushes" (169). As the poem looks back, so it looks forward. The imagined meeting of old partners—surely it was the loss of a partner recorded in the marks of the storm before—repeats the delay of recognition outlined in the poem's opening, only here the poet anticipates a moment of recognition yet to come. When it does, a "flush" of light will "gown" them again, recalling that first room in which the younger poet was "robed."

Just as the poem wanders into this imagined rendezvous, the doorbell rings, and three friends enter the house:

> One has brought violets in a pot;
> The second, wine; the best,
> His open, empty hand. Now in the room
> The sun is shining like a lamp.
> I put the flowers where I need them most
>
> And then, not asking why they come,
> Invite the visitors to sit. (170)

After this invitation, Merrill concludes with a brief *ars poetica*. What seem like private experiences will populate his poetry from this volume forward: "If I am host at last / It is of little more than my own past. / May others be at home in it" (170). *Water Street's* first poem concluded with "the dull need to make some kind of house / Out of the life lived, out of the love spent" (129). When, at the end of the book, Merrill figures his own past as an open house, poet becomes both host and medium, inhabiting his text as though it were a room through which others are invited to pass. Like the lights on the lake in "Yánnina," he seems to say "See through me. See me through" (383). In this sense the

poem does envision a qualified version of immortality. Merrill is "host" and ghost here, celebrating a genial afterlife.[58] The "bouquets and wreaths" that were swept up and out of "A Tenancy's" first room return in the form of wine and flowers. While the latter come fresh from earliest spring outside, "this March afternoon," writing them into the poem's penultimate stanza turns them into wallpaper as well. Appropriately, Merrill's poem concludes indoors, with three little rooms, three loosely-rhymed five-line stanzas. The sun shines "like a lamp" in this room at the end because the room is the poem. The "open, empty hand" must be ours.

III. "Object Lessons"

> The happiness of seizing one of these tall barriers to a room by the porcelain knob of its belly; this quick hand-to-hand, during which your progress slows for a moment, your eye opens up and your whole body adapts to its new apartment.
>
> —Francis Ponge, "The Pleasures of the Door"

"Object Lessons," a 1972 review essay on Francis Ponge, offers some of Merrill's most explicit statements about the relation between words and things. Early in the essay, Merrill cites Ponge's complaint that ideas give no pleasure because they win one's approval too easily, producing only "a kind of queasiness, a nausea," then uses Ponge's complaint as an occasion to reconsider one of American Modernist poetry's credos: "No

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[58] Well aware of the effect that posthumous collections have on a poet's afterlife, Merrill's literary executors have seen through the press a quartet of books that don't so much sit on a shelf as seem to hover there, the poet's face partially folded, nevertheless quick to return a sidelong glance. (If dust jackets seem out of bounds for reading, I can only say that Stephen Yenser started it. See his comments on the cover of *Scripts for the Pageant* (314).)

thoughts, then, but in things? True enough, so long as the notorious phrase argues not for the suppression of thought but for its oneness with whatever in the world—pine woods, spider, cigarette—gave rise to it. Turn the phrase around, you arrive no less at truth: no things but in thoughts" (Prose 208). Williams's "notorious phrase," "no ideas but in things," tells only half the truth to which Merrill subscribes, namely, that thought and thing, idea and object, give rise to one another.[59] In perfect keeping with this more nuanced proposition is Merrill's debonair delivery, the delicate touch so different from the clamoring of *Spring and All's* manifesto. It is as if Merrill admires Williams's monumental statement, sees it as "true enough," then moseys around to have a look at its other side. There is both unmistakable confidence and a profound humility in this approach. Turning Williams's credo against itself merely by shuffling two words consigns the entirety of the physical world to the realm of the mind as if for sport. This is the kind of formal whimsy for which the size of Merrill's audience has always suffered. Yet his insistence on having it both ways, on adhering to the priority of both thoughts and things, resonates with a doubling impulse always at the source of Merrill's work, a determination to remain of two minds. "I've tried, Lord knows, // To keep from seeing double," he writes in "To a Butterfly" (161). But doubled and reflected language—in puns, chiasmus, spoonerism, and rhyme—remains a generative force for the poet, even as it grants agency to words themselves, letting them lead him. Later in the essay on Ponge, after an elaborate defense of the pun as a grab at "a secret, fecund place in language herself," Merrill cites approvingly Stevens's statement, "there is no wing like meaning,"

[59] That Merrill substitutes the pedestrian word "thoughts" for Williams's more lofty "ideas" might remind us of what the former calls his congenital "shyness vis-à-vis ideas," or—and certainly the two aren't unrelated— his approval of Eliot's claim regarding Henry James, that he possessed "a mind so fine that no idea could violate it."

then extends the metaphor to its logical conclusion, “Two are needed to get off the ground” (210). Two meanings, particularly if they are contradictory, satisfy Merrill’s preference for what he calls “English in its billiard table sense—words that have been set spinning against their own gravity” (Prose 72). Ruminating further on Ponge’s statements, Merrill posits a physicality of thought, and the rapport between thoughts and things deepens: “For a thought is after all a thing of sorts. Its density, color, weight, etc., vary according to the thinker, to the symbols at his command, or at whose command he thinks. One would hardly care so much for language if this were not the case” (Prose 208). Though he would probably bristle at the accusation, Merrill is summarizing philosophy’s “linguistic turn” when he suggests that it is impossible to say whether one commands one’s symbols or is commanded by them. One “care[s] so much for language” not only because it assumes an astounding variety of shades and tones but because it makes possible the range and complexity of our thinking. Thus the care one takes with words is ultimately self-reflexive. A poet is, after all, “a man choosing the words he lives by” (Prose 82).

This vigilance toward the duplicity of language makes the practice of reading both richer and more provisional. Merrill cites Ponge’s meticulously descriptive prose poem “The Crate,” (“a simple openwork case . . . [put] together in such a way that at the end of its use it can be easily wrecked”) then describes the divided position that it requires of a reader: “To read something else into these lines—some lament for untimely death, or statement about form’s adaptation to content—would be excessive. Not to read it into them would be no less so. The sacrifice of overtones, whether for the sake of a more concrete image or of a more purified idea, is distasteful to Ponge, unhealthy, inhumane.

Thoughts and things need to be the best of friends" (Prose 209). Reading must always be "excessive" if it is to register the "overtones" that keep a text healthy and humane. Not wholly governable by strict symbolic equations, it participates in the "essential gaudiness" that Stevens, much to Merrill's delight, attributed to poetry. Certainly Merrill values in Ponge's work qualities he tries to cultivate in his own, and none more than his command of tone. What becomes clear from these comments on Ponge's text is that part of tone's prominent role in Merrill's work owes to its never being the direct object of attention. To perceive an "overtone" is excessive, but not to perceive it is excessive as well. Both there and not there, tone must be registered while one's attention is drawn to something else. It is a kind of semantic background, the negative space behind the poet's figures. Mediating between "concrete image" and "purified idea," "overtones" assure that thoughts and things remain "the best of friends." They provide the kind of structural support that one expects of good manners, another of Merrill's favorite subjects. A sensibility, like Merrill's, that places great value on what is indirect, mediated, and oblique, that finds "emotions … least artless / when most experienced," learns to rely on hints and intimations, to "read something else into" a line. This kind of reading requires that one bring to bear a considerable cognitive background, indeed a lifetime's familiarity with language *in situ*, in order to attribute subjective qualities—giddiness, nonchalance, terror—to the permutations of a public code. Comprehending the tone of a text requires intimacy, and the "sacrifice" of overtones, understandably, triggers a visceral response in Ponge, according to Merrill. "Distasteful," "unhealthy," and "inhumane"—this is the language of abjection, used to fend off threats to the body and, perhaps more urgently, to

the continence of the subject. The "sacrifice of overtones" elicits such a response because it veers close to what Merrill would consider self-sacrifice.

Merrill's preference for the term "tone" over "voice" testifies to his continual suspicion of the Orphic lyric tradition, the prosopopoeia that de Man recognizes as the principle lyric gesture.[60] For some time readers have sketched in Merrill's career a progression from the symbolist's profound reticence in the early poems to the round resonance and subtle modulation of voice we hear in his last volumes. He occasionally traces this movement himself. But to talk about "voice" in Merrill's work, even before contending with those "Voices from the Other World," (voices which DJ and JM learn to trust according to their *tones*) one needs to acknowledge how completely Merrill accepts, how he *welcomes* our belatedness relative to language, manners, convention, and custom. This acceptance manifests most strikingly in his desire to play dummy, medium, and host.[61] "'Voice,'" Merrill remarks, "is the democratic word for 'tone'" (Prose 51). To insist on "tone" rather than "voice" is to acknowledge, at every turn, a shared agency between the subject and the language he chooses. This concession to the logical priority of language and culture, and to the limits placed on the poet who would express himself with a system of symbols he did not invent, engenders in Merrill a respect, an enthusiasm even, for the enabling power of manners. Merrill's "fondness for given arrangements" leads him to see in the very artificiality of manners a liberating flexibility, a "framework

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[60] See de Man, especially 74-81.

[61] Merrill's comments on Rilke are pertinent here: "Desiring nothing less than the full flood of unconscious or—who can say?—divine inspiration, he saw that it was out of the question to force the issue. What he *could* do while waiting for the lightning to strike was to keep his instrument in order by writing poems that came to him in the usual way: set pieces, minor brainstorms, beautiful feelings, bits of life which caught his eye. . . . The lessons I mean are those that reach us from a source beyond the Self, a level of the psyche we no longer recognize as ours. How to invite that education is anybody's guess. Drugs have worked for some, meditation for others; in my own case it was something as apparently flimsy as the Ouija board" (Prose 17).

all the nicer for being more fallible, more hospitable to irony, self-expression, self-contradiction, than many a philosophical or sociological system. Manners for me are the touch of nature, an artifice in the very bloodstream" (Prose 58-59). Merrill is holding his own here against a poetics that would ground itself in the processes of the natural world, insisting instead on the priority of forms, cultivation, and habit as birthright, as a defining human inheritance. The subject is constituted in language, custom, manners, and lives within this framework.

"Opaque Morning," a sonnet written on the occasion of William Carlos Williams's death in 1963, offers an image of the reciprocal exchange between words and things, between the mind's rage to order and the natural world's constant flux. Beginning with the steady description in the manner of a Williams still life, Merrill's octave describes a balustrade semi-visible through fog:

> Cold mottles gray and lichen mustard
> The porous balustrade's
> Outermost shapeliness plotted
> Against these windless white
>
> Plungings. Upon it also,
> Two drained wineglasses standing guard
> Next to a fog-spangled book
> Left out, face down, all night. (757)

The rich opening sound patterns, clusters of consonance and assonance, tempt one to forego any slower working out of syntax or logic. This porous stone, hosting a mustard-yellow growth of lichen, combines the earthy exuberance of Williams's *Spring and All* with the abstractly ornamental proportions, the "outermost shapeliness," Merrill's formal verse has always displayed. Playing on both sides, "plotted" names the carefully measured arrangement of balusters even as it hints at their continued service to the earth.

The stone balustrade, made heavier by the two drained wine glasses left standing on it, provides the ground in which fungus and algae grow together in the form of lichen, all the while displaying these delicately figured night watchmen, refined descendents, perhaps, of Stevens's jar. Here is Merrill's sestet:

> Night. As if her black luxuriance
> Hairpinned with roving points of light
> Might never again be shaken loose,
>
> We strain to see beyond the stone
> That has soaked upward into words
> That have soaked downward into it. (757)

The sonnet's turn in the repetition of "night" dramatizes the exchange between word and stone, book and balustrade. Having been led to the word "night" in the description of the book "left out, face down, all night," Merrill's speaker repeats it as though its figural possibilities are only now dawning on him. "Opaque Morning" turns again to "night," and the referential hierarchy that so fascinated Williams—no ideas but in things—turns over. Words can be things too. No poet knows this better than Merrill. We look into them and they look back, leading us on.

Williams might have liked the activity in this still life, its opposing lines of force. Merrill's successive prepositions ("against," "upon," "next to," "out," "down," "beyond") along with the "plungings" of the balusters into a "windless" fog, the "wineglasses standing guard," and the night "hairpinned" with stars, register the weight and pull of the physical world's arrangement. Each detail strikes another balance, the baluster's "shapeliness" displayed against the shapeless fog, the delicate wineglasses set on heavy stone, the night sky brought indoors and set with pins. So, too, the natural world's slow and cyclical work—disintegration of stone, growth of fungus, lifting of fog—marks by

contrast the human world's contingencies—"two drained wineglasses," a book left out overnight. The poem gestures ultimately to writing in stone. But it gestures to writing in water as well. Given the slow erosion of this stone balustrade's hourglass waistline, Merrill's thoughts penned in memory of Williams seem likely to last about as long as any other epitaph. "Thoughts and things," word and stone, "need to be the best of friends."

IV. Blind Spots: "A shutter opens"

> Time—do they suspect?—
> Is changing signature and only stable
> These random moments ridden, then reined in.
>
> —James Merrill, "Trees Listening to Bach"

In his memoir, *A Different Person*, Merrill reflects on the nexus of experience, memory, and subjectivity contained in the structure of the photograph:

> To anyone with an identity problem the camera is a godsend, each shot proving (if nothing else) that the photographer has composed *himself* for the split second needed to press the shutter. It is also a way to make quick raids on life while keeping it at arm's length; you look at things no longer quietly, for their own sake, but greedily, for the images they yield. Studied later, if the rainy day ever comes, their historical present inspires an emotion not always felt at the time. I bought my camera on the spot and before driving to France photographed my father. (Prose 491)

Photography compensates the lyric poet for the loss of what were once his most secure and prized possessions: subjectivity and emotion. The self and its feelings rely on the apparatus of the camera for a singular origin of focus and for its ability to arrest an ephemeral world, rendering visible in hindsight what the present registers only as a blank.

The press of the camera's shutter creates, at the split second of exposure, a blind spot for the photographer, a negative space in which an event too immediate to comprehend is left to crystallize, assuming a form that can be "studied later," and indeed "felt" for the first time. This delay aids in the very construction of the subject, (something Merrill's memoir muses over often, beginning with its title) as it forces the subject "with an identity problem" to "compose *himself*." While the camera's distancing mechanism situates the photographer at an indeterminate proximity to his own life, he is both removed, holding life "at arm's length," and eager to eliminate distance, making "quick raids," looking "greedily." This greed marks the speculator's stance. While life conceals its value to the scattered subject, it may yield handsome profits later, "if the rainy day ever comes." Merrill owes no inconsiderable debt in this passage to Proust, particularly in this last qualifying phrase. Its uncertainty acknowledges what Benjamin reminds us about Proust's involuntary memory, that it can find the past in some material object, but that the encounter is entirely a matter of chance. Merrill's camera does not ensure that he will make lasting, rich experience out of his tour of Europe, but it helps to tip the odds. Trusting that his most severe emotional blind spots would fall closest to home, he points his camera at his real father, the master speculator and brokerage firm founder, Charles Merrill, with the hope that the apparatus will facilitate an emotional response now absent. His goal is to turn the present into an "historical present," to give it the affective power of art.

"Snapshot of Adam," a sonnet written in 1982, reads as though it were composed in just the sort of rainy-day recollection that photography facilitates. The poem features a modern day Adam, lounging naked in a deck chair, grinning and drinking a Coke. After

an octave devoted almost entirely to description of this man's body; the hair, skin, and smile that draw a viewer's attention and seem to account for the picture's interest, the poem develops, in its turn, a picture of the speaker, reflected in the distance of a sliding glass door. In this turn Merrill finds a rough equivalent for Eden's mythical dawn of self-consciousness, a kind of mechanical fig leaf. Allowing the speaker to see as if from outside his own body, split between subject and object in the distance of the "historical present," the photograph's divided perspective reveals the non-event in the picture (Adam is only lounging, after all) as a "threat" to the speaker's domestic arrangements. Having raised the stakes, it occasions what can be seen, eventually, as the poem's confession.

> By flash in sunshine "to reduce contrast"
> He grins back from the green deck chair,
> Stripped, easy at last, bush tangle rhyming
> With beard and windblown hair;
> Coke sweating, forearm tanned to oak,
> Scar's lightning hid by flat milk-blaze of belly
> —But all grown, in the sliding glass
> Beyond him, unsubstantial. Here I dwell,
>
> Finger on shutter, amid my clay
> Or marble ghosts; treetops in silhouette;
> And day, his day, its vivid shining stuff
> Negated to matte slate
> A riddle's chalked on: Name the threat
> Posed never long or nakedly enough. (826)

From its opening line the poem calls particular attention to various forms of media—film, glass, clay, marble, oak, slate—each at least one remove from the flesh, teeth, and hair of this original "Adam," lounging in the bright blaze of the sun. While the camera's flash is used "to reduce contrast" between lights and darks in the picture so that the features of his face will not be lost, the quotation marks in Merrill's first line give the phrase added interest. These little typographical flashes make more prominent the contrast between

"flash" and "sunshine," between artificial and natural light, art and life. The word "flash" also suggests the camera's quickness, photography's "quick raids on life," more sudden and more prone to accident than the natural world's cycles. Caught in this tension between temporal modes, the poem's final line assures that the man in the picture was not "posed" long, (that he did not sit for long and that the "threat" he "posed" did not last) even though he is held still, captured in the photograph. We follow the speaker's eye as it ranges leisurely over the image, noticing this Adam's grin and his body, in a state of repose, "easy at last." Merrill's description savors the sensuous physical details in the picture: blowing hair, tan skin, the condensation on the Coke bottle, the "blaze" of light reflected by the stomach, hiding a "lightning" scar that the speaker knows is there. Assuming, for a moment, that this scar is something other than a random detail taken from an actual photograph—a likely scenario—or—just as likely— that Merrill is at his best when mining the figural possibilities of just such accidents as these, (JM will learn in *Sandover* that there are "NO ACCIDENT[S]") just what, if anything, is one to make of it? If we follow the conceit that this man is Adam, then the scar near his ribs, washed out in a "flat milk-blaze of belly," conjures images of the mythical creation of Eve. But there is no Eve in the image, and the speaker, given that the scar is hidden, seems to go out of his way to remark on it. Indeed, Eve's place is taken by a second man (if "I" is a version of Merrill himself, a point we will come back to), and the casting change makes for a homoerotic rewriting of the Genesis story. Just why the scar is "lightning" isn't entirely clear either. The phrase "scar's lightning" may suggest its lightning shape or it may be, as in Genesis, evidence of a god's touch. Or it may refer to the discoloration of the scar, flashing out against tan skin. Only this lightning doesn't flash. It hides in broad daylight,

in the “flat milk-blaze of belly,” and this layering of light on light recalls the other two sources of light with which the poem began: camera flash and sunshine. Hiding light inside of light, the image points to the necessity to refigure the terms of visibility in this scene. What the poem needs to make its experience (and perhaps its wound or scar) visible is a measure of darkness. This image of lightning, the flash of white streaks on a black sky, anticipates the negative or inverted forms of writing (light on dark) that the rest of the poem will feature: the burning of light into the photographic negative and the “riddle” with which the poem concludes, written in chalk on slate.

Merrill calls the camera a “godsend” in his memoir because it inverts hierarchies between original and representation and because the distance that its lens provides can make manifest “an emotion not always felt at the time.” This inversion is reflected in the poem’s motif of white writing as well as in its formal divisions. Just after the mention of Adam’s invisible scar in line six, for example, the description of his body breaks off, taking with it the depth of his three-dimensional world. Line seven interrupts the catalogue of Adam’s parts with a dash, turning our focus to the reflections in the sliding glass door of the background. At this greater depth of field, Merrill, true to form, finds more brilliant and more telling surfaces. With Adam’s day brought inside, its “vivid shining stuff / negated to matte slate” both in the door and in the photograph, the sensuous particulars of the poem’s first six lines grow “unsubstantial.” A ghostly world emerges in the door, and, with a move that echoes the end of “The House,” the poem’s “I” emerges in the threshold. Indeed, the speaker’s image is suspended in the material of the door: “Here I dwell, // Finger on shutter, amid my clay / Or marble ghosts.” Flat, “unsubstantial,” he is one of the “ghosts” reflected in the glass. Drawing this “I” out

from behind the camera, from the blind spot of the subject's vantage created in the split second he presses the shutter, Merrill imagines a form of subjectivity that depends on these moments of darkness, blind spots which prove to be critical points of opening, reception, and exposure. The image of the speaker's reflection, now able to circulate free from the substance of his body, bears witness to Merrill's claim that through the photograph, at the very least, "the photographer has composed *himself* for the split second need to press the shutter."

On a formal level, the poem showcases the sonnet's traditional stanzaic divisions. The space left on the page between octave and sestet signals typographically the nature of the "here" in which the speaker is said to "dwell." As Merrill well knows, the written "here" is always a place of retrospection, an "historical present" divided between the shuttered event and its repetition. This "here" is the speaker's dwelling, a space between original and representation, between the world and its reflection, a space crafted to coincide with the threshold of the house and the hairpin turn of the sonnet. But perhaps one should speak here of the sonnet's "sliding glass door," as Merrill navigates the turn with a certain bravado. Though the phrase "Here I dwell" marks the turn from octave to sestet, a dash in line seven signals an earlier change of direction. With the words "—But all grown, in the sliding glass," we're banished from Adam's original world to the ghostly world of reflections, a world of surfaces and art. One can easily guess which world is more "real" to Merrill (who claims to have recognized as a child that "life was fiction in disguise,") and which marks a turn, an error, or a fall. If lines six and seven belong to the world indoors (and of course even Adam's world is fiction, myth, and photograph even in the beginning) then they might slide down to join the second stanza,

inverting the order of octave and sestet. The dash now starts to look like a handle Merrill can use, as he steps inside his second stanza, to close the door behind him.

In his commentary on the poem, Merrill describes the challenge of the sonnet's turn with another spatial metaphor:

> Rather than plan ahead as the eighth line approaches, I'm apt to recall a moment at the Kabuki in Tokyo decades ago. A long ramp (the *hamamichi* [sic] or 'flower way') cuts through the public to join the stage at right angles. This transitional point challenges the actor who crosses it. That day we had seen Benten the Thief at work plundering a house from top to bottom. Frightened, furtive, eyes darting, sleeves full of loot, he ran from the scene, set foot upon the ramp, paused, straightened, tidied his clothing, stuck out his chest. An imaginary thoroughfare took shape around utter probity, now striding out of sight to loud cheers. (Prose 27)

While the dictates of form might incline a poet to "plan ahead" for the sonnet's turn, Merrill moves forward by thinking back, drawing on his recollection of Kabuki. Where ramp and stage join in the threshold between the enclosed imaginary space of the fiction and the very public space of the crowd, Benten sets his foot and pauses. So, too, Merrill pauses as he draws near the sonnet's turn, before striding through with chest out and head high. Crossing the threshold in Kabuki, the character confronts his position as the object of a collective gaze, a fiction constituted by that gaze. The audience begins to applaud, and thief, in a moment of self-consciousness, turns back into actor. Hearing one's self cheered in the noise of the crowd is, according to Merrill's comparison, like suddenly confronting one's reflected image hidden in a snapshot. But the formal properties of the stage may not be the only aspects of this particular Kabuki play that jog Merrill's memory. That is to say, there may be a sense in which, like Benten the Thief, his speaker must adapt a posture with which to confront an audience privy to his crimes. The poem's last line raises this possibility. A naked "Adam" wouldn't pose a "threat" to anyone,

except that the photographer appears in the picture alongside him, reflected in the glass of the door to the deck. Together they represent a pair that would plunder the domestic space. Likening his speaker to the principal in the Kabuki drama, Merrill fingers the photograph as evidence of a crime scene, and, in what sounds like a confession to an audience of one (is David Jackson's name stuttered out as "day, his day, its vivid"?), the poem imagines another way in which to "catch" oneself.[62] The photograph captures not only its subject, "the fine view" of Adam it commands, but the relation of photographer to subject inscribed in the structure of the gaze. Afforded distance from this gaze, one is in a position to see the context that earlier passed without notice, in this case the relation between speaker and "Adam." Out of the background a face emerges. But Merrill, in catching or exposing himself, assumes his own posture of "utter probity." To say that Adam's "threat" was "posed never long" is to reassure an audience that this fling didn't last. To say it was posed never "nakedly enough" is to confess that the indiscretion was never revealed and to insist that any felt need to cover it up no longer exists. If the poem is indeed a confession, then its traditional form, much like the Kabuki's stage, turns villain to actor, speaker to poet.

[62] I am indebted to Mutlu Blasing for the suggestion that David Jackson's name is inscribed in Merrill's line.

V. Coda: "Dead Center"

> "All winter I have been trying to discipline myself—
> 'Empty the mind,' as they say in the handbooks,
> 'concentrate on one thing, any thing, the snowflake, the
> granite it falls upon, the planet risen opposite, etc., etc.,'—
> and failing, failing"
>
> —James Merrill, "Time"

Midway through his 1988 volume, *The Inner Room*, Merrill revisits the strict enclosures of the villanelle in "Dead Center." Moving through the repetitions of its form, the poem reflects on the relation of present and past, "Now" and "Then," experience and memory, with metaphors that grow progressively more extravagant with each stanza.

> Upon reflection, as I dip my pen
> Tonight, forth ripple messages in code.
> In Now's black waters burn the stars of Then.
>
> Seen from the embankment, marble men
> Sleep upside down, bat-wise, the sleep bestowed
> Upon reflection. As I dip my pen
>
> Thinking how others, deeper into Zen,
> Blew on immediacy until it glowed,
> In Now's black waters burn the stars of Then.
>
> Or else I'm back at Grandmother's. I'm ten,
> Dust hides my parents' roadster from the road
> Which dips—*into* reflection, with my pen.
>
> Breath after breath, harsh O's of oxygen—
> Never deciphered, what do they forebode?
> In Now's black waters burn the stars. Ah then
>
> Leap, memory, supreme equestrienne,
> Through hoops of fire, circuits you overload!
> Beyond reflection, as I dip my pen
> In Now's black waters, burn the stars of Then. (540)

With a commitment to serious play so characteristic of Merrill's late work, the poem revels in the rich figural potential of its idiomatic title phrase. "Dead center" names a geometric ideal, a bull's eye or point of perfect focus. Touched off with the dip of a pen, the poem conjures a host of images of things with centers or midpoints: ripples of watery ink in a well; the riverbank across which "marble men" are reflected; the round opening of a mouth blowing air, then "harsh O's of oxygen"; a cipher; "circuits"; and, finally, "hoops of fire." At a structural level, the villanelle itself moves in circles, turning its refrains over and over until they join in the final stanza. And Merrill compounds the effect of the form's repetitions as he sets the refrains in the first stanza. The poem's two opening words, "upon reflection," make for a cornucopia of doubling. While they signal the poet's reflective mental state, a state of contemplation, they also describe the visible reflection of his pen, about to be dipped in the "black waters" of an ink well. Of course Merrill means to bring both readings to bear at once, as writing and thinking go hand in hand. Following the villanelle's dictates, the phrase "upon reflection" will be reflected or repeated in the second, fourth, and sixth stanzas, though twice with different prepositions and once in different syntactical order. As for the second refrain, "In Now's black waters burn the stars of Then," it is both an image of reflection, the reflection of starlight on water, and a figure for the repetitions of memory. Starlight on black water suggests that the past, "Then," is not simply repeated in the present, "Now," through voluntary recollection. Rather, multiple past events become constellations against the dark background of the present. As starlight takes time to reach the earth, so "Then" is visible "Now" for the first time. This dialectic between past and present, starlight and dark

water, “Then” and “Now,” fits neatly with the sense of inevitability or fate built into the villanelle’s form, a form that comes full circle to end where it begins.

Where the poem surprises, however, and perhaps where it belongs most to Merrill, is in its tone. Merrill credits his other “surrogate parent,” Elizabeth Bishop, with the revivification of the form: “The villanelle . . . didn’t really change from ‘your eyen two wol slay me sodenly’ until, say, 1950. . . . In any case, ‘sodenly’ Elizabeth’s ravishing one came along, where the 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” (quoted in Bloom 157). What sets this villanelle apart from the handful of prominent twentieth-century examples, including Bishop’s “One Art” and Merrill’s own “The World and the Child,” is its tone, the buoyancy with which he keeps what might have become two rather ponderous refrains moving.[63] The flair of line and stanza breaks (mimicking “the road / which dips,” or the “leap” of “memory”) along with the ingenuity of the rhymes (“Zen,” “oxygen,” “equestrienne”) showcase a poet very much at home in this borrowed French form. The tone grows particularly playful with the phrase “others, deeper into Zen,” where the unexpected rhyme tips us off to the streak of irreverence in this speaker. Given that this line was written by a poet devoted to the continued presence of the past, a disciple of Proust, it is hard not to include among these “others” certain of Merrill’s Modernist poetic forebears (W.C.W. and E.P. perhaps) who wanted poetry to be a haven of immediacy, even an answer to the stifling mediation of the linguistic sign. But to “[blow] on immediacy until it [glows]” is to traffic in hot air. Merrill’s rhyme scheme, so pronounced in the villanelle’s form, anticipates and then

[63] Cf. Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night,” Roethke’s “The Waking,” Auden’s “If I Could Tell You,” and Plath’s “Mad Girl’s Love Song.”

remembers the sound of “Zen” in all of its sonic echoes: “pen,” “then,” “men,” “ten,” “oxygen,” and, finally, “equestrienne.” The meditative practice that would empty the mind through attention to the breath or the repetition of vowel sounds here serves to draw out Merrill’s rhyme scheme to its fantastic end. In the final stanza, the tricks of memory, the transformation of memory into circus performer, “supreme equestrienne,” trumps even the acrobatics of those earlier “marble men,” who “bat-wise,” not to say batty, sleep upside down.

Merrill’s reference to the “immediacy” of “Zen” recalls the passage with which we began and his admission there of a certain failure: “Trying for a blank mind, I catch myself instead revisiting a childhood bedroom on Long Island.” In both passages, the immediate present figures as a blank or blacking out, a passage over black water, which is nevertheless the condition of possibility for a later, lasting experience, what Benjamin would call *Erfahrung*. Memory offers no simple or easy access to the past. As Merrill’s fourth stanza revisits “Grandmother’s,” the speaker’s parents are obscured: “Dust hides my parents’ roadster from the road / Which dips—*into* reflection, with my pen.” The roadster moves with its sleek open body through dust that seems destined, in hindsight, to lead its passengers off course. Merrill’s line break, punctuating the unseen dip in the road, would seem nearly to throw them from the car. With the dash, the crash course that remained a subject of Merrill’s work his entire life seems fated, and the dip in the road assumes its metaphorical significance. “Harsh O’s of oxygen,” now foreboding ciphers, demand a reading. With a bemused “Ah then,” the poem obliges, leaping into the villanelle’s fated final stanza through “hoops of fire.” Illegible events from “Then” are

supercharged as memory overloads its circuitry, blazing “Now” with meanings accrued in the fullness of time.

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