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Article

# The Purloined Letters of Elizabeth Bishop

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**Abstract:** In this paper I propose to examine several poems by Elizabeth Bishop through the prism of the concept of letter delineated in “Lituraterre”, where Lacan explores the connection between the literal and the littoral in order to draw a key distinction between signifiers which are the semblances involved in ordinary communication, and the letter as a precipitate resulting from their breakdown. Insofar as the letter causes “writing effects that are structured around moments of vacillation of semblances” (M-H Roche), such effects may be traced in poems where Bishop focuses on how meaning is set adrift by eliding, displacing or transforming graphemes and phonemes. Her observation that “the names of seashore towns run out to sea” points to the littoral/liminal space of the poetic signifier that straddles enjoyment and meaning. I analyze Bishop’s painterly treatment of mist through the prism of Lacan’s discussion of Japanese calligraphy where the unary brush stroke, which “is the means to clear original Chaos” (E. Laurent), operates as the equivalent of the median void, often represented by fog in Chinese painting, i.e., as an avatar of the littoral that separates knowledge from enjoyment. I conclude with a reading of a poem where the *semiosis* of mortality hinges on the (dis-)appearance of certain phonemes, inviting us to question the literal/literary destiny of letters when they turn into Joycean litter, and prompting us to revisit Lacan’s familiar aphorism that “a letter always reaches its destination”.

**Keywords:** Lacan; literature; letter; littoral

In her autobiographical sketch entitled “Primer Class”, Elizabeth Bishop tells her reader about an early experience of beauty in the person of her aunt Mary, who, though 12 years older than she, went to the same school. She also reminisces about the joys of learning penmanship and how, at a very early age, she came to think of herself as a woman of letters rather than numbers. When it came to writing the latter, her preference went to the number eight precisely because it was patterned after the curvaceous, feminized letter S, whose shape was perhaps reminiscent of the way her aunt wore her “brown hair *in a braid* down her back” (Bishop 2011, p. 81):<sup>1</sup>

The summer before school began was the summer of numbers, chiefly number eight. I learned their shapes from the kitchen calendar and the clock in the sitting room, though I couldn’t yet tell time. Four and five were hard enough, but I think *I was in love with eight*. One began writing it just to the right of the top, and drew an “S” downwards. This wasn’t too difficult, but the hardest part was to hit the bottom line (ruled on the slate by my grandmother) and come up again, against the grain; that is, against *the desire of one’s painfully cramped fingers*, and at the same time not make it a straight line, but *a sort of upside down and backwards “S”, and all this in curves*. Eights also made the worst noise on the slate. My grandmother would send me outside to practice, sitting on the back steps. The skreeking was slow and awful.

[. . .]

My initial experiences of formal education were on the whole pleasurable. Reading and writing caused me no suffering. I found the first easier, but the second



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was enjoyable—I mean artistically enjoyable—and I came to admire my own handwriting in pencil, when I got to that stage, perhaps as a youthful Chinese student might admire his own brushstrokes. (Bishop 2011, pp. 80–85).<sup>2</sup>

As the passages I have just quoted indicate, long before Bishop began her massive correspondence with Robert Lowell and others, the drawing of letters, and to a lesser extent numbers, was to her a source of enjoyment unrelated to the actual contents of the words that they transcribed. As mere graphic objects, they could also function as metonymies of desire, as is suggested by the “love” she felt for “number eight” because it resembled an inverted S, a letter characterized by its “curves”, as well as by its association with—albeit thwarted—desire, since Bishop specifies that in order to draw that S, it was necessary to go “against the desire of one’s painfully cramped fingers”.

What Bishop’s narrative suggests is, in Jean-Michel Rabaté’s terms, that “the letter, be it Roman or Greek or even the loop of an arabesque, circumscribes the edges of the hole that has been left open by *jouissance*, then closed by the symbolic system” (Rabaté 2001, p. 35). Bishop’s “Primer Class”, in other words, spotlights a connection between the Lacanian concept of the letter, enjoyment, and knowledge that does not know itself, i.e., what unconscious desire is allowed to manifest itself through the seemingly smooth surface of Bishop’s matter-of-fact account of her early years in Nova Scotia. That link is what I will try to explore in this paper—an exploration to which I feel prompted by Bishop’s own acknowledgment that a literal *felix culpa* gave rise to one of her most intriguing early poems.

Bishop used footnotes a lot more sparingly than, say, T.S. Eliot. One notable exception, however, was “The Man-Moth” (Bishop 1983, pp. 14–15), a title Bishop explains in a footnote she chose after happening upon a “newspaper misprint for ‘mammoth.’” Bishop’s poem, in other words, was born out of her chance encounter with a literal flaw within the signifying fabric of language, a dropped—if not purloined—letter “m” mistakenly replaced by the “n” of her title, and whose imaginary correlative becomes the tear the man-moth sheds at the end of the poem. If letters in Bishop’s poems are thus occasionally displaced or misplaced, readerly enjoyment itself may well prove a function of those literal shifts, as becomes clear in “The Map” (Bishop 1983, p. 3), the very first poem of *North and South*, where we find an early manifestation of Bishop’s focus on the manner in which meaning may be set adrift by eliding, displacing, or transforming letters and phonemes.

This is the case with the nearly unnoticeable phonic shift that occurs between the signifiers “lend” and “land” in the line: “lending the land their waves’ conformation” (l. 21). Clearly, the syntagm “lending the land” makes punningly audible the fact that water on the ocean front marks the land’s end. But beneath the pun which relies on resemblances between “semblances”—as Lacan calls signifiers in his last seminars—there remains for us to experience as readers the bare nuance or shade of sound separating “lend” and “land”—an experience of the text as that which generates *jouissance* rather than mere punning textual pleasure, to borrow Barthes’ familiar terminology in the *Pleasure of the Text*. The same is true of the question the speaker asks in the poem’s second line: “Shadows, or are they shallows [. . .]?” Through this question, Bishop verifies in the letter of the poem her seemingly bland initial observation that “Land lies in water” (l. 1). As the paronomasia indicates, land may be said to “lie” both because it is submerged, and because it does not tell the truth, which leaves us in a (pleasurable) quandary as to where the lying lies: is it located in the referent (the visual data on the map which may stand for land itself, or the shadows its ledges project into the ocean), or in the signifier, since “shadows” and “shallows” (l. 2) are nearly indistinguishable homophones, the audible difference between them being itself rather shadowy? It may well be, of course, that on the black and white surface of the printed page, the map-maker’s “delicate” colors are only transposable into such infinitesimal nuances of sound; but this is only ex-post facto rationalization of a primarily meaningless literal shift, aiming to reintegrate it within the poem’s discourse. That enjoyment always exceeds the boundaries of the Barthesian pleasure of the text that is preserved as long as a semblance of semiotic coherence is restored, is hinted at in Bishop’s observation that “the names of

seashore towns run out to sea”, where the meaning or reference of those toponyms is obliterated to the benefit of a purely visual take on their littoral status, i.e., their ability, as reified/literalized signifiers, to straddle the space between land and sea, which elicits in “the printer [...] the same excitement/as when emotion too far exceeds its cause”, much as we ourselves may derive enjoyment from the way in which the signifiers “lies” and “shadows” straddle the separate semantic realms of vision and of meaning.

In these readings of “Primer Class” and of “The Map”, we see how, as Rabaté explains, “letters do not point to a pure void of signification but produce a ‘hole’ in which enjoyment of the most excessive type can lurk” (Rabaté 2001, p. 34). More specifically, I would suggest that what Bishop formulates in terms of enjoyable literal excess taking place at the junction between land and sea is not unrelated to what Lacan called “the instance of the letter in the unconscious” as manifested in literal word play.<sup>3</sup>

Lacan’s two most thoroughgoing elaborations on the concept of the letter, whose relevance to Bishop I wish to examine, are to be found in his “Seminar on The Purloined Letter” (Lacan 1966, pp. 11–61), and in his 1971 essay, “Lituraterre”.<sup>4</sup> My main focus will be on this later article, which probes the intimate link between the “literal” and the “littoral” in a way that sheds light on the poetic signifier’s *littoral* status in Bishop’s poetry, i.e., the liminal space it straddles at the border between enjoyment and meaning. In addition, the article contains a highly suggestive discussion of the calligraphic dimension of writing highlighted in Bishop’s “Primer Class”.

In this paper I propose to interweave some of the key issues raised by Lacan in his article with readings of Bishop’s poems. My goal here is not to discuss Bishop as a mere illustration of Lacan’s difficult piece, but rather to treat Lacan’s own article as an *illumination* in the double sense of the word, i.e., both as a clarification and as the artistic process applied to a letter or manuscript.

At the beginning of his article, Lacan explains that “Lituraterre” is a neologism that he coined after reading the entry for the word “literature” in an etymological dictionary:

This word derives its legitimacy from the *Ernout and Meillet: lino, litura, liturarius*. It occurred to me, however, as a result of the kind of wordplay that is sometimes transformed into wit: the spoonerism falling to the lips, the upset back to the ear.

This dictionary (just have a look) provides me with the auspice of being founded on the departure point that I took (here, to part is to give re-part-ee) from equivocation, for instance Joyce (James Joyce, that is) slides from “letter” to “litter”, from *une lettre* (I translate) to *une ordure* (“Lituraterre”, p. 29).

The Joycean pun between letter and litter that Lacan adduces is well documented. It recurs throughout *Finnegans Wake*, notably in the exclamation: “The letter! The litter! And the soother the bitter!” (Joyce 1939, p. 93).<sup>5</sup> As for the word Latin verb “lino” that is the alleged root of the word “literature”, it means both “to smear”, “to cover”, and “to erase”. Those two contradictory meanings come into play in Lacan’s article, as does the Latin word *litus*, which happens to be both the past participle of the verb *lino*, and a noun designating a *littoral*, i.e., a shore or a coastline. Lacan’s “Lituraterre” thus exploits the punning potential of a word which means writing/erasure, and “the limit or border of a territory” (Rabaté 2001, p. 34).

Lacan begins his article by observing “that the knowledge that is the starting point of contemporary literature does not base itself on myth, on meaning” (Marret-Maleval 2016, p. 2).<sup>6</sup> “By handling senselessness and equivocation”, contemporary literature foregrounds the object (a) of enjoyment to which “the letter is intimately linked” in that, by means of sublimation, it recovers this “indescribable object” (Lacan 2001, p. 197). The letter, more precisely, “is at the juncture between the object and the signifier. It processes/tackles enjoyment” (Marret-Maleval 2016, p. 3).<sup>7</sup>

Lacan makes an explicit reference to his seminar on “The Purloined Letter” (Lacan 1966, pp. 11–61) which followed the trajectory of the letter, not as a signifier<sup>8</sup>—since the letter’s content is never revealed—but as conveying, regardless of its actual meaning, the

message of castration, to be read in the letter's feminizing effect on whoever comes into its possession. The seminar's main thesis is that the message in question is never explicitly worded. It is only to be inferred from the letter's impact on its bearers. Meaning, in other words, is elided, as is the phallic signifier "whose function operates unbeknownst to the protagonists and to the reader" (Marret-Maleval 2016, p. 4). Insofar as the letter bears the message of castration, a universal law, it always reaches its destination although it represents nothing, marking instead a hole in the signifying fabric, the hole of the missing object, the hole of enjoyment. As in Poe's "Purloined Letter", therefore, literary texts are depositories of a knowledge that does not know itself ("a knowledge that is *en échec*, in check" ["Lituraterre", p. 31]), and which is carried by their letter.

In "Lituraterre" Lacan builds on his previous article in presenting the letter as that which marks a border between the real and the symbolic, between enjoyment and unconscious knowledge. The metaphor he privileges is not a border but the bank of a river or a shoreline, a littoral between land and sea—a term Lacan favors because it indicates that the two realms the letter separates are incommensurate, unlike a border which "symbolically separates two zones that may be of a similar nature" (Marret-Maleval 2016, p. 5).

Lacan urges his readers to think of signifiers as clouds—including Aristophanes' clouds, i.e., mere appearances or semblances that are constantly at work in ordinary discourse, as well as in the manifest message of literary texts. As for the letter, it is similar to what results from the collision of two clouds with opposite electrical charges: it is a precipitate that proceeds from the breakdown of the signifier. The letter, Lacan writes, "dissolves what constituted form" ("Lituraterre", p. 35).<sup>9</sup>

It is important to bear in mind the dual etymology of the letter as writing and erasure to understand what Lacan designates as its littoral function, and the paradoxical fact that the letter is the trace of an erasure. The partial enjoyment of the drives accompanies the initial stage of writing, which involves putting pen to paper, drawing the shapes of letters, or typing successions of typographical signs on the typewriter, thus littering a page with graphemes. At that stage, the letter is nothing more than the *real* precipitate of the signifier. In a second stage of the writing process, the letter erases or bars enjoyment, and the succession of letters becomes readable as a signifier. The letter's borderline status stems from its being involved in both stages of this process. The letter stands for that which is "devoid of meaning and thus lends itself to deciphering, not decoding" (Heyman 2012). To this extent, it partakes of what Lacan called the "*moterialité*" (Roche 2011, p. 245) of language, a programmatic pun, since the letter is precisely that which causes "writing effects that are structured around moments of vacillation of semblances" (Roche 2011, p. 246),<sup>10</sup> moments when the identity of the signifier is unsettled as when, for instance, a "bite" lurks behind a "bight" in Bishop's poem by the same title (Bishop 1983, pp. 60–61).<sup>11</sup>

Lacan narrates that while flying over Siberia, he caught sight of a "streaming" down below, corresponding to rivers that furrowed the Siberian plain, thus appearing as marks or traces in that deserted space. This "streaming", Lacan suggests, is a metaphor of the workings of the letter that Japanese calligraphy captured, a metaphor of the letter's dual function of inscribing and/or circumscribing enjoyment, then erasing it by covering its track—as a river does its riverbed—once individual letters are subsumed under the signifier<sup>12</sup>:

So appeared to me, invincibly, this circumstance is no small matter: through parting clouds, the streaming [*ruissellement*] of waters, the only trace to appear, effectuating more than indicating its relief at that latitude, on what of Siberia forms the plain, a plain desolate of any vegetation but luminous shine, which pushes into the shade whatever doesn't glisten back.

This streaming is a cluster [*bouquet*] of the first trait and what effaces it. ("Lituraterre", p. 34)

In his persuasive reading of these lines, Eric Laurent argues that the rivers that Lacan sees from above are a trace "in which the imaginary is abolished" (Laurent 1999, p. 27).<sup>13</sup>

What Lacan seems to be suggesting, therefore, is that in this landscape, the sign's indexical function no longer holds sway. Lacan sees a mere trace which "does not even emphasize a preexisting aspect of the world". Siberia itself is thus "read as a calligraphy, as a pure trace that operates without indicating, without signifying what is there [...] the pure operation of the letter in the act of its effectuation". Bishop's lines from "Questions of Travel" are a case in point: "But surely it would have been a pity [...] Never to have studied history in/the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages" (Bishop 1983, pp. 93–94). Indeed, the Lacanian letter prevails at the exact juncture where "weak calligraphy" has not yet been superseded by historical discourse organizing ethnographic observations into a coherent body of knowledge.

Although it may have seemed like a painfully long detour to follow Lacan all the way to Japan and back across the Siberian plain in order to reach Nova Scotia, it may prove worth our while if we bear in mind the following lines from Bishop's "Cape Breton":

The road appears to have been abandoned.  
 Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned,  
 unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,  
 where we cannot see,  
 where deep lakes are reputed to be,  
 and disused trails and mountains of rock  
 and miles of burnt forests, standing in gray scratches  
 like the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones—  
 (Bishop 1983, pp. 67–68, ll. 28–35)

Adopting a bird's eye view, Bishop in these lines focuses on those meaningless traces left in a landscape that also happens to be defined as a littoral, liminal space: "the wild road clammers along the brink of the coast" (l. 23). While she allows for the possibility of meaning being "[held] back" (l. 30), the poem stays clear of projecting any interpretive frame unto what remains a fragmentary vision devoid of a grand unifying theme which would partake of the dimension of what Lacan calls "semblance". Instead, Bishop insists on taking the landscape and its key components literally, most strikingly when, through the mere juxtaposition of the first two letters of the alphabet, she provides a literal—albeit onomatopoeic—transcription of the sheep's senseless bleating ("the few sheep pastured there go 'baa, baa'" [l. 5]).

It is perhaps no coincidence if the one element that holds this otherwise disparate picture together is the mist which is mentioned in four out of the poem's five sections. In his exegesis of "Lituraterre", Eric Laurent points out how Lacan's discussion of Japanese calligraphy was influenced by his friendship with the sinologist François Cheng, whose analysis of the painter Shih-Tao emphasized the role of "the median void", often represented by a fog or mist separating the elements of chaos in classical Chinese painting. Much of Lacan's discussions with Cheng revolved around the "Tao", the Chinese way in which "what has a name and what has no name are joined" (Laurent 1999, p. 14)—a joining that the homophony of the French words "voie" and "voix", meaning "way" and "voice" aptly captures, as Laurent points out. One of François Cheng's major contributions was his highlighting the role of the neutral intermediary layer of fog frequently seen in Chinese paintings, and which stands for the ordering void at the center of creation. What Cheng calls "the central element in the cogwheels of creation" (Cheng 1979, p. 26)<sup>14</sup> has its equivalent in "the unary brush stroke [which] is the means to clear original Chaos", as Laurent writes, pointing out that "this Median-void is a sort of version of the littoral" (Laurent 1999, p. 16) that separates knowledge from enjoyment.

I would suggest that this may also be the function of the mist that orders and unifies the chaos of perceptions in Bishop's poem, where the logic of Laurent's pun between "voix" and "voie", the voice and the way, is reflected in the fact that the sheep's infra-signifying

“baa-baa” resonates from the space situated “along the cliff’s brown grass-frayed *edge*” (l. 4) whose outline the “wild road” follows.

The most relevant passage in Cheng’s study of Chinese painting, whose debt to Lacan the author overtly recognized,<sup>15</sup> is the beginning of chapter 6 where Cheng indicates how the brush stroke connects to the drives that channel enjoyment:

The brushstroke [. . .] is not a mere line or the mere outline of things. Born of calligraphic art, it carries multiple implications. Alternating downstrokes and upstrokes, circumscribing the Void, it represents form and volume. Through its initial “attack” and “thrust”, it expresses rhythm and motion. [. . .]. Finally, due to its being executed instantaneously, without being touched up, it ushers in vital breaths. Rather than external resemblance, what the Stroke seeks to capture is [. . .] the “internal line” of things. At the same time it takes charge of man’s irresistible drives. (Cheng 1979, p. 87)

This function of the brush stroke is what Bishop highlights in “Large Bad Picture”, where the amateur painter’s naïve touches of paint are significantly compared to letters deposited on the canvas:

And high above them, over the tall cliffs’  
Semi-translucent ranks,  
Are scribbled hundreds of fine black birds  
Hanging in *n*’s in banks.

(Bishop 1983, p. 11, ll. 17–20)

In “Cape Breton” as in “Large Bad Picture”, the Lacanian letter’s littorality between knowledge and enjoyment informs Bishop’s pictorial technique.<sup>16</sup>

I mentioned earlier how, according to Lacan, modern literature, “by handling senselessness and equivocation”, foregrounds the object of enjoyment to which “the letter is intimately linked” (Marret-Maleval 2016, p. 3). As Lacan wrote, modern literature, through sublimation, “celebrates the taciturn wedding of empty life with the indescribable object” (AE 197) by foregrounding the letter which, located “at the juncture between the object and the signifier [. . .] processes/tackles enjoyment” (Marret-Maleval 2016, p. 3). This dialectic of the letter and the object, I want to argue, is at work in Bishop’s “The Imaginary Iceberg” (Bishop 1983, p. 4).

As the chiasmatic ordering of identical phonemes in the signifiers “own” and “snow” (l. 6) indicates, the poem places heavy emphasis on specularity. Given its underlying conceit equating the iceberg and the soul, it comes as no surprise that semblance and resemblance are central to its argument.

Referring to the final lines (“Icebergs behoove the soul/(both being self-made from elements least visible)/to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible” [ll. 31–33]), Marilyn Lombardi concludes that the iceberg projects “an image of phallic self-sufficiency” (Lombardi 1995, p. 90). This observation is consistent with Bishop’s earlier statement that “this is a scene a sailor’d give his eyes for” (l. 12), hinting at the iceberg’s power to enact a castration of the gaze which is the prerequisite for poetic/imaginative vision to come into its own. What takes place on the imaginary plane is also relayed in the formal make-up of the poem. The pronouncement contained in the last three lines, voiced in the gnomic present, takes on the assertive monumentality of a universal law. The iceberg’s erection is thus mirrored in the syntax of the lines, as well as in the materiality of the signifier, since the four adjectives which form the poem’s “pinnacle” (l. 14) contain a growing number of syllables—successively two monosyllables, one trisyllable, and one quadrisyllable.

In Lacan’s reading of “The Purloined Letter”, the letter’s symbolic efficacy is a function of its remaining unopened, and thereby conveying the message of castration, to be read in its feminizing effect on its temporary owners. As Lombardi’s remark indicates, the phallus appears in its *imaginary* dimension in the discourse of Bishop’s poem: it is not acknowledged as a *symbolic* agency. That agency, nonetheless, does write itself, notably

into the speaker's choice of the first-person plural. Indeed, to the extent that individual desire is draped in the collective "we" (l. 1) of universal experience, it also marks the symbolic action of that which bars it from full expression, a symbolic action also perceptible in the previously quoted line "This is a scene a sailor'd give his eyes for", where the anonymity of the indeterminate "a sailor" mitigates the speaker's involvement in this hypothetical quid pro quo. The conditional mood, furthermore, signals the speaker's ambivalent acknowledgment of this castration of the gaze, intimating that this sacrifice, the price to be paid in exchange for poetic vision, might somehow be by-passed. Symbolic castration is thus disavowed by means of these syntactical deflections.

The letter, however, nonetheless operates in the contracted form in which the modal verb "would", the very signifier of desire, is partially elided ("We'd rather . . ."). As in Lacan's reading of Poe's tale, it thus reaches its destination, though not at the juncture where, in the poem's discourse, the iceberg's phallic dimension is overtly designated. In the modal verb's contracted form, the letter carves a hole in the textual fabric, outlining the contour of the sublime object of fragmentary enjoyment around which much of Bishop's exploration of the Wordsworthian sublime revolves. It is indeed significant that, as the allegory of the soul and/or the imagination, the iceberg is likened to a jewel that "cuts its facets from within" (l. 23). Standing "stock-still like cloudy rock" (l. 3), it is a mix of the solid and the aerial, symbolizing the most spiritual dimension of a human being, while preserving the appearance a concrete precious object not unlike the *agalma*, that other precious object that Alcibiades imagines Socrates contains in Lacan's reading of Plato's *Symposium*. It may actually be more than coincidental that Lacan, in his discussion of mystical love in *Seminar XX*, analyzes the concept of the soul in Aristotelian metaphysics as a forerunner of the psychoanalytical object involved in the structure of fantasy. A recurrent motif in Lacan's writings is that there is no sexual relationship because the frame of fantasy is always interposed between the subject and the other, who is systematically reduced to a partial object. Lacan argues that in pre-scientific theories of the relationship between form and matter, as exemplified by Plato and Aristotle, "the terms of active and passive are supported entirely by a fantasy in which they attempted to supplement that which cannot be formulated, namely the sexual relationship. The strange thing is that into this coarse polarity which makes of matter the passive element and of form the agent that animates it something, although something ambiguous, was still introduced, i.e., the fact that this animation is none other than the object (a) with which the agent animates what? —it animates nothing, it mistakes the other for its soul" (Lacan 1975, p. 76).<sup>17</sup> The soul is thus the object that the agent fantasizes as being present in the other. These observations help shed light on Bishop's enigmatic "Icebergs behoove the soul" (l. 31), where the verb "behoove" seems to indicate that, between icebergs and the soul, there is an element of fitness or congruence, i.e., a *relationship* structured around this precious object, the underlying logic being that although icebergs are not identical to the soul, they seem ideally suited to function as its visible counterpart, thus relating to the soul in the same way as form relates to matter in Aristotelian metaphysics.

Where the letter's littoral status between enjoyment and knowledge that does not know itself comes into play, here, is in the wording in which this alleged relationship of congruity is couched. Indeed, as any dictionary of the English language will confirm, the line "Icebergs behoove the soul" is utterly agrammatical. Using a subject other than the impersonal "it" with the verb *to behoove* is a syntactical irregularity which, in this particular instance, happens to target the very signifier of fitness. It is the signature, in the poem's letter, of the impossibility of that relationship upon which Aristotelian physics was predicated. *What* this linguistic impropriety reveals is the order of a textual knowledge that is no less effectual for not being recognized as such. *How* it resurfaces is by means of a poetic intervention on the syntactical norm governing the use of the verb *to behoove*—an intervention all the more *enjoyable* as it infringes on the grammatical rule governing the uses of a verb that happens to signify dutiful obedience.



That Bishop's iceberg is of the order of what the later Lacan calls "semblance" is by now abundantly clear. "Even as she tropes the iceberg into being", Bonnie Costello writes, "Bishop emphasizes the illusionary, rhetorical nature of this iceberg through metaphors of the theater" (Costello 1991, p. 93). In light of this remark, there is a good deal of disingenuity in Bishop's statement that "this is a scene where he who treads the boards/Is artlessly rhetorical" (ll. 16–17). This is evident in the oxymoronic phrase "artlessly rhetorical", a contradiction in terms given the fact that rhetoric was commonly known in ancient Rome as one of the liberal *arts*. Obviously, the phrase echoes other oxymorons pointing to the iceberg's dual nature, such as "cloudy rock" (l. 3) and "moving marble" (l. 4). It also reminds us that the art of rhetoric revolved around the proper use of figures of speech or tropes, such as the oxymoron, among others. It becomes all the more difficult, in this context, to miss Bishop's artful handling of the letter in the lines that immediately follow the ones just quoted above: "The curtain/is light enough to rise on finest ropes/that airy twists of snow provide" (ll. 17–19). Lacan's image of the letter as a precipitate that proceeds from the breakdown of semblance, i.e., of the signifier, seems particularly relevant to the way in which, by means of what Garrett Stewart calls "trans-segmental drift" (Stewart 1990, p. 30) the poem's letter is set into motion as the image of the iceberg drifts in and out of view, so that behind the "finest ropes" on which the curtain rises, we also perceive the finest of "tropes". The "shifting stage", here, thus turns out to be not the poet's psyche, but the written page where letters undergo unexpected "airy twists" and turns, as indeed the word "trope" itself suggests, since a trope, etymologically, is precisely such a twist or turn. More precisely, what literal enjoyment is contained within the "finest ropes/finest tropes" homophony is a function of the letter "t"'s littoral status, of how it flickers between absence and presence, silence and sound—purloined yet all the while visible.

Comparable to the rivers Lacan observes from above in the Siberian plain, the letter "t" here is no more than "a trace in which the imaginary is abolished", a "calligraphy" reminiscent of Bishop's own "weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages" (Bishop 1983, p. 94, l. 54) "which operates without indicating, without signifying what is there [...] the pure operation of the letter in the act of its effectuation" (Laurent 1999, p. 10). To the extent that as, Eric Laurent has argued, the letter overlaps with the object which acts as a stopgap "filling out [...] the anxiety of th'Athing" ("Lituraterre", p. 34), what phenomena befall the letter are not unrelated to the iceberg's role as an avatar of the gaze, i.e., the object of enjoyment involved in the structure of scopical fantasy, that imaginary construct cast as a veil over the subject's lack-of-being. Yet there is no mimetic connection between the literal phenomena we observe in "The Imaginary Iceberg" and their imaginary counterpart.<sup>18</sup> The focus on the letter's borderline status in "finest ropes" does not illustrate the iceberg's role as the imaginary object of scopical enjoyment that a "sailor'd give his eyes for". The passage where the trans-segmental drift occurs is simply one where the partial enjoyment of the letter is experienced in its utter meaninglessness, as is also the case in the anagrammatic redistribution of the letters that make up the word "twists" into "wits". The most we can say, in this particular instance, is that the word "twist" has been twisted out of shape in the process of its letters being rearranged, although little sense can be made of this literal manipulation. Much as in "Over 2000 Illustrations, and a Complete Concordance", we see the Letter of scripture turn to litter when "the gilt rubs off the edges/of the pages and pollinates the fingertips" (Bishop 1983, p. 58, ll. 66–67), there is a littoral, but no actual concordance or correspondence between the workings of the letter and poetic *semiosis*.

I mentioned earlier the Joycean pun connecting the words "letter" and "litter" that Lacan references in order to illustrate his concept of the letter as "what is evoked of jouissance on the breaking of a semblant" ("Lituraterre", p. 35). This pun reverberates in "The Bight" (Bishop 1983, pp. 60–61), a modern elegy on the loss of Baudelairean correspondences where Bishop observes that "the bight is littered with old correspondences". In the immediate context of lines that describe boats at low tide lying on their sides "like torn-open, unanswered letters", the obvious conclusion is that Bishop's bight is littered with letters.<sup>19</sup> Where Lacan, in his "Seminar on the Purloined Letter", concluded that "a letter always

reaches its destination" (Lacan 1966, p. 41), Bishop describes her own correspondences as "torn open" and "unanswered". Her point is that, unlike Baudelaire weaving a network of synesthesias between the realms of the spirit and of the senses, one may only ponder "blurr'dly and inconclusively" (Bishop 1983, p. 94, l. 48) on what links exist between visual perceptions and the comparisons they trigger. Judging by the number of signifiers that are variations on the motif of cutting in the poem, it seems fair to assume that the letter has definitely reached its destination in the Lacanian sense of the phrase: Bishop's bight is littered with as many letters as letter openers, as may be inferred from several etymological and semantic echoes between words related to cutting: "sheer [...] water" (l. 1), "pickaxes" (l. 13), "plowshares" (l. 25), "scissors" (l. 18), "gaffs and hooks" (l. 22), to name but a few. Here, however, as in "The Imaginary Iceberg", we need to distinguish between such *semblances* and the workings of the *letter* per se. That "the signifier [...] materializes the instance of death" (Lacan 1966, p. 24) is hinted at early on in the poem by the "[w]hite, crumbling ribs of marl [that] protrude" (l. 2) at low tide like a dehumanized *vanitas*. The visual, imaginary, dimension nonetheless prevails here, in other words: the dimension of semblance. Where the letter comes into play is primarily in the pun on the homophones "bight" and "bite" suggested by the final description of the dredge bringing up "a dripping jawful of marl" (l. 34). "The signifier plays and wins [...] before the subject realizes it, so much so that in the play of *Witz*, of the witticism, for instance, it catches the subject by surprise"<sup>20</sup> (Lacan 1966, p. 840) Lacan writes: such is definitely the case when the homophony of the title becomes audible in the poem's final lines.

In his seminar on *The Formations of the Unconscious*, Lacan comments on the French adjective "aterré", the French equivalent of the word "appalled", which conveniently offers the same punning potential as its counterpart in English. When we hear the word "aterré", Lacan explains, we also overhear the word "terreur", although there is actually no etymological connection between the two, since "aterré" literally means "brought down to the ground". Likewise, one might hear the signifier "pall" in the adjective "appalled", although those words are quite unrelated. Lacan goes on to say that a nuance of terror is introduced into the signifier "aterré" by means of its partial homophony with that word, a process of an essentially metaphorical nature, he adds.<sup>21</sup> The conjunction of those two signifiers is what engenders a signification that may be read as a "certain taming of terror. Terror is not only named, but also toned down [...]. It remains in the semi-darkness" (Lacan 1998, p. 34): the signifier of terror has been repressed, although, like Poe's purloined letter, it hides in plain sight within the phonic substance of the word "aterré".

Bishop's pun follows a similar logic to the extent that, by calling a bite a "bight", she dilutes its hostile potential. The poem thus revolves around a question of mastery to be asserted over the signifier of the master par excellence, namely death itself. This operation, however, goes beyond Bishop's handling of semblances, as when the obscene presence of the decaying, broken-up body is filtered and diffracted through the prism of description: poetic composition is thus held up as a fragile response to the prospect of bodily decomposition.

As in Lacan's analysis of the word "aterré", what remains of "the *dread* of something after death", in Hamlet's familiar words, is the innocuous "Click. Click". of the "*dred/ge*". Indeed, breaking down the signifier in order to uncover what dread lurks in Bishop's "dredge" is a critical operation that seems warranted—if not called for—by the fact that the phonemes [d<sub>3</sub>] first recur in the signifier that carries the metaphorical weight of the following line ("and brings up another jawful of marl" [l. 33]) before being obliterated in the paronomasia that connects the noun "jawful" with the adjective "awful" at the poem's close (l. 36). In the adjective "awful", the letters "d" and "g" which, combined, produce the initial sound of "jawful", have been erased from the surface of the text: they are now literally dead, and if they recur, they do so as mere phonic shadows of themselves in the very last word of the poem, "cheerful" (l. 36) whose first consonantal sound, [tʃ], is a combination of an alveolar plosive and of a palate-alveolar fricative, their exact voiceless

equivalents. A dredge thus turns out to trope the signifier of dread through the addition of a few soon-to-be-dead letters.

This may explain, in hindsight, why the machine is initially described as a “little ocher dredge at work off the end of the dock” (l. 9). In this rewriting of the topos of *tempus edax*, it is once again the minimal difference between the voiced plosive [g] and its voiceless counterpart [k] that keeps the devouring ogre at bay in the dredge’s seemingly innocuous “ocher” color. Here too, poetic *semiosis* is thus a function of this disappearance of the phoneme’s voiced feature. Those literal-phonemic (dis-)appearances may then be read as interpretants that help us detect the *dread* behind the dred(ge) and recognize how the poem’s foundational dialectic of the “(j)awful” and the “cheerful” hinges on the uncanny effects triggered by the wanderings of individual letters and sounds. Throughout those metamorphoses and vanishings, we observe the letter’s littoral condition halfway between repressed unconscious knowledge and the pure meaningless enjoyment of graphemic permutations and elisions.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> “It remains to be seen how the unconscious, which I say is an effect of language, presupposing as it does its structure as necessary and sufficient, commands this function of the letter. The fact that the letter is the proper instrument for the writing of discourse does not make it improper for designating a word that is taken for another, or indeed by another, in the sentence, and thus for symbolizing certain signifier-effects, but that the letter should be primary within these effects is not a must” (“Lituraterre”, p. 32). All translations of “Lituraterre” are by Adrian Price and Beatrice Khiara-Foxton.

<sup>4</sup> This article was published in the French journal *Littérature* (N° 3, October 1971, pp. 3–10), then reprinted after Lacan’s death at the beginning of his *Autres écrits* (Lacan 2001, pp. 11–20).

<sup>5</sup> According to Rabaté, “[a] letter, a litter’: in Joyce’s circle, they played on the homophony of the two words in English.” (Rabaté 2001, p. 32).

<sup>6</sup> All translations of Marret-Maleval’s article are mine.

<sup>7</sup> While Rabaté limits the Lacanian letter to the graphemic dimension, in my discussion of the letter in Bishop’s poetry I follow Marret-Maleval who makes it clear that since the letter is located in the liminal space between signifier and object, it operates both on the graphemic and on the phonemic level. This is borne out by Lacan’s own remark in “Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire” that the “feature of the cut”, which is “prevalent in the object described by analytic theory” makes it necessary to include in the list of psychoanalytical objects not only “the mamilla, faeces, the phallus [. . .], the urinary flow”, but also “the phoneme, the gaze, the voice—the nothing” (Lacan 1966, p. 817—translation and emphasis mine). This view is also consistent with Isabelle Alfandary’s contention that the letter is at work wherever meaning exceeds the limits of signification: “literature is the work of the letter, and as such it transmits meaning beyond or beneath signification.” (Alfandary 2016, p. 75—translation mine.)

<sup>8</sup> Sophie Marret-Maleval stresses that a signifier may be involved in the play of metaphor, whereas the letter is “beyond meaning” and “excludes metaphor” (Marret-Maleval 2016, p. 3).

<sup>9</sup> This explains why Lacan finds fault with academic discourse, literary scholarship included, on the grounds that it puts knowledge “to use on the basis of semblance” (“Lituraterre”, p. 32). Academic discourse, in short, connects networks of signifiers into meaningful discursive wholes instead of putting the letter to work.

<sup>10</sup> All translations from Marie-Hélène Roche’s article are mine.

<sup>11</sup> Lacan tells his readers that his concept of the letter was developed when, on his way back from a trip to Japan, he flew over the Siberian plain, an entirely deserted area that was the only route that the Soviets would allow so that their military installations could not be photographed. It was important that this experience took place upon his return from Japan, since in Japan, Lacan had discovered calligraphy, an art uniquely apt to connect enjoyment and the unary trait (S1) of primordial identification which represents the subject in the Other of unconscious knowledge (Marret-Maleval 2016, p. 8). Whereas Western writing is based on the universal valence of the signifier, and on repression, Lacan argues, Japanese writing relies on the letter (Marret-Maleval 2016,

p. 9) and on the singularity of the brush stroke which is the artist's signature. This brushstroke, in Japanese kakemonos, functions as the inscription of the otherwise a-semantic unary trait that forms the basis of a subject's primordial identification and is also the locus where enjoyment in the form of object (a) is deposited.

12 To the extent that the unary trait that stands for the subject is correlated to the missing object of his/her enjoyment, the subject's inscription as pure negativity is also a function of the letter's double status as the unary stroke that "ushers in the subject by erasing it" (Marret-Maleval 2016, p. 10) and as the erasure of that initial stroke. What fascinates Lacan about the Japanese art of calligraphy is that it is, in his view, uniquely apt to capture in one brushstroke the calligrapher's signature i.e., the single mark or unary trait of his lack of being.

13 All translations of Éric Laurent are mine.

14 All translations of François Cheng are mine.

15 Cf. [http://www.lacanchine.com/L\\_Cheng-Lacan3.html](http://www.lacanchine.com/L_Cheng-Lacan3.html), accessed on 10 July 2022.

16 In "12 O'Clock News" (Bishop 1983, pp. 174–5), it manifests itself in the very typographical layout of Bishop's prose poem, subdivided as it is into two sections, one of which contains only one or two words, while the much larger section to the right is an imaginary journalistic account of what the objects designated by the words in the left margin may represent. This prose poem may, obviously, be read as a post-Coleridgean hymn to the powers of the imagination generating a whole narrative out of a few objects scattered on the writer's desk, the poem offering a verbal equivalent of the musical formula of theme and variation. Where in such a musical piece, the variations are typically separated by a short interval of silence, the demarcation between the italicized words in the left-hand margin and their imaginative expansion in the main body of the text is indicated by a littoral blank space which belongs to neither. The entire poem is thus built around the dynamic contrast between those isolated words and the flights of fancy that they trigger—the word flight being all the more inevitable here since the speakers, in the main text, seem to be surveying the scene from inside an airplane. Clearly, Bishop's clever interweaving of the metonymic and the metaphorical order is one of the primary formal features that we notice here. All the italicized terms designating the writer's tools are metonymically related to one another due to their proximity within one identical space. The main text in roman characters, likewise, takes on the form of a live reportage in which things are described in their consecutive order of appearance. Metaphor, meanwhile, creates unexpected connections between the two textual subsets, as when the typewriter eraser is troped as a "unicyclist courier" or when the ashtray becomes "possibly a shell crater, a 'nest' of soldiers". All these connections between textual signifiers partake of the dimension of semblance which, Lacan insists, has nothing to do with the letter per se. Yet we are never allowed to forget that the poem would not exist without its odd typographical layout, notably the median void that simultaneously joins and separates the two sets of signifiers. Nor can we fail to notice that what connects the italicized words is that they all designate writing implements whose materiality is accentuated by their being left free-floating in a-syntactical space, as well as by the italics which displace the focus toward the actual shaping of the letters regardless of the meaning of the signifiers that their combination gives shape to. As we shuttle back and forth between the left-hand and the right-hand section of the poem, we thus see the text write and unwrite itself and catch a glimpse of the workings of the "letter [as] that precipitate that falls from semblance as it breaks down [and] calls forth enjoyment" (Marret-Maleval 2016, p. 6). In this regard, the news reporter's speculation as to whether the "typed sheet" is either "an airstrip" or "a cemetery" is revealing of the poetics of Bishop's text which exposes how meaning alternatively takes off and is cancelled if, due to a change of perspective, the written page reverts to the materiality of a "dark-speckled" surface. What "Twelve O'Clock News" stages is the poetic transfiguration of the poet's utensils, but also its reverse dis-figuration, what we might call its *reductio ad literam*, most spectacularly, perhaps, in the abbreviation "pile of mss." reminding us that a manuscript is itself little more than an accumulation of "typed sheet[s]" littered with such letters as the abbreviation "mss." to which the word "manuscript" can be reduced.

17 Translation mine.

18 This has been persuasively argued by Thelma Sowley in "À travers les frontières" (Sowley 2007).

19 In a talk given at the Elizabeth Bishop centenary symposium delivered on 10 June 2011 at the University of King's College in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a Canadian poet named Zachariah Wells seemed to have caught Bishop's fairly obvious Joycean allusion when he chose the enticing title, "The Literary Litter of the Littoral-Minded: Elizabeth Bishop's Ideas of Disorder at Key West." The sound archive of this talk, however, yielded no insight into the relevance of the familiar Joycean pun to Bishop's poem, thus leaving open the question of the modalities by which the letter litters "The Bight." Indeed, Wells's (2011) focus in this talk was not on word play in this poem, but on Bishop's negotiations with the literary canon (including Baudelaire, Herbert, Hopkins, Whitman, Stevens, and Moore). For the same reason, the speaker alludes to Bishop's observation that "poetry should have more of the unconscious spots left in" ["Key West Notebook 1", p. 89, qtd. by Barbara Page in Lombardi 1993, p. 201]) but only does so in order to contrast her work with the more self-conscious Wallace Stevens.

20 Translation mine.

21 See Lacan's remark on the "homonymic reserve that metaphor works with" (Lacan 1998, p. 34). All translations from *Seminar V* are mine.

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