


4-2012

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Recommended Citation

Phillips, Siobhan. "Elizabeth Bishop and the Ethics of Correspondence." *Modernism/modernity* 19, no. 2 (2012): 343-363.

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Elizabeth Bishop and the Ethics of Correspondence

Siobhan Phillips

Among the letters published for the first time in *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* is a 1970 missive from Bishop.¹ She is reading about Thomas Carlyle, she tells Lowell, and may try to “finish” a “poem about him I’ve had around for years.”² She never did finish it, however, and the poem is not exactly about “him.” A draft appears posthumously as “Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle,”³ and it narrates an incident taken from Jane Carlyle’s correspondence, in which Thomas meets his wife in a busy street after missing her at “The Swan With Two Necks.”⁴ Bishop’s worksheets hail that place-name in what seems to be a final stanza, affirming the doubled bird as a symbol of the Carlyles’ relationship—and the epistolary dynamics of that relationship in particular. Bishop suggests the “Swan With Two Necks” as a model of correspondence when she rewrites Jane’s letter’s anecdote about returning with the “mail from Liverpool” at a mail-coach inn.

This poetic draft helps to articulate Bishop’s conception of a correspondent two-ness. Critics have begun to describe the crucial, indeterminate ambit of Bishop’s epistolary transactions: Langdon Hammer describes a productively unspecified “third area” in what is still the best analysis of Bishop’s correspondent practice, and Heather Treseler analyzes a zone of “epistolary relationship” in her study of Bishop’s correspondent poems.⁵ It is important to note the dyadism of letters, however, in order to understand their implications for Bishop and others of her era. Letters link a particular “I” and a particular “you” rather than dividing a specific “I” from a general “they” (or even a general “we”). With this duality, they articulate a kind of writing that

MODERNISM / *modernity*
VOLUME NINETEEN,
NUMBER TWO,
PP 343–363. © 2012
THE JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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344 is neither singular nor collective, personal nor political. Letters are ethical, rather, insofar as that term can indicate a principled attention to intersubjective exchange.⁶ Correspondent ethics provides models of selfhood, morality, and publicity that are particularly relevant to a writer of Bishop's time.⁷ If Bishop seems increasingly central to her era for both critics and subsequent poets, it is in part because she recognizes this epistolary potential—and shows, too, the problems and questions attendant on its realization. These problems mean that Bishop's ideas of correspondent practice may be most richly evident in the work of one of her correspondents: this essay concludes with a letter-poem by May Swenson, "Dear Elizabeth," that realizes the epistolary ethics suggested in Bishop's own writing.

To recognize epistolary ethics is to grant earnest respect to a seemingly casual form, a type of appreciation important to Bishop. As Jonathan Ellis describes, Bishop saw letters as a genre in their own right: in the many letters she wrote, she mentions the many letters she read, including correspondence of Byron, Chekov, Coleridge, Hart Crane, Creevey, Fitzgerald, Hardy, Hopkins, Henry James, Keats, Millay, Sydney Smith, Madame de Sévigné, Stevens, Queen Victoria, Walpole, and Yeats, among others.⁸ When she taught at Harvard, her one seminar not focused on poetry is titled "Letters: Readings in Personal Correspondence, Famous and Infamous, from the 16th to the 20th Centuries."⁹ Bishop writes (in a letter) that while she plans to include a "nicely incongruous assortment of people" on her syllabus, first among them "Mrs. Carlyle," she intends to discuss correspondence "as an art form or something"—a phrase that takes letters seriously even as it qualifies their seriousness.¹⁰ The paradox fits Bishop's own career, since her ascendancy as a major writer has been buoyed by celebrations of her minor affect: by 2006, David Orr collects adjectives like "modest" when he declares on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review* that in "the second half of the 20th century, no American artist in any medium was greater than Bishop."¹¹ Appreciation of Bishop, moreover, draws particularly from the "medium" of epistolarity, consolidating around the 1994 publication of her collected letters and continuing through the 2010 reception of *Words in Air* and the 2011 appearance of her correspondence with *The New Yorker*.¹² This significantly insignificant genre seems as important to readings of Bishop as it is to Bishop's reading.¹³

Bishop's correspondence has an importance broader than the biographical, although it has been used as life writing.¹⁴ Analyses of epistolarity in scholarly disciplines from anthropology to sociology to history to philosophy help to theorize Bishop's correspondence by articulating the distinct properties of the correspondent form. These are various: tacking between aesthetic expression and practical necessity, letters may be an ur-genre modeling written communication as easily as an addendum providing secondary details.¹⁵ Regardless of their place or importance, however, letters are distinguished by the "pact" that Janet Altman identifies in her classic study of epistolary fiction: "the call for response," as she writes, "from a specific reader."¹⁶ Such reciprocity defines a model of two-party relationship that is not necessarily familial or romantic, a model still undertheorized in literary studies. Letters thereby disrupt the familiar dichotomies of self/other and private/public: if cultural theorists and sociologists have

shown the problems with such binaries, the person-to-person expression of epistolarity demonstrates an alternative.¹⁷ This alternative prompts us to look at Bishop's epistolarity for its models of ethical interaction rather than its itinerary of biographical detail.

It is such interaction, for example, that Bishop recognizes and emphasizes in the epistolary couple of "Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle." As fanatically communicative as they were famously contentious, this pair's happiest moments together came when writing to each other: their constant, animated correspondence turned opposition into affection. Bishop's draft emphasizes the result as her poem manages the same shift. She tells the story of a happy meeting by starting with a preamble of annoying travel:

The mail from Liverpool was fifteen minutes early
 at the Swan with Two Necks.
 No sign of Mr. Carlyle, so Mrs. Carlyle
 put her "luggage on the backs

of two porters, walked to Cheapside,
 took a Chelsea omnibus"
 and got inside it with her headache,
 hoping this would save a lot of fuss.

He was living only for his book
 these days, and she lived not to vex
 Mr. Carlyle, who meanwhile had set out on foot
 to meet her at the Swan with Two Necks.

Her trunks went up on top.
 She would be at home now soon.
 She was feeling perfectly wretched.
 It was a hot September afternoon.

Bishop then forecasts the happier climax of her story with her closing:

One flesh and two heads
 engaged in kisses or in pecks.
 Oh white seething marriage!
 Oh Swan with Two Necks!¹⁸

Culminating in the final apostrophe to double-necked, double-headed two-ness, the poem describes a particular domain of ethical attention. When Thomas stops "brooding about Robespierre," as Bishop writes in other draft lines, in order to notice his wife, he shifts from his account of a world-historical revolution to his obligations in an everyday interaction, but one that requires him to leave the sanctuary of his study for a busy outdoors.¹⁹ Husband and wife manage to find each other, as Jane writes in her letter, "amidst all the imaginable and unimaginable phenomena which the immense thoroughfare of a street presents."²⁰ The serendipitous cheer of that meeting proves

346 the good of its dyadic, liminal space: Thomas should not “liv[e] only for his book” (*The French Revolution*), just as Jane should not “live” to keep from “vexing” him, since the “vexations” of mutual care are a redemptive part and a creative product of one’s best living. Bishop thus follows a suggestion from Jane’s letter, in which she argues that her husband’s discovery of her was “indubitable proof of genius”; though Thomas *was* a “genius,” Bishop agrees in her draft, and though a genius’s “powers of observation are [remarkably] spotty,” he proves himself in this instance “a *little* aware,” even “if it was only to his own name.” For this poem of “Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle,” that name does not legitimate a prominent man so much as mark the relationship of two people, with the “seething” in their shared signature the interanimation of partners at work rather than the subordination of a frustrated helpmeet to a Victorian hero. Bishop’s “swan with two necks” uses its source to suggest a literary-humanistic possibility, recognizing the white of the page as an almost erotic field of affection and resistance, in which the exchange of words can turn into a dialogue of kisses and pecks and in which those kisses and pecks can turn into each other. The “Swan” of “Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle” honors the genre in which this poem began, evincing Bishop’s appreciation for writing as an ethical relationship rather than subjective expression or objective account.

This kind of writing tempers a salient conception of authorship—one taking creative expression as individual and poetic expression as particularly so. Recent critics have dismantled the familiar assumption that the lyric is a transcription of solitary interiority, an “overheard” reflection offering the reader a script for self-interpellation. William Waters, for example, analyzes models of address to show how poetic speakers manage imagined or actual interlocutors, and Virginia Jackson shows how “lyric reading” has promoted a limiting, inaccurate definition of poetry that neglects situated exchange for abstract monologism.²¹ Poems that use letters, and poets who value letters, support and extend these valuable insights; Jackson’s exploration of Emily Dickinson’s correspondence, in fact, shows how this quintessentially lyric poet corrects our mistaken notions of lyricism when she embeds poems in notes to a correspondent.²² The implications of epistolarity, however, are perhaps even more relevant to poets of a later period, when a version of Jackson’s “lyric reading” had been codified in New Critical practice.²³ Writers of Bishop’s time, who came to maturity in the shadow of an institutionalized modernism, would have been especially conscious of the lyric speaker as a central category and the lyric’s sociality as a central question. Letters allow them to unsettle the terms in which this question was commonly posed, terms which mark even so challenging a contemporaneous essay as Adorno’s “The Lyric Poet and Society” (1957). When Adorno argues, counterintuitively, for the universal import of personal speech, he nonetheless relies on a commonplace distinction between individual and collective.²⁴ Letters replace this lyric boundary between the private voice and its public appearance with the epistolary space of an interpersonal text.

This possibility sheds light on Bishop’s relationship to the “confessionalism” so prominent in her lifetime and so antipathetic to her sensibility. In her excellent analysis, Deborah Nelson shows how confessional poetry exaggerates the division of personal

and general: drawing its power from the sensation of divulged secrets, confessionalism presents something like the limit case for the individualist lyric.²⁵ This is evident in the work of Robert Lowell, especially in Lowell's most famous instance of confessional transgression, *The Dolphin*. Though Lowell composed this volume at the same time that Bishop worked on her Carlyle poem, Lowell makes very different use of a wife's letters. His collection includes and alters, without consent, correspondence written by his own estranged spouse, Elizabeth Hardwick. As Nelson demonstrates, the poet thereby emphasizes the "'privateness' of Hardwick's coerced collaboration to secure the publicness of his own voice."²⁶ One can frame an alternative to this contradictory maneuver, however, through aspects of the genre in question: letters need not be taken as the private documents of one person that another should or should not make public. Letters might rather be seen as the interchange of two people that is neither public nor private. It seems worth noting, then, that Bishop's well-known objections to *The Dolphin* cite other writers' letters in a letter to Lowell against his use of letters, mustering quotations from correspondence by Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Henry James (*WIA*, 707–8). Bishop's appreciation of the genre Lowell appropriated supports her opposition to his appropriation, as letters bolster her distaste for an individualism that could only draw contrasts between self and other.²⁷ Against the confessional "voice" of exposed interiority, letters suggest a correspondent text of interrelated subjectivity.

This contrast helps to explain why Bishop's letter-indebted ascendancy, in the years since her death, should accompany Lowell's declining reputation: Michael Hofmann, for example, reads the co-authored *Words in Air* as evidence for "Bishop's increasingly sweeping posthumous triumph."²⁸ Letters help us to resist the hierarchy implied by such assessments with an articulation, instead, of two writers' differences, as well as the changing critical preferences they suggest. Lowell demonstrates little of Bishop's relish for reading correspondence, and nothing like her obsessive pleasure in writing it. Her letters gather velocity as they go, beginning as "short note[s]" that somehow extend for many typewritten pages, and continue after they stop, accruing handwritten postscripts and marginal emendations among promises to write again soon and requests for quick replies (*WIA*, 464, 577). This is perhaps because Lowell demonstrates little of Bishop's delight in the basic reciprocity of epistolarity: whereas Lowell describes letter-writing as "facing yourself in the mirror," Bishop compares it to "conversation" (*OA*, 67).²⁹ "Oh dear—now I don't want to stop talking . . ." she writes to him in one late message of typically fluent question-and-answer, for example (*WIA*, 725). An earlier passage evinces the same fluency, after Bishop describes herself as "talking to you like Dorothy Dix": "I didn't think much of Jarrell's poem in the last *Partisan Review*, did you . . . How do you feel about Browning and why don't the critics ever mention him in connection with you? . . . I just finished *Trial of a Poet*—& I didn't think much of that—the tone seems to me so often false" (*WIA*, 23). Lowell tends to impart his opinions in direct statements ("it's an over-clever *tour-de-force*," he writes in reply about the Jarrell poem, "Money"), whereas Bishop tends to weave hers into dialogic inquiry (*WIA*, 25). She generates her own thoughts by soliciting others' assessments

348 and her own descriptions by imagining others' reactions. She practices writing as self-connection rather than self-expression.³⁰

This tendency resists what Bishop sees as "falsity" in Karl Shapiro's *Trial of a Poet*, with its weighty speeches of public import, through a tone as "sincere and spontaneous" as that she recommends in other Shapiro poems.³¹ If Bishop's letters might seem more-than-usually appealing, in part, because of how they revel in the same epistolary affect, they might seem more-than-usually important, at the same time, because of how such affect suffuses Bishop's poetry.³² Consider "The Bight," which could be an exercise in resisting the confessional: the poem begins with the epigraph notation "on my birthday" and ends with a "jawful of marl" as well as the phrase on Bishop's tombstone, yet the lines between forgo the contents of a life for the observations of a place and time (*PPL*, 46–47). It is fitting, then, that "The Bight" had its origin in a passage from the same letter to Lowell quoted above—"It reminds me a little of my desk," she writes to him of the harbor she sees—and that the poem's low-key turning point comes with metaphors of epistolarity. When damaged boats from "the last bad storm" appear as "unanswered letters" and "old correspondences" for Bishop to complete, she counters confessional despair with conversational account as she sets down the details of "awful but cheerful" activity. Correspondence helps to distinguish the "peculiar Bishop voice"³³ in such verse reportage, suggesting an intersubjective valence even to those works of "plain description" that are not explicitly marked with an interlocutor (*WIA*, 85). Epistolarity fosters a selfhood that is not necessarily autobiographical and yet remains undeniably personal.

The dyad between epistolary partners also implies a principle of politeness—a second implication of epistolary intersubjectivity. In fact, Bishop presents her anti-confessionalism as "a kind of 'good manners'" (*PPL*, 864). Epistolarity nourishes the "goodness" that Zachariah Pickard has discerned in Bishop's work: if the result is often careful description, offered to another, its ground is considerate sociality, thoughtful of "audience" or "other people," as Bishop put it in her letter against confessional "self-absorption" (*PPL*, 864–65).³⁴ Indeed "Manners," as the poem of that title recalls, means "speak[ing]" and "being spoken to" (*PPL*, 119). Bishop describes the effects in her essay on Marianne Moore, which was also in draft at the time of "Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle" and *The Dolphin*, and which ends with the vital question of "manners and morals; manners as morals? Or is it morals as manners?" These desirable morals-manners are embodied in Gerard Manley Hopkins's "ideal of the 'gentleman'" (*PPL*, 498–99),³⁵ who proves his status through consideration of others, and who thereby shows the "democracy" of Moore's own courtesy to both T. S. Eliot and an "elevator man."³⁶ When Lowell violates this same ideal with his lack of consideration for a correspondent, Bishop invokes the same mannered example in her objections to *The Dolphin*. "I keep remembering Hopkins' marvelous letter to Bridges," she tells her friend, "about the idea of a 'gentleman' being the highest thing ever conceived" (*WIA*, 708). Bishop cites epistolary manners against Lowell's confessional methods, demoting the artistry and religiosity implicit to anything "confessional" by agreeing with Hopkins's preference for a "gentleman" over a "Christian" or the "poet." For Bishop, letters show the seeming trivialities of social convention to be more rigorous than art or faith.³⁷

Letters therefore present a reactionary standard in a surprisingly relevant light: an ethics of sociality is particular germane to an age that can no longer presume theological or aesthetic normativity. For post-war theorists, in fact, human relation offers a still-valid basis for moral strictures. Emmanuel Levinas's increasingly influential work is the most important example of this strain,³⁸ deriving an ethical calling from intersubjective conditions, and Jean-Luc Nancy, among others, has found a related program in recognition of alterity.³⁹ Levinas even agrees with Bishop on the import of "the pure polish of manners."⁴⁰ Bishop's epistolary manners, however, temper the ideality and immediacy of the Levinasian paradigm, since hers are less an existential attention to unknown otherness than a conscious engagement with specific familiars.⁴¹ A dyadic model of two agents modifies the "passivity" of the vulnerable Levinasian subject as well as the indeterminacy of the demanding Levinasian other.⁴² Epistolary ethics thereby recalls an eighteenth-century "culture of politeness" as it also relates to a post-war construction of alterity:⁴³ it is no accident that the heyday of the letter as a form occurred in a period when theorists of moral sentiments posited sociality as an ethical force.⁴⁴ For writers like David Hume and Adam Smith, human good emerges from the manners of interpersonal situations rather than metaphysics of given truths or the mechanisms of ahistorical logic: Hume recommends that we guide our conduct by considering how it "appear[s] in the eyes of those who approach and regard us," for example, and Smith forwards the regard for others' "censure or applause" as the basis of moral sense.⁴⁵ These earlier theorists clarify how Bishop's epistolary "ideal" can provide exigent morals for a disenchanted world.

The dynamics of that ideal, in turn, help to explain some seemingly illogical aspects of Bishop's specific moral injunctions. The status of truth is one example: in *The Dolphin* debate, Bishop's objections to Lowell decry the "mixture of fact & fiction" even though a logical concern for verity against artifice could well recommend the inclusion of more, rather than less, of Hardwick's correspondence (WIA, 708). Bishop's "truth," in her epistolary model, means not objective accuracy but intersubjective "trust"—being true to another; and if Lowell has "violat[ed] a trust" by publishing another's words, a reader cannot "trust" what he presents (WIA, 708–709). When a subsequent letter from Bishop, therefore, returns to the "the mixture of truth & fiction," she adds, "of course, I don't know anything about your possible agreements with E" (WIA, 716). To preclude such agreements, in Bishop's view, is to preclude the truth consonant with her "gentlemanly" ideal. Lowell seems to accept, even acknowledge, this judgment, since he writes a sonnet called "Truth," added to *The Dolphin* after Bishop's dismayed letters, which asserts—through Auden's voice—that "W. B. Yeats was not a gent, / he didn't tell the truth."⁴⁶ When *Dolphin* poems express ethical doubts, Lowell turns to his own "conscience" rather than another's complaints;⁴⁷ his morals aspire to lone absolution rather than mutual accommodation.⁴⁸

Indeed as David Gewanter has persuasively argued, Lowell's drafts of *The Dolphin* show progressively less dialogism and progressively more emphasis on his own authority.⁴⁹ In Gewanter's terms, this choice reveals Lowell's preference for the "modernism" of individualism rather than the "postmodernism" of collaborative practice. Bishop's

350 epistolary objections, however, help to define the anachronistic roots of that latter, progressive alternative. She discovers an ethics suitable for her age by resurrecting standards exemplified in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century figures: “Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle,” for example, in whose correspondence a relational model of subjectivity might yield a responsible attention to alterity. Epistolary dyadism, therefore, helps to stipulate the “moral . . . atmosphere” that critics have struggled to define in Bishop’s work,⁵⁰ as well as to credit an overt moralism that critics have been reluctant to discuss, without dismissing it as fusty or negligible. When the poem “Letter to N.Y.,” for example, uses correspondence to call its recipient to account after a night of wild oats in the city, it demonstrates the accountability Bishop seeks through her own letter-writing, which asks for correspondents to send her “strength of character” (*OA*, 515). Letters help to forbid the absorption of the self-regarding and the presumption of the “social[ly] conscious,” two tendencies that Bishop abhorred, with cognizance of one’s “surroundings, other people’s personalities, etc. etc.”—as she writes in one letter (*OA*, 87). Epistolary links an intersubjective situation to a moral standard.

Given the importance of the epistolary to Bishop, though, it seems curious that “Letter to New York” is the only poem of hers to be labeled as correspondence, that “Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle,” along with several other letter-indebted drafts, remains unfinished.⁵¹ Bishop was a poet who loved letters and yet had difficulty making letters into poems. The fact suggests the third crucial aspect of correspondent ethics: its modification of a writer’s public. Here, again, epistolary marks a difference between Bishop and Lowell, since Lowell’s declining reputation in recent decades, as Marjorie Perloff describes, might arise from his asymmetry with the “diverse communities” of readers in a “post-canonical age.”⁵² Lowell’s confessional subjectivity, which presents personal testimony to unknown, unspecified others, assumes a different audience than does Bishop’s correspondent affect, which moves among two-party affiliations with particular familiars.⁵³ Bishop was in fact uneasy with the idea of a wide readership: “I really often think,” she writes to one critic, “I would have preferred the days when poems just got handed around among friends.”⁵⁴ True to her preference, Bishop often sent a poem with a letter or a poem “as a letter,” appreciating the same in return; she relished inscriptions in books and many times requested that her works be printed with a dedication (*WIA*, 171).⁵⁵ If Lowell’s poetic persona inhabits an economy of celebrity—in which he could appear on the cover of *Time* magazine—Bishop’s suggests an economy of gift—in which the experience of art, as Lewis Hyde describes, depends on “a relationship between the parties involved.”⁵⁶

The need for relationship vexes the prospect of publication, however, since Bishop did not in fact live during an era of coterie, “hand-around” circulation. Her difficulties in shaping personal letters toward more formal literary genres show her dissatisfaction with a general public-ness that might destroy the very conditions of epistolary. She could not complete a “Brazilian letter” for *The New York Review of Books*, for example, even though she could report her stalled progress in a long letter to Lowell ranging in subject matter from Leon Edel’s biography of Henry James to the Yemanjá celebra-

tion on Copacabana beach; with its questions, references, appeals, and inquiries, that correspondence everywhere presumes the person-to-person communication that a published work cannot (*WIA*, 456–63). Bishop’s eventual contribution to the *Review*, moreover, restores her preferred status as a personal correspondent, since she offers her translation of work by a Brazilian poet, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, who is “so shy,” Bishop writes elsewhere, that he and she “transact everything by letter.”⁵⁷ She handled similarly a request from *The New Republic*, when the journal asked for a regular contribution from South America, since she wrote to Lowell that she intended to ask “a good Brazilian” to compose these pieces instead, and later mentions Clarice Lispector’s “articles for the *New Republic*, and 2 ‘Letters’ of mine she was going to use in her column” (*WIA*, 408, 450). Bishop’s letters to a Brazilian writer become that writer’s offering to an American journal: this was the kind of correspondence that Bishop felt comfortable in publishing. Her epistolary need for one-on-one connection, in these and other instances, helps to explain her difficult passage into any general publication.

It also helps to explain the difficult passage into any general politics: as Bishop’s reliance on a “good Brazilian” demonstrates, epistolarity complicates the role of public citizen as well as the role of published author. Bishop’s letters from South America would manage the uncertainties of expatriate status—aptly symbolized, from the start, in those slippery “postage stamps” that trouble her “Arrival at Santos”—with an emphasis on specific relationship; in her correspondence, the local affections of exchange could prevent the potential aggrandizements of representation (*PPL*, 72). She could speak, as she writes to Lowell when describing governmental efforts, “as a friend rather than as an official American” (*WIA*, 362). Bishop’s distinction, however, suggests how hazy the line is between epistolary ethics and representative politics, and their symbiosis is equally evident in the contemporaneous theories of public discourse: Hannah Arendt’s account of politics, for example, or Habermas’s description of *Öffentlichkeit* (public sphere). Both of these different models respond to the memory of totalitarianism and the rise of mass culture with a call for renewed “civil society” based on universal, rational, argument, and yet both rely on the specific, affectual transactions of epistolarity.⁵⁸ Arendt’s agonistic theory, Seyla Benhabib has shown, began with attention to an eighteenth-century salon culture that nurtured letter exchange. Habermas himself, meanwhile, describes how the discourse of objective reason emerged from the literature of subjective emotion in an eighteenth-century context that he termed the “century of the letter.”⁵⁹ These genealogies of the post-war public sphere suggest that discursive citizenship cannot entirely dispense with epistolary dynamics: that a correspondent practice will always inform, perhaps, a political participation.⁶⁰

Bishop’s practice can specify the difficulties attendant on that mixture—the unease evident in her ambivalent “official”-ness, for example. “Friendly” citizenship brings particular dangers and benefits when it mixes personal emotion and collective action. Lauren Berlant specifies some of these in her analysis of an “intimate public sphere,” explaining how the “displacement of politics to the realm of feeling” allows “analysis of the operations of injustice in lived democracy” but also “shows the obstacles to social change that emerge when politics becomes privatized.”⁶¹ Berlant’s argument extends a

352 long critique of “sentimentality” in American political or literary culture when it warns that a substitution of personal affect for political will diverts real demands for policy change into the mere desire for affirmation of emotions.⁶² As letters manifest this diversion, though, they show how the one-on-one relationships of ethics strengthen as well as threaten the abstract categories of politics. On the one hand, personal correspondence manifests the intersubjective consideration that can justify or model objective policies; on the other, personal correspondence nourishes the subjective biases that can weaken or ignore objective justice.⁶³

This twinned potential helps to describe why Bishop’s politics can seem at once subversive in its recovery of neglected voices and reactionary in its ignorance of systemic flaws. In her letters, and in the vision they support, she would temper an undesirable hegemony of public information even as she would ignore the undesirable reach of general conditions. Her correspondence emphasizes, for example, the mismatch between newspaper stories of Brazil’s revolution and her lived experience of the same event (*OA*, 401, 424; *WIA*, 376–77, 532). “Reporters are always told to agree with whoever’s in power,” she writes angrily to Lowell, whereas correspondence can present the disagreements of the non-powerful—those, like her household, for whom revolution meant “everyone sit[ting] in the dark . . . and telephon[ing] their friends all day and all night” (*WIA*, 172, 523). Friendly interchange registers the sphere where differences in government policy yields to alliances of ordinary practicality; Bishop reports, for example, how opponents share *cafézinhos* and reporters ferry messages to soldiers’ wives (*WIA*, 525–26). But friendly interchange, also, can ignore real problems in policy; Bishop’s acquaintance with Carlos Lacerda, for example, prompted her letters to brush aside “liberal intellectual” arguments about Lacerda’s disregard of “civil rights” (*WIA*, 532–33). A related ignorance produces her concluding point in one of the few pieces of journalism about Brazil that she was able to complete: here, she approvingly describes a local advertisement showing “a young Negro cook, overcome by her pleasure in having a new gas stove, leaning across it toward her white mistress, who leaned over from her side of the stove as they kissed each other on the cheek” (*PPL*, 448). Bishop’s description of this kiss validates Berlant’s warnings about sentimentality when Bishop implies that personal recognition is sufficient cure for political discrimination.

Her description, however, also demonstrates a political potential that might inhere in the very dyadism of epistolary relationship: as James Longenbach notes, the billboard’s most radical aspect is its depiction of same-sex affection between two women.⁶⁴ Bishop’s “friendly” politics relied on the same; she was not an “official American,” in Brazil, because she was the partner of Lota de Macedo Soares—herself a Brazilian public servant and the familiar of several others. Thus if heterosexual marriage has long defined the borders between public and private,⁶⁵ and particularly so among post-war redefinitions of privacy, Bishop’s epistolarity revises that limited and hierarchical model.⁶⁶ Epistolary ethics allows a more varied and egalitarian two-ness while suggesting this multiplicitous dyadism as a political and a personal standard. “Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle” does so, for example, even in its celebration of a traditionally married man and woman, as Bishop uses a wife’s letters to recommend a fluidly contested authorship

that is neither entirely civic nor properly domestic. This implication again differentiates her work from Lowell's, since the marital letters in *The Dolphin* seem to reinforce patriarchal divisions of public, male authority and private, female disempowerment. It might link Bishop's work to Marianne Moore's, instead, since The Carlyles' "seething" interchange recalls the "fight to be affectionate" in Moore's "Marriage," a poem that Bishop cites in her contemporaneous essay about Moore and later quotes in her elegy for Lowell (*PPL*, 489, 177).⁶⁷ Moore's emphasis on "liberty and union" connects the integrity of one's personal partnership to the health of one's political society; Bishop's correspondence makes dyadic ethics essential to both when it questions the borders between them.⁶⁸

Bishop's epistolarity is thus implicitly feminist, mining the political possibilities of the sentimental "women's culture" in Berlant's critique, and using the traditionally feminine genre of the letter to support a long-held feminist dissatisfaction with the divisions between the personal and the political.⁶⁹ It seems fitting that Bishop's essay on Moore appreciates the "feminism" of "Marriage."⁷⁰ But epistolary ethics could be implicitly queer as well: if "Marriage," as Linda Leavell has shown, probably took the homosexual relationship of Monroe Wheeler and Glenway Wescott as one example of its ideal, Bishop's "swan with two necks" suggests a queer version of matrimony with its playful image of erotic doubling.⁷¹ Her epistolary ethics supports that homosexual politics that questions the divisions and definitions of the political, while suggesting that such politics need not vilify partnership as a form.⁷² Though procreative matrimony has imposed an exclusionary model of "social union," as Michael Warner rightly emphasizes, dyadic relationship might counter with an unrestricted model of social interaction, nourishing those "nonstandard intimacies" that Warner's seminal analysis would forward as both a public and a private freedom.⁷³ Correspondent reciprocity maintains the parity of two parties while refusing to regulate their manner of two-ness.

The unfinished status of Bishop's draft could well reflect ambivalence or uncertainty about such manipulation of "Mr. and Mrs." correspondents, however much Bishop's own letter-writing practice posits nonstandard interchange, and however much her letter-indebted publications relied on the same.⁷⁴ Other post-war poets, however, use the ethics of correspondence to wield more explicitly the model of epistolary ethics, including its implications for public action, personal expression, and interpersonal consideration: Jack Spicer, for example, when he imagines posthumous epistolary connection, or Lorine Niedecker, when she writes her late poems about the letters of great men, or James Schuyler, when his epistolary poems turn correspondence into a principle of elegiac care, or Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, when their wartime letters question political poetry and sexual roles. Or May Swenson, when she writes back to Bishop in a poem exemplifying the very epistolarity that Bishop's own poems and letters recommend. With "Dear Elizabeth," Swenson shows how correspondence allows an aesthetic creativity that is inseparable from its ethical challenge.

The subject of Swenson's poem, a "pair of *Bicos de Lacre*," compares to the doubled swan of Bishop's "Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle" while expanding its possibilities: Swenson's

354 poem is not a third-person description but a second-person exchange between two writers.⁷⁵ Focus on the work's epistolary form might thereby complement the reading of Kristin Hotelling Zona, whose excellent analysis of the Bishop-Swenson relationship argues that Swenson was frustrated and inspired by Bishop's sexual reticence; "Dear Elizabeth," Zona suggests, would capitalize on a sensual content that Bishop suppressed. But "Dear Elizabeth" would also capitalize on an epistolary context that Bishop helped to create. Swenson's poem begins by emphasizing that context, as the title and opening make clear:

Yes, I'd like a pair of *Bicos de Lacre*—
 meaning beaks of "lacquer" or "sealing wax"?
 (the words are the same in Portuguese)
 ". . . about 3 inches long including the tail,
 red bills and narrow bright red marks . . .
 You say the male has a sort of "drooping
 mandarin-mustache—one black stripe"—

otherwise the sexes are alike.

In two lines, Swenson secures both the memory and expectation of reply, her "yes" responding to a query and her puzzlement about translation posing another; from the start, this poem replaces the lyric convention of lone, abstracted speaker with the epistolary situation of two particular writers. With this, it replaces the expression of a singular perspective to a general audience with the management of dyadic interplay between related questioners and answers—from the responsive, prospective "yes" of the opening stanza to the responsive, prospective "yes" of the closing. In the correspondent ethics of "Dear Elizabeth," its easy-but-careful design suggests, a finished work is no more or less than an ongoing exchange.

Fresh correspondence thus guides the work's evolution as well as animates its finished form: "In today's letter you / write," Swenson records in the sixth stanza. The manuscripts of Bishop's and Swenson's actual correspondence confirm this: Bishop first mentions the *Bicos de Lacre* on August 27, 1963, in a message that provides many of the details in "Dear Elizabeth," when she tells how she "couldn't resist" buying "a pair of Bica Lacquas,"

(lacquer beaks, or maybe sealing-wax beaks—the words the same)—I wish I could send you a pair and I wonder if they import them. They're the most adorable bird I know—about 3" long, including the tail—extremely delicate; bright red bills and narrow bright red masks. The male has a sort of mandarin drooping mustache—one black line—otherwise they're just alike. They're tiny but plump—and the feathers are incredibly beautiful, shading from brown and gray on top to pale beige, white, and a rose red spot on the belly—but all this in almost invisible ripples of color alternating with white—wave-ripples, just like sand ripples on a sand flat after the tide has gone out—all so fine I have to put on my reading glasses to appreciate it properly. They're almost as affectionate as love-birds, and they have a nest—smaller than a fist—with a doorway in the side, that they both get in to sleep.⁷⁶

By a letter of October 3, Swenson has already sent Bishop a draft that uses this paragraph, and Bishop turns to “our bird poem” with more information for Swenson to assimilate; on October 12, Bishop writes with more (OA, 418). On November 11, she concludes more description with “I think I have really exhausted that subject,” but on March 9, she again reports on the birds’ activities: “The Bicos de Lacre are as adorable as ever—so tiny—so clean, taking baths constantly in this heat, and then retiring to their *filthy* little nest to lay another egg—which never hatches—”⁷⁷ Swenson incorporates these words, too, only to receive more in a letter from Bishop of March 11. “Dear Elizabeth” extends the dialogic energy that spurred Bishop’s letters. As Bishop’s descriptions become Swenson’s verse, as Swenson’s verse prompts Bishop’s descriptions, the poem’s scatter of quotation marks charts the back-and-forth of mutual generation.

“Dear Elizabeth” is thus determinedly textual, depending on the materiality of epistolary exchange—and clarifying, thereby, the perennial comparison of correspondence and conversation that Bishop found so comforting. Letters show an oscillation between writing and speech that makes them paradigmatic for the ambiguous status of literary expression.⁷⁸ Such ambiguity may be particularly germane to *lyric* expression, moreover, with its originary comparison to song, and Swenson’s epistolary poetics emphasizes this interplay of poetic sonority and prosaic sense. The poem capitalizes on the chimes of “nests” to “fist,” “sleep” to “keep,” “shred” to “bed,” “flies” to “eyes,” “neat” to “heat,” “ripe” to “stripe,” among others—yet sets these sounds in aurally unobtrusive stanzas that resist metrical or rhyme schemes to accommodate the flow of sentence syntax. Swenson manifests a music as subtle as the “extreme” note of the Bicos de Lacs, which is “not something one hears, / but must watch the cat’s ears to detect.” The poetry that results, both designed and felicitous, suggests that letters can be taken as lyrics just as lyrics might be taken as letters. After all, the notes in question will have to come from beaks of “sealing wax,” a traditional accessory of correspondence, and from a bird that one must “put on / reading glasses to appreciate . . . properly.” Swenson’s first stanza, again, already presents the vital combination of meaning and music when a rhyming pair of words question what italicized letters indicate in English.

That query also invokes the spatial and political divide that separates the two writers. The *Bicos* note thus compares to other national sounds that were posted between them; at different points, Bishop sent Swenson a recording of Brazilian birds and an album of sambas, while Swenson sent Bishop LPs of Odetta’s folk songs and Robert Johnson’s blues. All were part of that “gift economy” that Bishop nurtured in letters, with their friendly circulation of poems among other products: she often asked correspondents to purchase items in the States, in fact, and send them to her in South America labeled as a personal present. Swenson was Bishop’s favorite among buyers, procuring at various times perch scrapers, blue jeans, typewriter ribbons, a radio, eyeglass wipes, and a bathing suit as well as books, clippings, and records. Such arrangements may have been necessary, as Bishop claimed, because of Brazil’s uncertain customs office, but such arrangements also bespeak her preference for the friendly interchange of correspondents rather than the official transactions of citizens or consumers. Indeed Bishop’s dispatch of indigenous music might be her replacement for the journalistic

356 “letter from Brazil” that she was unable to write, since she tells Swenson that she was trying to “concentrate on Sambas” as she composed “something about Brazil” for “that N Y Review.”⁷⁹ When Swenson reports back on her plans to recreate South American song in New York—to “build . . . a little Brazil” for Bishop’s *Bicos* gift among the “back porch on Perry St.”—the dynamics of epistolarity model international affiliation as well as commercial transaction and literary authorship.

In the case of Bishop and Swenson, those dynamics produce a mutual appreciation that evades the constrictions of other sorts of relationship. Swenson was briefly in love with Bishop at the start of their acquaintance and Bishop at several points offered Swenson advice on her work.⁸⁰ But in their decades of epistolary confidences about writing, reading, travel, politics, pets, finances, child-rearing, psychoanalysis, fine art, and many other subjects, these poets’ correspondence ranged far beyond the roles of lover or mentor.⁸¹ The resulting freedom of affect was not as present, perhaps, in Bishop’s other major epistolary exchanges, including her correspondence with Lowell (who famously wrote about his desire to marry her) and Moore (who famously wrote detailed corrections of Bishop’s work). Bishop complained to Swenson, in fact, about Lowell’s impractical style of gift-giving, and recalls in her memoir how “complicated” it was for her to give presents to Moore (*PPL*, 481). Offerings to the latter, whether of presents or poems or postcards, may be “complicated” by the Kleinian reparations that Treseler has described so well in Bishop’s epistolary poetry,⁸² whether or not the Moore-Bishop relationship can be limited to a mother-daughter model of intersubjectivity.⁸³ Moore’s poem about a present from Bishop, it is worth noting, describes the maternal “love” of “The Paper Nautilus” rather than the liberated affection of “Marriage” (*PPL*, 121–22).⁸⁴ The ideal of free union might be better embodied in the correspondence of “Dear Elizabeth,” and its epistolary transactions of “real generosity and real feeling”—to use Bishop’s words about another present from Swenson (*OA*, 377).

That feeling might model a queer reciprocity, moreover, though critics have tended to look to the Moore-Bishop exchange, instead, as a model of subversive gender and sexual roles.⁸⁵ In “Dear Elizabeth,” Swenson shows how correspondent dyadism both enables creativity and questions its heteronormative valence. This is evident when the poem considers the result of Swenson’s New York Brazil-recreation: “Although ‘their egg,’ Swenson quotes,

. . . is apt
to be barely as big as a baked bean . . .”
It rarely hatches in captivity, you mean—

but we could hope! In today’s letter you write, “The *Bicos de Lacre* are adorable as ever—so tiny, neat, and taking baths constantly in this heat, in about ¼ inch of water—then returning to their *filthy* little nest to lay another egg—which never hatches.” But here it might!

The union of bean and mean, the only end rhyme of the poem, heightens the drama of that dash and stanza break leading to Swenson's imagined triumph. It is Bishop's imagined triumph, too, since she writes to Swenson that the egg "rarely hatches in captivity—but I'm hoping."⁸⁶ When Swenson exclaims, "But here it might!" she suggests that a transposition from Petropolis to Perry Street could be key to these birds' efforts: only the epistolary cooperation staged between two friends, texts, locations, and languages allows these two songsters to realize their creative project. That project, moreover, compares to the creativity of "Dear Elizabeth" itself: Swenson can thus imagine, in the subsequent stanza, that she sees the birds "as I / write—on their perch on my porch." Writing another's words, in this letter-lyric, and writing back to those words, produce a mutual "hatching" of aesthetic promise.

Swenson specifies that promise further, however, when she fulfills the implicit demands of her epistolary method by turning finally to her far-off addressee rather than concluding with her own vision in New York. "Yes, dear Elizabeth," Swenson writes,

if you would be so
kind, I'd like a pair of *Bicos de Lacre*—
especially as in your P.S. you confess,
"I already have two unwed female wild
canaries, for which I must find husbands
in order to have a little song around here."

When the line-break between "wild" and "canaries" suggests a conflation of unwed female singers and unwed female poets, it questions Bishop's supposition that she must "find husbands" for her music-makers. The lyricism of "Dear Elizabeth," Swenson reminds her, has come through a husbandless pairing. The poem's two correspondents, in their imagined exchange and poetic correspondence, can replace frustrated canaries with potentially generative *Bicos*. Bishop describes these "sociable" animals as "almost as affectionate as love-birds";⁸⁷ Swenson's poem queers this amorous lyricism with the heterogeneous affections in an epistolary text. These include the feeling in her final "dear Elizabeth," the poem's only repetition of its title, and its deferential following of "if you would be so kind": as it teeters between mockery and tribute, the humorous exaggeration of Swenson's politeness at the close of her poem compares to the humorous exaggeration of Bishop's homage at the close of "Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle." "Dear Elizabeth," however, estranges the standard "dear" only to adhere more deeply to its promise. She transforms a familiar mark of the letter genre's sentiment into an uncertain mark of a particular letter's emotions. Swenson honors correspondence's conventions by making them a challenge to her correspondent—asking Bishop to recognize what epistolarity ethics can mean.

This challenge suggests a different role for the poem's future reader, too: a correspondent ethics does not seduce its audience into an easy intimacy so much as forbid it from a disengaged consideration. If writer and reader, Swenson and Bishop suggest, are always indefinitely linked in their interdependent positions, the aesthetic and political possibilities of this epistolarity depend on maintaining dyadic responsibility without

358 falling into determined roles. When it came time to publish “Dear Elizabeth,” then, Bishop would remain clear about the ambiguity of its genre: querying the explanatory subtitle of “[a] reply to Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil,” she writes, “I shd think just ‘Letters’ or even ‘Letters to El B in Brazil’ might sound better . . . since *reply* suggests one of those literary controversy things rather than simple letters.”⁸⁸ Swenson’s verse letter to her, Bishop knows, must remain as correspondence between friends rather than statements between authors. It is the richness of “simple letters” that allows this poem’s literary complexity.

Excerpts from unpublished letters to My Swensen by Elizabeth Bishop 1963–1965. Copyright © 2011 by the Alice Methfessel Trust. Printed by permission of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, LLC on behalf of the Elizabeth Bishop Estate, and by Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections.

Notes

1. For thoughts on this essay, I am grateful to Charles Altieri, Langdon Hammer, Martin Hägglund, Peter Howarth, Reena Sastri, and Heather Treseler. I also thank students and colleagues in the English Department of Dickinson College for their thoughts in a seminar on “Dear Elizabeth.”

2. Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, ed. Thomas J. Travisano and Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008), 674 (hereafter cited in text as *WIA*).

3. Elizabeth Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*, ed. Alice Quinn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006), 180.

4. Bishop owned Jane Carlyle’s correspondence and Froude’s biography, both of which include the letter in question. *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol. 1, ed. J. A. Froude (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1883), 65; *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1834–1881* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884), 68.

5. Langdon Hammer, “Useless Concentration: Life and Work in Elizabeth Bishop’s Letters and Poems,” *American Literary History* 9.1 (1997): 173; Heather Treseler, “Lyric Letters: Elizabeth Bishop’s Epistolary Poems,” PhD diss., thesis, University of Notre Dame, 2010, 116.

6. In her study of lyric address, Helen Vendler notes that “every human relation-of-two entails an ethical dimension”; see *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7.

7. Treseler’s study emphasizes the importance of letters for “middle generation” poets, focusing on the Second World War’s reconfiguration of privacy and gender roles; see “Lyric Letters,” esp. 5–8, 24, 77, 85, 104.

8. Jonathan Ellis, *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 142–46, 155–57.

9. Hammer, “Useless Concentration,” 163.

10. Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), 544 (hereafter cited in text as *OA*).

11. Celebration of Bishop’s minor affect begins as early as Marianne Moore’s 1946 celebration of “A Modest Expert,” *The Nation*, September 28, 1946; five decades later, Richard Tillinghast describes how Bishop “made a virtue of modesty” in “Elizabeth Bishop: Driving to the Interior,” *New Criterion* 27.8 (April, 2009): 15; David Orr, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Rough Gems,” *The New York Times Book Review*, April 2, 2006, 1.

12. Joelle Biele, ed., *Elizabeth Bishop and The New Yorker: The Complete Correspondence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

13. Barbara Page describes the role of letters in Bishop’s growing reputation in “The Rising Figure of the Poet: Elizabeth Bishop in Letters and Biography,” *Contemporary Literature* 37.1 (1996): 119–131.

14. For examples, see Ian Hamilton, "The Buried Life," *New Republic* 211.6 (1994): 29–34; Phoebe Pettingell, "The Epistolary Bishop," *New Leader* 77.5 (May 9, 1994): 14.

15. For letters' status on "the edge of literature," see Claudio Guillen, "On the Edge of Literariness: The Writing of Letters," *Comparative Literature Studies* 31.1 (March 1994): 1; Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, "Letters as/not a Genre," *Life Writing* 2.2 (2005): 76. For letters as ur-genre, see Charles Bazerman, "Letters and the Social Grounding of Differentiated Genres," in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, ed. David Barton and Nigel Hall, Studies in Written Language and Literacy, vol. 9 (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999), 15–29. Janet Altman ventures that "impulses behind epistolary fiction can be generalized . . . to virtually all literature" in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 211–12; Derrida writes that the "epistolary genre in literature . . . would be literature itself if there were any" in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 88. Scholars as different as Jacques Lacan and Bernhard Siegert take letters to be representative of literature; see John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, eds., *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, & Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 28–54; *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, trans. Kevin Repp (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 13.

16. Altman, *Epistolarity*, 89. S. P. Rosenbaum also notes that letters' "central feature" is "transitive duality"; see "Bloomsbury Letters," *Centrum* 1.2 (1981): 117. See also Frances Ferguson, "Interpreting the Self through Letters," *Centrum* 1.2 (1981): 110.

17. Alan Wolfe argues for a "third realm of social life, intermediate between public and private" in "Public and Private in Theory and Practice: Some Implications of an Uncertain Boundary," in *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*, ed. Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 182. Michael Warner's analysis historicizes the public/private dichotomy; see *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 39, 21–63. Ezra W. Zuckerman argues for "a fundamental difference between the dyad and the triad" in "Why Social Networks Are Overrated (A 3+ When They Are at Best a 2)," *orgtheory.net*, n.d., <http://orgtheory.wordpress.com/2008/11/14/why-social-networks-are-overrated-a-3-when-they-are-at-best-a-2/>. Richard L. Moreland and Kipling D. Williams debate the question linked papers; see "Are Dyads Really Groups?" *Small Group Research* 41.2 (April 2010): 251–67; "Dyads Can Be Groups (and Often Are)," *Small Group Research* 41.2 (April 2010): 268–74.

18. Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems, Prose, & Letters* (New York: Library of America, 2008), 264 (hereafter cited in text as *PPL*).

19. Bishop, *Edgar*, 357–58.

20. Carlyle, *Letters and Memorials*, vol. 1, 62.

21. William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 2–14; Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

22. Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 133–64.

23. Jackson describes this codification; *Ibid.*, 92–99.

24. Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 37–54.

25. Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), xvi, 40.

26. *Ibid.*, 72–73.

27. In other comments, Bishop objected in particular to confessionalism's public-private conversions: "Now the idea is that we live in a horrible and terrifying world," she explains, "and the worst moments of horrible and terrifying lives are an allegory of the world." "Poets: The Second Chance," *Time*, June 2, 1967, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,902090,00.html>.

28. Michael Hofmann, "The Linebacker and the Dervish," *Poetry* 193.4 (December 2008): 358.

29. Robert Lowell, *The Letters of Robert Lowell*, ed. Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 195.

30. Hammer's astute contrast of Bishop's epistolarity and confessionalism notes that Bishop's letters would connect to people "whom confession might have driven away." "Useless Concentration," 172–73.

31. Treseler's comparison of Shapiro's and Bishop's epistolarity is relevant here; see "Lyric," 77–85.

32. Hammer, "Useless Concentration," 175; Treseler, "Lyric," 23, 49.

33. Orr, "Elizabeth Bishop's Rough Gems," 1.

34. Zachariah Pickard, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Description* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 99–106.

35. My account is indebted to Luke Carson's analysis, though he finds Bishop more ambivalent about Moore's moralism; see "James Merrill's Manners and Elizabeth Bishop's Dismay," *Twentieth Century Literature* 50.2 (2004): 178–79.

36. Qtd. in Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 152. Elizabeth Hewitt's study of epistolarity in early American literature argues that letters constitute a crucial site "by which democratic theory passes into social practice"; see *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 6–7.

37. Chiasson makes a related point, emphasizing how Bishop invokes "a moral standard guaranteed by an aesthetic one." "Works on Paper: The Letters of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell," *New Yorker*, November 8, 2008, 110.

38. In 2000, Larry Buell writes that a revived "ethics talk" has drawn from "the emergence of Emmanuel Levinas as a post-structuralist model for literary-ethical inquiry." "What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics," in *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.

39. Nancy's conception of "being singular plural" abandons even the supposition of individuality: for him, the foundational "with" of community cannot presuppose its elements. See *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Richard D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 12, 35 ff.

40. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 185. Simon Critchley emphasizes how Levinas elevated "quite banal acts of civility" to the status of "ethical" in *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 287.

41. Epistolary ethics thus addresses Charles Altieri's observation that a Levinasian "allure of . . . ungraspable otherness" can forgo "possibilities for identification and judgment." *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 321.

42. Levinas describes this self-conception in *Otherwise than Being*, 108–14. Paul Ricoeur implies a related criticism of Levinas when he notes "the contrast between the reciprocity of friendship and the dissymmetry of the injunction"; see *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 189. See also Martin Hägglund on the "asymmetry" of Levinasian alterity in *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 89–90.

43. I take this phrase from Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). J. G. A. Pocock concisely describes this shift in eighteenth-century culture in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 48–50.

44. Klein, for example, notes that for Shaftesbury, letters' dialogic form and affectual valence promote their "central significance" as "a polite genre"; see *Shaftesbury*, 115.

45. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 150; Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 135. N. T. Phillipson provides a useful description of Smith's moral theory, "which would show how moral encounters are two-way affairs," in *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 151. Blakey Vermeule clarifies how moral postures, for Hume and others, "can only be grasped in relation to specific social situations and other people"; see *The Party of Humanity: Writing Moral Psychology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 13.

46. Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 697.

47. *Ibid.*, 658, 689.

48. This changes later: Reena Sastri demonstrates that Lowell's last book seeks a "relationality and intersubjectivity" that is different from confessional dynamics. "Intimacy and Agency in Robert Lowell's *Day by Day*," *Contemporary Literature* 50.3 (2009): 463.

49. David S. Gewanter, "Child of Collaboration: Robert Lowell's *Dolphin*," *Modern Philology* 93.2 (1995): 199–200.

50. Randall Jarrell, "The Year in Poetry," in *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews, 1935–1964* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 245.

51. Treseler shows the relation of these drafts, nonetheless, to published work; see "Dreaming in Color: Bishop's Notebook Letter-Poems," forthcoming in *Elizabeth Bishop in the 21st Century: Reading the New Editions*, ed. Angus Cleghorn, Thomas Bethany Hicok, and Thomas Travisano (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

52. Marjorie Perloff, "The Return of Robert Lowell," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 27.1/2 (2003): 82.

53. Hammer, "Useless Concentration," 174. For discussion of Bishop's conception of audience at an earlier period, see Kamran Javadizadeh's excellent introduction to her correspondence with T. C. Wilson; "'An Audience May Be Found': Letters to T. C. Wilson," ed. Kamran Javadizadeh, *Yale Review* 93.4 (2005): 20–25.

54. Biele, *The New Yorker*, vii–viii.

55. Biele, *The New Yorker*, 129, 211, 281.

56. *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1983), xi–xiv. Paul Crumbley reads Emily Dickinson's correspondence as "a gift-based . . . circulation" with "the power to unite distinct sovereign selves"; see "Dickinson's Correspondence and the Politics of Gift-Based Circulation," in *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters: Critical Essays*, ed. Jane Donahue Eberwein and Cindy MacKenzie (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 50.

57. Bishop to Swenson, November 11, 1963, May Swenson Papers, Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections, I.104.4009.

58. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 23; see also Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 24.

59. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 15–30, 19. Letters and fiction, in Habermas's description, formalized the audience-oriented subjectivity of the family and made it the agent of rational debate; through subsequent literary discussion, "the experiential complex of audience-oriented privacy made its way also into the political realm's public sphere." Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 51.

60. This is particularly relevant to debates about the political role of digital publics and social media: with its expansion of epistolary interactions, the internet dissolves private/public borders into newly prevalent instances of epistolary space. Hewitt suggests how the internet today, "like the letter of the early national period . . . is increasingly imagined as the space in which the messy work of making communities can be dissolved, even as it simultaneously is the place where that work is exposed"; see *Correspondence and American Literature*, 186–87.

61. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), xii.

62. This debate might be said to begin with Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977); see Berlant, *Female*, x–xii, 22–24, 34–35, 146.

63. I see this as consonant with Altieri's provocative theory of expressivist selfhood: only the "responsibilities" and "acknowledgments" of the subject in second-person interactions, Altieri argues, "make it worth worrying about the more abstract reciprocal protections that constitute the political order." *Canons*, 312.

64. James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry after Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 47–48.

- 362 65. Marriage is “the site where lines are seemingly drawn,” Elizabeth Maddock Dillon explains, even as the “the creation of these lines reveals the fundamental interdependence” of the two spheres. *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 127. See also Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 1–2, 225–27.
66. Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy*, 67–70 ff.; Treseler, “Lyric,” 73–77, 86–88.
67. Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 62–70.
68. Linda Leavell, “Frightening Disinterestedness: The Personal Circumstances of Marianne Moore’s Marriage,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 31.1 (2007): 73.
69. See esp. Carole Pateman, “Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy,” in *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 118; Jeannie Suk, “Is Privacy a Woman?” *Georgetown Law Journal* 97 (2009): 485–513.
70. In “Efforts of Affection,” Bishop wonders if feminist critics have “really read ‘Marriage,’ a poem that says everything they are saying.” *PPL*, 489.
71. Leavell, “Frightening Disinterestedness,” 74; Hammer describes Bishop’s epistolary space as potentially queer in “Useless Concentration,” 173.
72. I have in mind Michael Warner’s account of “counterpublics of sexuality and gender,” “scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate.” Epistolary dyadism is not in itself a counterpublic in Warner’s definition, since Warner emphasizes “stranger sociability” and writes that “the address of public rhetoric is never going to be the same as address to actual persons,” yet two-party correspondence, I would suggest, might provide ethical energy for alternative as well as hegemonic publicities. *Publics*, 57, 121, 78.
73. Michael Warner, “Introduction,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxi; “Sex in Public,” an essay written with Lauren Berlant; *Publics*, 199; see 187–208. Kathryn R. Kent’s work is relevant here: her study of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American writing shows how “semi-public/semiprivate” spaces nourish protolesbian and queer identities. *Making Girls into Women: American Women’s Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 1–18.
74. Treseler provides the best analysis of how epistolarity allows Bishop to incorporate lesbian relationship and queer affect in her poems; see “Lyric,” esp. 86–149.
75. May Swenson, *New & Selected Things Taking Place: Poems* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 130–31.
76. Elizabeth Bishop and May Swenson, “Correspondence,” in *The Paris Review Book of Heartbreak, Madness, Sex, Love, Betrayal, Outsiders, Intoxication, War, Whimsy, Horrors, God, Death, Dinner, Baseball, Travels, the Art of Writing, and Everything Else in the World since 1953*, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Picador, 2003), 711.
77. Bishop to Swenson, November 11, 1963, March 9, 1963, May Swenson Papers, Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections, I.104.4009.
78. Derrida’s response to Lacan focuses on this; see *The Post Card*, 422–88. Eve Tavor Bannet describes how eighteenth-century “letters were a site where speech and writing were constantly rotating into each other’s places”; see *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 44–46.
79. Bishop to Swenson, March 24, 1963, May Swenson Papers, Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections, I.104.4008.
80. A draft remembering this is in May Swenson, *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000), 12–14; see Zona’s chronicle in *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson: The Feminist Poetics of Self-Restraint* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 59–68.
81. I am grateful to staff at Washington University Libraries for making this collection available to me.
82. Treseler, “Dreaming in Color.”
83. Joanne Feit Diehl has described the Kleinian dynamics of the Bishop-Moore relationship in *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: the Psychodynamics of Creativity* (Princeton: Princeton Uni-

versity Press, 1993). Kent argues against this characterization in part by describing mother-daughter relationships as themselves a site of greater intersubjective ambiguities; see *Making*, 167–207.

84. Kent points out that the gift was actually from Louise Crane, “Bishop’s lover at the time,” though she agrees that “The Paper Nautilus” explores Moore’s ambiguous attitudes toward maternal affect; see *Making*, 227–34.

85. Kent, *Making*, 167–234, esp. 189–207; Treseler, “Lyric,” 111–19.

86. Bishop and Swenson, “Correspondence,” 711.

87. *Ibid.*

88. Bishop to Swenson, July 5, 1965, May Swenson Papers, Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections, I.104.4011.