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Bishop's Correspondence

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When Anne Stevenson began the first full-length study of Bishop’s poetry in the early 1960s, she wrote to her subject for clarification, and the inquiry yielded almost a decade of epistolary exchange (see Ellis, “Between,” for a full analysis). One of Bishop’s responses includes an explanation of the poet’s aesthetic ideal. “What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it,” she writes, “is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration” (Pr 414). Justly famous, the passage reappears in editions of Bishop running from a 1983 volume called *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, when Bishop’s fame was only beginning to grow, to the 2011 collection of *Prose*, when she was recognized as the most important American poet of the late twentieth century (Orr). Changing citations of “the Darwin letter,” however, show developments during that span. The 1983 book excerpts a paragraph of analysis, presenting it under a title as if it were a miniature essay (288). The 2011 volume includes the entire letter, presenting it under Bishop’s opening notation of place and date and including Stevenson’s messages before and after (Pr 410-417). Correspondence is no longer a negligible medium through which Bishop articulated her ideas; it is a distinct medium that exemplifies those ideas. Letters have moved from secondary source to primary document. This shift helps to constitute a wider development in Bishop criticism, which has gone from analyzing her great but scant output of lyric poems to considering those poems among a full range of her fine art, essays, fiction, translation, and other writing. In the case of correspondence, this attention must assess an ill-defined genre as well as assimilate newly discovered content. Full attention to Bishop’s correspondence means clarifying the form of the letter itself, relating the properties of epistolarity to Bishop’s aesthetic practice and cultural context.

Bishop’s own reading and analysis demonstrate her interest in epistolarity as a distinct field, what Jonathan Ellis describes as her “faith in letter writing as an art form in its own right” (*Art and Memory* 142). Bishop took in letters by everyone from Horace Walpole to Anne Sexton — staying up late
to finish thick volumes of Coleridge’s, looking forward to an “old age” in which she would read all of Madame de Sévigné’s, objecting to misrepresentations of Hart Crane’s (OA 324; NYr 241; WIA 147–148). Ellis documents more than two dozen volumes of correspondence by authors and writers in the library she left, and that list leaves out collections by Fanny Burney, Charles Darwin, Sidney Smith, and Ivan Turgenev, among others (Art and Memory 156). “We’ve been reading Henry James’s Letters ... all week,” she writes in 1941, and “I’ve just been re-reading all the Hopkins letters all over again,” she writes in 1965 (OA 103; WIA 572); in 1953 she is thinking about “acquiring” Mrs. Carlyle’s letters “for myself,” having read them “long ago,” and in 1974 she responds to a gift of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s letters with the admission that she already owns them (OA 272). Correspondence was the genre that spurred enthusiastic recommendation and near-addictive consumption: “Thank you for the Flannery O’Connor Letters,” she writes in 1979; “I can’t stop reading them – have until 2 a.m. for two nights now, to the detriment of my daily life” (OA 630). Bishop’s interest in epistolary helps to demonstrate the still-underappreciated breadth of her reading, as she ranges across categories of time, style, and type of writer in her admiration for the genre of correspondence.

Bishop’s reactions demonstrate the acuity as well as the avidity in her epistolary reading, given that she explored the limits of correspondence as a serious or literary form. Her own “Darwin letter” proves that letters can contain valuable analysis. In her view, so did the correspondence of many she read. Keats in his letters, for example, “makes almost every other poet seem stupid” (NYr 228). Even correspondence that did not discuss weighty topics could make aesthetic claims. The one Harvard seminar Bishop taught that was not focused on poetry was titled “Letters: Readings in Personal Correspondence, Famous and Infamous, from the 16th to the 20th Centuries,” and she writes to friends that she plans to consider “[j]ust letters – as an art form or something” (OA 544). With a proposed syllabus that runs from Keats to “a letter found in the street,” Bishop’s plans take ephemeral messages to be worthy of sustained analysis, and she later complains about a student who thought correspondence by Montagu, Walpole, and Byron was “too frivolous” (WIA 703). Still, the “just” in “just letters” betrays her own suspicion of letters’ frivolity, and the same disquiet blooms in a never-finished review of Sylvia Plath’s correspondence, several years later: “Of course one can’t really ‘review’ letters, or criticise them – ,” Bishop writes, “at least, not perhaps the way a play, a novel, or poetry can be reviewed and criticised” (Ellis, “Mailed” 13–14). Taken in tandem, Bishop’s late-career reflections on epistolarity know that letters are “fascinating,” but hesitate about setting their fascination next to that of fiction, verse, and
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drama. How does one treat letters as an “art form” while acknowledging, even crediting, their extra-artistic “something”? Or how does one craft “a poetics of the familiar letter” when the letter’s mark may be its “refusal of the literary”? These phrases come from Tom Paulin’s 1994 review of One Art, the first and principal selection of Bishop’s correspondence (3). At more than 600 pages that are far from a complete presentation, the collection celebrates Bishop’s lifelong writing of the genre she so liked to read. The book, therefore, not only offered a wealth of content, joining Brett Millier’s 1993 biography to provide details of Bishop’s life story; it also pressed the issue of form, raising the question of what the letter allowed or developed in Bishop’s art. Paulin’s answer follows his subject’s when he emphasizes the letter’s dubious artistry: this ambiguity promotes an “unfinished completeness,” Paulin writes, a composition that emerges “here and now as part of a process” (4). Epistololarity’s moment-by-moment divagation thus manifests Bishop’s overall preference for “a mind thinking” rather than “a thought” (Pr 473). One 1938 note, for example, moves from her “awfully nice” room to a view of “convicts in their black-and-white stripes” to a history of Key West to a recent lunch in New York to her views of Communism before concluding with plans for “joining the Anarchists” and “renting a catboat” (OA 68–69). Bishop writes in stages, noting when Friday in one spot becomes Saturday in another and recording the breaks for refreshment, conversations, interruptions, other work: “Time out to make another little coffee,” or “Time out while a tiny boy ... comes to the door with a suitcase of pathetic goods to sell, and sells them to me. I now have a crude potato-peeler, cruder flint gadget for lighting the gas-stove, a blue plastic barrel to keep something in” (WJA 363, 573). The result is a precision never fixed or finished: “Perhaps I shall get this mailed today or tomorrow,” she writes at the end of a 1959 letter to May Swenson, “so I shall draw it to a close, and give up the hope of turning it into something brilliant at the last minute. The flock of parrots that comes every year about this time is back and I wish you could see them – their backs are bright green and their breasts bright yellow, so as they turn in the air the effect is very gay – and they never stop talking at the top of their voices” (May Swenson Papers I.103.4003). Last-minute brilliance makes the “close” of this letter into the continuation of experience. Bishop stops her written words only by yielding to a real world that never stops talking.

Epistolary process thereby dramatizes the accuracy that marks so much of Bishop’s work, and that critics have noted from Randall Jarrell’s early praise to Zachariah Pickard’s recent reconsiderations (Jarrell 235). Letters support Bishop’s tendency toward a reportage that keeps faith with its subject by remaining open to change – so that a poem like “The Monument” begins
its looking with “Now” and continues via self-correction (P 25). With this, letters support Bishop’s suspicion of any writing that strays too far from lived experience – what Paulin calls, in an allusion to Heideggerian Dasein, her sense of “being-in-the-world.” When Bishop writes to Robert Lowell, for example, about her idea of meter, she tells him that she has “loads of thoughts on the subject and I think I’ll have to write again tomorrow,” then goes on to sketch a “theory now that all the arts are growing more and more ‘literary’... a late stage, perhaps a decadent stage ... If I were Shapiro I’d write a book about it. (And have you read Art & Illusion? by one Gombrich? – it is fascinating.) I find it is time to go to market” (WIA 335). As Bishop’s “theory” resists the definitive with the prospective – “tomorrow” – it also resists the “literary” with the worldly, a trip to “market.” Bishop’s speculations thus exploit their epistolary difference from the prose in a book by Shapiro. She tempers aesthetic philosophy with quotidian practicality. This accords with her statements of creed in that “Darwin” letter, which move beyond “observation” to advocate a “living in reality” that understands “non-intellectual sources of wisdom and sympathy” (Pr 414): letters preserve these very sources. If Keats’s epistolary intelligence could mix a report on his brother’s health with his view of poetic imagination, Bishop’s would leaven an analysis of decadence with household duties.

In this way, correspondence supports Bishop’s career-wide attempts to integrate literary composition and ordinary living, to find forms adequate to the apparent formlessness of quotidian sensation. Such a preference, however, was not a disinterested one. Just as Keats used letters for his theorizing, in part, because his socioeconomic status denied him more formal prose outlets, Bishop used letters for her theorizing, in part, because she felt that her own position required complicated negotiations of authority – as a female, a lesbian, an expatriate, and/or a relatively unheralded writer who produced poems slowly. Langdon Hammer focuses on those complications in his seminal essay about One Art, showing how correspondence’s status as ambiguously aesthetic allowed Bishop to control “her conflicted experience of professional obligation and achievement” (163). In the aforementioned passage about “decadence,” for example, a movement between “meter” and “market” allows Bishop both to join and demur from the confident theorizing of established male critics like Shapiro, Gombrich, or even Lowell himself. Indeed, as Hammer shows, Bishop’s conflicted sense of authority especially pervades the two longest, most involved correspondences of her life: with Lowell, a colleague who both championed and overshadowed her, and with Marianne Moore, a mentor whom Bishop both resisted and emulated. Bishop needed their assistance and encouragement; she enclosed poems to Moore, for example, with the request to “please tell me what you
think,” and she wrote to Lowell to get help with procuring fellowships, among many other promptly answered solicitations (OA 67; WIA 316). Yet Bishop also chafed at their guidance. She famously refused Moore’s letter of suggestions about “Roosters” (“I know that esthetically you are quite right, but I can’t bring myself to sacrifice … a very important ‘violence’ of tone”), and wrote her own letter of correction about Lowell’s French translations (“I don’t think you should lay yourself open to charges of carelessness or ignorance”) (OA 96; WIA 356). Bishop’s ambivalence may be most patent in her late memoir of Moore, “Efforts of Affection,” which was written at a time when her relationship with Lowell was also problematic – since she was considering writing a preface to a book about Lowell and taking on what had been his post at Harvard (Pr 117-140; WIA 656-678). But throughout Bishop’s life, letters demonstrated and managed this difficult psychological content. They allowed Bishop a mixture of assertion and reliance that could both use and refuse other writers’ influences.

The fact of influence itself, however, marks correspondence as a form. As Hammer points out (173), its distinctive, ambiguous place between life and literature joins its distinctive, ambiguous place between one author and another. Personal letters differ from other prose in that they are directed toward, and expect a reply from, a particular person (Altman 88-89). Bishop relishes this transitivity, despite its entanglements, as her letters continually reinforce their connection to others. The very description of her Harvard letters course, in fact, ends with a request for reply: “I need some ideas from you both,” she tells her correspondents. She interweaves other speculation with similar expectations: Burroughs is “probably very much like Poe, don’t you think?” she asks Lowell, or “I suppose you have read the Fiedler book?” (WIA 501, 317); “have you ever seen that wonderful Miró Farm?” she asks Moore, or “those articles they have been running in The New Republic about the miracles of science, etc.? ” (OA 90, 101) “What do you think?” she asks May Swenson after a description of Robert Fitzgerald (OA 336). Such questions seem less about garnering someone else’s ideas than reinforcing the structure of responsiveness that letters provide – which turns production into reception, consumption into collaboration, reading into writing. When she stayed up late with Coleridge’s letters, for example, Bishop fell into an empathy so fervent that “his tooth-aches are my tooth-aches,” as she tells Jarrell, recounting that “only the pleasant and relieving prospect of writing you can tear me away from that adorable man” (OA 324). Composing a message to Jarrell here stands in for composing a message to Coleridge, continuing the almost physical bond established by the latter’s correspondence. Letters therefore make Coleridge “contemporary,” Bishop writes in the same letter. If epistolarity forbids the disinterestedness of literature, it
also precludes its distance, bringing together two people across gaps of time and space.

Togetherness was particularly important to Bishop, since she endured the loss of many people close to her and often felt the lack of any permanent home. Bishop’s focus on correspondence supports a critical emphasis on her orphaned, outsider status. J. D. McClatchy’s review of One Art, for example, is headlined “Letters from a Lonely Poet,” and in a later, more subtle reading, Heather Treseler analyzes Bishop’s unpublished letter-poems in the light of her need for reparative connection (“Dreaming” 88–90, 95–103). With specific phrases from her letters, as well as through their sheer volume, Bishop shows a steady fear of being cut off: “I hate to keep losing people,” she laments to Kit and Ilse Barker, for example, and tells Moore that a message from her “lightened my sensation of being an exile very much” (OA 250, 60). Letter-poems show similar anxieties: “Letter to N.Y.,” for example – addressed and dedicated to Louise Crane, with whom Bishop shared a house in Key West – marks a distance from both place and person with its fervent “wish” for more news about goings-on in the city (P 78).

Bishop’s residence in Brazil, where she lived consistently from 1951–1967 and intermittently after that, made such wishes only more important and more vexed, as she despairs at “mailboxes [that] are never collected” and “glue machines which are frequently incapacitated by their own glue” (OA 237). Continual fuss about post and postage cloaks less practical anxieties about delivery.

This anxiety even becomes a compositional principle. As Hammer notes (178), Bishop’s written letters often strive to maintain connection for as long as possible, in a self-perpetuating self-consciousness: “I’ve been entirely alone for 4 days and am just chattering without having anything at all to say” (VC I.24.4), she writes to Pearl Bell in 1954, for example, and asks Pauline Hanson, in the middle of a 1951 letter, “May I keep on talking to you for a while?” (VC I.32.1). The dynamics of this “keeping on” help to explain why so many Bishop letters begin with intentions of a brief message and pick up speed through several single-spaced pages of “chatter.” Bishop’s relish for such chatter capitalizes on a formal characteristic of correspondence, the “solecism of two presents” that Charles Lamb describes in one of the first considerations of epistolarity (105). Bishop does so, moreover, by emphasizing another peculiarity of correspondence: a conflation of writing and speech – most famously considered by Jacques Derrida in his musings on La Carte Postale, and usefully historicized by Eve Tavor Bannet in her consideration of eighteenth-century correspondence (Derrida 463–476; Bannet 46–49). It is a fittingly correspondent irony that Bishop sounds more conversational when typing than when talking, that she apologizes in one
note for her “strangeness” of tone when “dictating” correspondence (NYr 324). Composing a letter in written prose allows the comforting fiction of being and speaking with another.

The difference between writing and speech, however, was just as important for Bishop, as she emphasizes with a contrast in her unfinished Plath review. “Writing letters, not telephoning,” she writes, “is ... a bit like getting dressed up and going to the symphony concert instead of sitting at home in pajamas and listening to it on the radio: ... once one takes pen in hand, one has to make an effort; certain formalities are to be observed” (Ellis, Art and Memory 145). Correspondence requires the “effort” of a “formal” presentation, in Bishop’s view; it does not simply indulge the ease of an informal intimacy. Her opinion on this point (especially when it comes couched in a review of Plath) might therefore clarify Bishop’s use of epistolarity vis-à-vis her opinion of confessionalism. From her time to our own, critics have debated how “confessional” a poet Bishop really is, wondering if her well-known antipathy to the movement belied her own use of its methods (Rosenbaum, Professing Sincerity 193). Bishop’s regard for correspondence could place her in the confessional camp: although she recommended, in a 1967 interview, that writers “keep some of these things to themselves” (Cory and Lee 68), she also praised Dorothee Bowie, in a 1968 letter, “because you are so beautifully Indiscreet & do tell one all the lurid details one is always dying to hear” (VC I.27.3). Since the letters of One Art provide information about Bishop’s own experience, moreover, the book adds a potentially confessional valence to many poems, and the editorial choices of One Art further this idea by linking letters and poetry in the unified “one” of her “art.” “The letters constitute her autobiography,” Robert Giroux argues in his introduction, by offering “details of her little known private life” (Giroux vii). To those with the requisite knowledge, then, Bishop might be offering the same autobiographical details in her verse. Several early reviews support this idea in their focus on biographical material (Ian Hamilton and Pheobe Pettingell provide examples), suggesting that to read Bishop as an epistolary writer may be to read her as a confessional one.

Yet Bishop’s musings on Plath’s letters – as well as Bishop’s practice in her own letters – oppose such a reading. She refuses the equation of epistolarity and autobiography as well as the related equation of correspondence and confessionalism: the “formalities” of the letter form mean writing toward another, and with another in mind, rather than writing for oneself, and about one’s suffering. Indeed, that very suffering is to be resisted, Bishop feels: her chief objection to confessional “self-absorption,” when she criticizes the trend in her “Darwin letter,” is its failure of “good manners” and concomitant “heaviness” (Pr 417). Bishop’s emphasis on the reverse is
evident in poems like “The Bight,” with its suggestive invocation of “old correspondences” and comparison of boats to “torn-open, unanswered letters.” In this poem, first-person description avoids the despair of a psychological “dredge” (Treseler, “Dreaming” 95) to end with a summary of “awful but cheerful” activity (P 59). Like Keats, therefore, who would resist “feeling vapourish” by “adoniz[ing] as I were going out” before “sitting down to write,” Bishop would use the “dressed up,” “symphony-going” self-presentation of epistolary composition to resist her darkest moods. This was not always possible – Bishop sometimes writes, as she notes apologetically in one message, “selfishly, to unburden myself a little before I get up my courage to go out” (OA 536). But she also destroys notes that she finds too despairing to post, rewrites a message that is “too gloomy and weak-minded to send,” and expresses relief when Lowell did not get a letter in which “I think I sounded rather gloomy and apologetic” (OA 509; WIA 158). She exhorts Lowell, moreover, to resist his own “heaviness” through epistolarity, recommending the “cheering” prose in Sydney Smith’s collected letters (WIA 420). Such cheerfulness-despite-awfulness was a standard for Bishop’s letter writing as well as a comfort in her letter reading.

That standard distinguishes her from other poets of her era – Lowell, for example, who was the major exponent of confessionalism. Their similarities and differences were most apparent in the second major publication of Bishop’s letters: Words in Air, which appeared in 2008, provides both sides of the complete Bishop-Lowell exchange. It thereby offered critics occasion to note the two poets’ changing reputations, which have reversed Lowell’s previous dominance; one review of Words asserts Bishop’s “sweeping posthumous triumph” over her “friend” (Hofmann 358). It seems paradoxical to promote a double-authored text as a “culminating book” for Bishop, since elision of Lowell’s part in the exchange ignores the very dyadism that Bishop prized in epistolary method. But the revision may be fitting nonetheless, given that Lowell’s failure to recognize dual authorship separates the two friends. In fact, it occasioned Bishop’s most strenuous defense of letters – objecting to Lowell’s 1972 collection The Dolphin, which quotes and alters correspondence from his estranged wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, without securing her permission. Bishop presses the fact of relationship as she recommends a correspondent ethics against her friend’s confessional aesthetics: “One can use one’s life as material,” she concedes, “but these letters – aren’t you violating a trust?” (WIA 708). Bishop also uses the evidence of other writer’s letters, in this letter to a writer about his misuse of letters, by quoting correspondence from Hardy, Hopkins, and Henry James to prove her point. Lowell’s decision violates a code of conduct that is, for Bishop, fundamentally linked to genre – not only by forgoing cheer for the “tragic,
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anguished” experience of a rejected woman, or by relinquishing accuracy for a “mixture of fact & fiction,” but also, and more fundamentally, by appropriating another’s writing as his own. Bishop’s attention to epistolarity itself supports her aversion to Lowell’s letter-indebted poems (Chiasson).

That distaste indicts more than The Dolphin, since Lowell’s confessional appropriations only emphasize the first-person valence of lyric more generally. Bishop’s attention to the forms of correspondence, therefore, clarifies her subtle attention, also, to the conventions of verse. Her epistolarity anticipates the “new lyric studies” of recent criticism, which would dismantle the fiction of an individual, even an abstracted, poetic speaker, disembodied from particular setting and expressing himself without the encumbrance of audience (Jackson). Letters provide an alternative model: two writers, set in a particular place and time, speaking to each other through responsive and responsible exchange. That situated back-and-forth, moreover, erases the supposed boundary between the “absolute privacy” (Warner 79) of the lyric and the violating publicity of its dissemination – a division that was particularly important in postwar America, and which confessionalism only emphasizes (Nelson 40). The letter assumes a sphere of action that is neither single nor general. Several critics of letters, including Mireille Bossis, Rebecca Earle, Liz Stanley, Eve Tanor Bannet, and Logan Esdale, have explored this epistolary space; and Heather Treseler analyzes its application to Bishop (Bossis 70; Earle 4; Stanley 209; Bannet 226–227; Esdale 104; Treseler, “Lyric” 24, 57, 75–76, 104–105). In a letter-indebted poem like “The Bight” or a postcard-indebted poem like “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress,” one can see how Bishop resists both the narrow privacy of self-reflection and the unfettered publicity of a general pronouncement. In Hammer’s words, Bishop’s correspondence enacts a space where “poet and reader” can be “alone together” (173). It is something like the “estudio” she describes in a letter to Lowell, a room that is neither institutional nor domestic and that she has lined with pictures of her friends – an area where she need not feel herself a “public figure,” but might write in view of a familiar audience (WJA 161–163).

This space has particular uses for a feminist and queer poetics, and letters offer fruitful evidence for the evolving criticism of Bishop as a woman and lesbian. It is no accident that Bishop’s objections to The Dolphin defended a female correspondent against male appropriation – as she did earlier, too, in her protests against William Carlos Williams’s poetic use of letters from Marcia Nardi (WIA 38). To take correspondence seriously is to provide women with authorship and authority in their own right, to rectify the exclusion of women from traditional genres by enfranchising the supposedly nonliterary stuff of personal exchange. Bishop’s proposed letters
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syllabus thus includes her own “aunt Grace” between Chekhov and Keats, and begins with “Mrs. Carlyle,” a copious correspondent who went unpublished in her lifetime, rather than her more famous husband. Perhaps more important, correspondence also unsettles the relationship between women like Mrs. Carlyle and their correspondents, famous husbands among them, because epistolarity does not specify the terms of its dyadic intimacy beyond requiring the collaborative equality of two parties. Letters can thereby evade the strictures of heteronormative binaries, finding less conventional arrangements of friendly intimacy. Bishop’s exchanges with Moore and Lowell test this very chance when she resists the patterns of mother-daughter or lover-beloved (Bishop could respond to Lowell’s famous letter about wanting to marry her, for example, by ignoring the subject entirely [WIA 219–229]). Several astute discussions of Bishop’s sexuality, therefore, use letters to describe queer negotiations of fixed roles: Treseler analyzes the gendered epistolarity of Bishop’s and Moore’s interchanges, for example, as she develops Kathryn R. Kent’s analysis of “semi-public/semi-private” areas of lesbian identity formation, and Kirstin Hotelling Zona uses letters to chart the differences between Bishop’s and Swenson’s use of sexual language (Treseler, “Lyric” 111–153; Kent 6–17, 169–187; Zona 95–119). The virtual space of correspondence brings women together in relationships that are not easily defined—and are all the more creative for such ambiguity.

Did epistolarity model, in addition, a connection to readers of poems? The drafts that Treseler makes available point to a key question of Bishop’s correspondence, that of its relation to her poetic composition. Several letters include material that became verse: description in a note to Lowell, for example, appears later in “The Bight” (WIA 23), and Ellis argues that Bishop generally wrote letters “with potential poems in mind” (Art and Memory 143). His analysis and others’, however, rightly focus on form over content, arguing that Bishop took epistolarity as a stylistic model rather than an experiential fund. Joelle Biele, for example, uses unpublished material (“The Armadillo” was originally titled “From a Letter”) to show how Bishop’s verse adopts an epistolary sensibility. Correspondence demonstrates her preferred tone of indeterminate but presumed intimacy, an address that links writer and audience in a distant, considerate mutuality of ongoing compositional process. “I think I’ll send you a poem I just this minute finished—,” Bishop writes to a friend at one point, for example, adding that “it will serve as a sort of letter; that’s what it really is” (Biele, “Like Working” 95). And yet even in this sense, comparison of poetry and correspondence can only go so far, given that Bishop’s poem will not retain its immediacy—or its particular address, or its expectation of response—beyond her epistolary
enclosure. However “letterlike” a poem, it must nonetheless forgo a particular context of two-party exchange (Hammer 164). Abandoned drafts called “Dear Dr.” and “Letter to Two Friends,” now published in Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box, attest to an unbridgeable difference between epistolary and poetic forms as much as a repeated desire to bring them together (EAP 77–78, 113–114).

That generic gulf, in turn, helps to explain Bishop’s diffident reaction to publication, and her well-known discomfort with poetic “Business” (OA 202). Even though she sometimes regretted her limited fame, she was on the whole “very touched by the small but interested circle of readers I seem to have” (VC I.24.9), as she wrote to Bell in 1959; she looked back with longing, as she explains to Stevenson, to “the days when poems just got handed around among friends” (NYr viii). Coterie “handing round” would preserve the epistolary relationship that she preferred. Bishop’s distribution of poems, papers, and paintings demonstrates this preference: she sent just-finished poems to Pauline Hanson, Lowell, Moore, Swenson, and others and she relished receiving unpublished verse from her friends. A large part of Edgar Allan Poe comes from notebooks she gave to Linda Nemer in Brazil (EAP xii; see also Goldensohn 27–29), and many of the paintings collected in Exchanging Hats were created and presented as gifts to friends in South and North America (EH viii). The rounds of correspondence were for Bishop the proper dissemination of all art. Her preference is clearest in a third major collection of Bishop’s letters, Elizabeth Bishop and The New Yorker, which was published in 2011 and edited by Biele, and in which exchanges between Bishop and her editors reveal her efforts to turn commercial transactions into epistolary friendships. Bishop exaggerates a lack of publishing savvy, for example, when she asks Howard Moss to “enlighten” her about offprints “so I’ll be more professional” (NYr 267); her insistence on dedications to her poems – against New Yorker policy – suggests a related desire to eschew professional economy for a friendly circuit (NYr 281, 283). At one point, Bishop even wished to dedicate a poem to Katharine White, who explained that “the New Yorker tries to avoid personal dedications and it would be particularly bad, of course, if the dedication were to an editor ... too intramural” (NYr 212). It is just such intramuralism that Bishop hoped to dramatize. This latest collection of Bishop’s letters thus supports and extends Hammer’s earlier analysis of her ambivalent professionalism as it helps to explain the difference between Bishop’s small number of poems and voluminous output of letters. Her scarce publication testifies to designs as well as difficulties. Bishop would reduce the unlimited purview of the mass market to the limited boundaries of an epistolary addressee.
Such epistolary narrowing – from the general to the specific, from the collective to the personal – might develop critical understanding of the poet's engagement not just in publishing, but also in politics – a theme of increasing interest to Bishop studies. Recent analysis has turned from the poet's opinion on particular issues to her position among various allegiances, particularly during her residence in South America (Gray 24–62; Hicok; White; McIntosh). Letters show Bishop's complicated attitude toward both the United States and Brazil, as she sends messages north that criticize American conditions but long for an American community (White 255–256; McIntosh 231–234) – and that complain about her adopted country while promoting its misunderstood ways. Form, however, might again be more important than content, since letters model Bishop's stance of testimonial participation: an expatriate whose romantic partner, Lota de Macedo Soares, was an upper-class, politically involved Brazilian, Bishop saw the political upheaval of 1960s Brazil with an insider's biased knowledge and an outsider's objective vision. Her correspondence enacts this position, often contrasting the inaccuracies of newspaper reportage with the truth of personal witness. She sends her account of the 1964 coup to Lowell, for example, “in a RAGE about what the US papers are quoted as saying ... What in HELL does the NY Post know about it?” and ends by imploring Lowell to “please try to see it fairly, and if you get the chance, make your liberal intellectual friends see it fairly, too” (WIA 532–533). The difference is one of affect as much as fact; from one friend to another, Bishop's epistolary intervention would work through invested relationship rather than abstract policy.

To recognize this is to perceive some easily overlooked political implications in her poems, as works like “Cootchie,” “Faustina,” and “Manuelzinho” approach the vexed sociology of race, class, and gender through the vexed sociability of particular pairs. Bishop’s preference for epistolary citizenship contains a progressive potential even if her reaction to specific policies did not (her letter to Lowell, for example, dismisses civil rights violations that were supported by her friend Carlos Lacerda). Correspondent politics emphasize the particular position of the writer and the particular position of the audience; correspondent politics, moreover, enforces a transitivity that makes both parties agents of evolving meaning. To take epistolary composition as a model of political participation is thus to refuse abstract terms and hegemonic discourse for specific instances and mutually determined implication. Gillian White’s recent work on the “interpretive space” of Bishop’s poems shows how these emphases can turn even apolitical passages of description into scenes of social critique (258–263). When Bishop composes the provisionally titled “Letter to Two Friends,” for example, she
concludes her unfinished draft with a quoted sign-off, "Brazil, 'where the nuts come from'" (EAP 113–114). The ironic distance of that phrase suggests the sociopolitical self-consciousness that epistolarity fosters, in this writer "with a visa about to expire" – as Bishop writes, also, to ask Moore and Lowell for help with her poetry ("please cable a verb!") and to cure her anxious loneliness ("I am slightly sick of myself").

Even though that “Letter” remains unfinished, correspondence helps to specify the art in many of Bishop's completed poems as well. Consider “Santarém,” for example, a late work of seemingly meandering, subtly cumulative progress that takes formlessness as a principle of composition, and a poem that Bishop may have written in part using letters she sent to Macedo Soares during a trip on the Amazon (Biele, “Like Working” 96). “Santarém” moves by means of questioning, associative observation, enforcing Bishop’s refusal of “literary interpretations” and preference for the less absolute “dialectic” of experience. In so doing, the poem fosters indeterminacy through its very precision – a paradox implicit in the content of Bishop’s “Darwin letter,” with its aesthetic-scientific ideal, and resulting from its form, with its epistolary meditation. Bishop relished the way that correspondence could bring writer and reader together in an attentive immanence that is both productive and receptive, that is neither intentional nor meaningless. A similar sense pervades poems like “A Monument,” which opens its observations with a question, or “A Cold Spring,” the descriptions of which culminates in “your shadowy pastures,” or even “North Haven,” with its attentive, elegiac address – as well as many letters: her witty messages to Moore about European travels, when she would like “to describe many infinitely described things to you,” or her precise accounts to Swenson of Brazilian birds, revising “our bird poem,” or her late dispatches from that Maine island where she was learning names of flowers (P 25, 56, 210–211; OA 65, 418).

“Santarém” also indicates a respect for otherness that arises from the “self-forgetful” ideal in Bishop’s epistolary writing. The poem concludes with a Brazilian pharmacist offering Bishop the “wasps’ nest” she admires on his shelf. A Dutch tourist then scorns the present as “ugly” – challenging the reader, in conclusion, to perceive the worth of the object and the cross-cultural link it fostered. In this and other respects, the papery nest manifests an artistry akin to that of a letter – both dubiously aesthetic, inescapably humble, and potentially perishable, but both marked with a setting, attentiveness, and connection to be valued. One might equally compare the painting in “Poem,” which Hammer analyzes in his consideration of Bishop’s epistolary rhetoric, and which describes a small, descriptive artwork passed among friends (Hammer 175–176). The title emphasizes Bishop’s recognition of these qualities in all sorts of art, even as she recognized the limitations,
too, of epistolary writing – and wrestled with its distinct possibilities in both poems and letters. As she writes in a 1955 letter, “communication is an undependable but sometimes marvelous thing” (OA 312). Her lifelong trust in its chancy marvels help to describe the possibilities of the letter form as they help to deepen the profundities in her entire body of work.