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The Matter of Elizabeth Bishop's Professionalism

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE MATTER OF ELIZABETH BISHOP'S PROFESSIONALISM

Claire Seiler

Series II of the Elizabeth Bishop Papers at Vassar College houses the poet's "Professional Correspondence, Contracts, and Financial Statements." What is one to make of this series? More to the point: Why would one make anything of it at all, beyond taking its contents as corroborating documents, no longer if ever necessary, for lines on Bishop's curriculum vitae? When I told the NEH Summer Seminar of my curiosity about Bishop's professional self-fashioning, and thus of my plan to read through the professional materials, one colleague remarked, "That'll get old real quick." Titters all around, including from me. We were laughing knowingly about the blandness of professional documentation in general, about the foregone boredom of literary contracts, grant applications, statements of purpose, royalties reports, notifications of prizes, professional chronologies and CVs, and the like. But we were also laughing specifically about the idea of such things in relation to the study of Elizabeth Bishop, where they hardly seem to belong.

Perhaps the least fully told story of Bishop's career is, in fact, the story of her career. From the warm reception of her first book, *North & South* (1946), through the chorus of appreciation that has greeted the six new editions of her work published since 2006, literary critics, scholars, editors, and readers have often envisioned Bishop as a kind of antidote to whatever is or was wrong with modern poetry. (Saying what's "wrong" with modern poetry never goes out of style.) By the late 1940s, when Bishop began her professional career, ills commonly said to plague poetry included its "difficulty" and "obscurity"—charges that Randall Jarrell rebutted in his memorable essay "The Obscurity of the Poet" (1951)—and a creeping professionalization. Reviewers of *North & South* already understood Bishop's

distinctive “modesty” (Marianne Moore) and “restraint” (Jarrell) in opposition to both. Despite the gendered implications of such praise, *modesty* and like terms still rank as keywords in the Bishop scholarship.¹

An associated idea of the poet’s anti-professionalism has long worked as something of an operating principle in Bishop studies. As Bonnie Costello, Gillian White, and others have observed, in this authorial subfield, select aspects of the poet’s character, personality, and lived experience—what White dubs “the Bishop biographical paratext”—often provide not simply explicatory, but reductive or over-determined, grounds for understanding her poetics (White, *Lyric Shame* 45; Costello “Elizabeth Bishop’s Impersonal Personal” 334-36). My initial curiosity about Bishop’s professional self-fashioning stemmed, in part, from how seamlessly the biographical-psychological iconography of Bishop studies seems to accord with a critical vision of the poet as sustaining a principled near-abstention from the demands of “Poetry as Big Business,” as she put it in a 1950 letter to Jarrell (OA 202).² On the face of it, Bishop’s oft-quoted quip squares with ready impressions of her admirable disdain toward the postwar professionalization of poetry. Less remarked, however, are the thoroughly professional contexts in which Bishop made it. She wrote to Jarrell from her office at the Library of Congress, on her official letterhead, and principally to break the news of two professional disappointments for him: he had been passed over as the next Consultant in Poetry and Houghton Mifflin was not interested in publishing his next book.

To read the whole of Bishop’s professional correspondence on-site at Vassar is, at the very least, to see its store of professionally requisite documents continuously interspersed both with materials long invaluable to Bishop scholars—meticulous drafts, dazzling letters, travel notebooks, precocious college writing, photographs—and with newer and more obviously revelatory additions to the Elizabeth Bishop Papers, especially the poet’s “letters” to Dr. Ruth Foster (1947), to which I will return. It is also to recognize that the filing system projects a fiction across the Bishop archive, a fiction that organizes, to a significant degree, the study of Bishop’s work as well. The standard curatorial heading of Series II suggests a clean separation of professional correspondence from the letters that comprise Series I: Correspondence. This latter unmodified heading implies the more personal and substantive character of the hundreds of letters filed in Series I. But even a cursory reading of the letters of just about any writer of Bishop’s era shows that no such clear divide existed; moreover, epistolary writing among members of professional sets or networks often trades in an idiom of familiarity that signals the letter writer’s belonging, or aspiring to belong, within said set or network, as the peer-to-peer jocularly of “Poetry as Big Business” attests.

For her part, Bishop was also something of a professional correspondent

(Hammer; Phillips, “Bishop’s Correspondence”), and evidence of the porous line between her personal and professional correspondence surfaces everywhere in it—notably at the very start of two of the new editions of her letters that have prompted reconsideration of her work, if not of her professional life. The development of Bishop’s professional relationship-turned-friendship with editor Katharine White of *The New Yorker* is among the moving histories to emerge from Joelle Biele’s edition of Bishop’s correspondence with the magazine (*EBNY*). Readers of *Words in Air* (2008), Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton’s edition of the Bishop-Lowell correspondence, will recall the career occasions for Bishop’s first few letters to her most storied correspondent. Bishop wrote the very first, dated May 12, 1947, and addressed to “Mr. Lowell” care of Harcourt Brace, to congratulate him on winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946) and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her letter quickly slides from the formality of “Mr. Lowell” to a sprightly, ironic, among-peers tone to congratulate him on all “the awards—I guess I’ll just call them 1, 2, & 3” (*WIA* 3). Bishop had also just won a Guggenheim but makes no mention of it.

Still, in recent years, the vision of Bishop as exception to the professionalizing rule of postwar American poetry has proven its durability. Even as scholars in the broader fields of modernist and post-1945 US literature have revalued the assumption that professionalization in its various guises exerted mostly deadening effects on American letters (McGurl, Emre, Kindley), it seems to have become only more important for some Bishop scholars to protect, even to promote, the story of the poet’s deliberate remove from professional concerns. For example, the first concerted, collaborative effort to take stock of the six new editions of Bishop’s work, *Elizabeth Bishop in the 21st Century: Reading the New Editions* (2012), does not simply replay “the deep ambivalence and reluctance with which Bishop confronted the public role of ‘major poet’ in midcentury American society” (Cleghorn et al. 7). The editors of the collection also romanticize that reluctance: “This was a role her talent may have entitled her to claim, but it was also a role from which she always shied away” (7). Cataloging recent emphases in Bishop scholarship, the volume’s introduction presents a “poet crucially engaged with such vital cultural and political issues as outsiderhood, gender, sexuality, national identity, social class, war, the environment, power relations, and family intimacy and conflict” (7)—but not, it would seem, with professional life, much less with what it meant to navigate professional life as a poet “crucially engaged” with these issues.

Although typically promulgated in the celebratory terms of artistic vocation, the story of Bishop’s professional abstention or reluctance lines up uncomfortably well with dated, gendered notions of what constitutes truly professional or, for that matter, truly artistic life. Consider, to this point, the ease with which standard

comparison of Bishop's pursuit of her career, as if in spite of herself, to Lowell's famously fervent pursuit of his own reproduces those notions, implying that there exists no middle ground between admirable remove from professional concerns on the one hand and maniacal careerism on the other—does a disservice to both poets to boot. But, the stakes of the reigning disinclination to investigate Bishop's professional self-fashioning extend across and well beyond the scholarship on her singular work and that of her peers. For Bishop's career not only synchronized with the increasingly institutional patronage and management of literature and the arts in the postwar United States but also participated in the movement of hundreds of thousands of women into professional and professionalizing fields in the latter half of the twentieth century.³ Like many of her women peers and contemporaries, Bishop could not—and, contra the mythology, did not wholly seek to—deflect the demands and opportunities of postwar professional life. Nor, in turn, can Bishop's critical readers responsibly ignore the question of how she fashioned herself as poet amid various professional expectations, pressures, and occasions, least of all in the service of protecting her vocational purity.

This is not to propose remaking Bishop as a consummate “professional” poet or a second-wave workplace heroine too long hidden behind the screen of her legendary modesty. Bishop *was* ambivalent about the bureaucratic, institutional, and commercial contours of poetry over career and had a well-documented discomfort with and career-long distaste for many of poetry's professional trappings, including public readings, recordings for posterity, and teaching jobs. One might persist in wrapping her evident ambition in a language of feminine demurral, but it is precisely Bishop's ambivalence that necessitates an accounting of and for her professional self-fashioning. I use the phrase *professional self-fashioning* for two reasons. First, it denotes Bishop's ongoing practices of engagement—neither enthusiastic nor consistent, sometimes deliberate, sometimes not—with the professional field of poetry. Second, the phrase distinguishes between the need to attend to these critically neglected but, for Bishop, necessary practices and the more accustomed habit of measuring her career by a yardstick marked out with fixed professional “roles.” Against such a yardstick, Bishop can only succeed by having failed or refused to conduct her career like her male peers or caricatures of them.

Borrowing the terms of Pierre Bourdieu's classic account of the relational constitution of the field of cultural production, it is fair to say Bishop's “disposition” occupies disproportionately more space in accounts of her life and work than either her “positions” or, more to the point in the present context, her “position-takings.”⁴ To begin to address this disproportion, this chapter turns to that outwardly unpromising array of documents in the Elizabeth Bishop Papers, Series II: Professional Correspondence, Contracts, Financial Statements. Dispersed across

more than a dozen boxes in the archive, this series houses material records of the poet's position-takings—that is, those sites at which whom Bishop was or was becoming ran into the positions, themselves malleable, that she sought out or was offered, accepted, or reimagined over the course of her thirty-plus-year professional career. Since it lies beyond the scope of any one chapter to tell the whole history of Bishop's professional self-fashioning or even fully to describe Series II, this concluding chapter focuses on a representative pair of unpublished documents filed there: Bishop's two successful applications for fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. For both, Vassar holds typescript and autograph drafts as well as fair copies of Bishop's final application.

Let me acknowledge that applications for grant funding are, at root, utilitarian documents, means to a necessary or desired end rather than an end in themselves. Such applications are all but required of artists who, like Bishop, lack ample private means and are not otherwise consistently employed; at the same time, to win a fellowship is also to accrue capital in an economy of prestige. In all these senses, grant and fellowship applications are the opposite of poems yet sponsor the writing of them. But long after their immediate utility, when they are filed away in unassuming archival series, grant applications and like “professional correspondence” also record instances of professional self-fashioning. They record occasions on which the artist presents her record, references, and project to try to win time and money to make her art. Bishop's first application for a Guggenheim, submitted in the fall of 1946, was one of several marks of her arrival in the poetry world; her second, prepared in the fall of 1977, bespeaks her late-career ascendance within it.⁵ Read together, and given their situations at the chronological and reputational poles of Bishop's career, these documents can begin to restore a sense of the texture of Bishop's professional self-fashioning. The Guggenheim applications recast some of Bishop's vaunted modesty as also effective professional strategy, show Bishop's savvy about the centers of literary prestige as they moved into the academy over the course of her career, and point to why it matters to consider how Bishop navigated her professional life over three decades.

A PAIR OF GUGGENHEIMS

Bishop's career was bookended not only by the name-making and valedictory successes of *North & South* and *Geography III* (1976), respectively, but also by the two fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation that followed quickly on the publication of these volumes. No-strings-attached Guggenheim grants supported Bishop's writing for two calendar years, from July 1947 and from September 1978. The latter supported her until within two months of her death, on October 6,

1979. Bishop had just published *North & South* when she applied for and won a Guggenheim in the fall of 1946. The \$2,500 award was one of many marks of her establishment as a professional poet. Others included the commencement of her friendships with Jarrell and Lowell, *The New Yorker's* offer of a first-reading agreement and steady financial retainer, and the welcoming reception of *North & South*. By the fall of 1977, when Bishop applied for a second Guggenheim, she had won the major US literary prizes and several international awards, and *Geography III* had been published the previous winter to sterling reviews. To put all of this more schematically, what changed for Bishop between 1946 and 1977 was as much her professional stature as it was her person or poetics. In the late 1940s, Elizabeth Bishop was a promising new poet; by the late 1970s, among poets and literary scholars and critics, *Elizabeth Bishop* was a signifier whose meaning was perhaps best crystallized by John Ashbery, in an indelible aside from his review of her National Book Award-winning *Complete Poems* (1969): “Miss Bishop is somehow an establishment poet herself, and the establishment ought to give thanks; she is proof that it can’t be all bad” (201). Here again is Bishop as exception or antidote. But as Ashbery’s “somehow” suggests, such a delicate balance between the “establishment” and its discontents can neither be struck nor maintained by accident.

If Bishop’s reputation among poets, writers, critics, and scholars preceded her by the time she applied for her second Guggenheim, the force of her achievement was lost on Stephen L. Schlesinger, the Secretary of the Guggenheim Foundation. In an unpublished letter to Bishop dated September 1, 1977, he cautioned her “that the proportion of second Fellowships has declined in recent years because of the pressure on us from applicants who have not previously held one of our awards” (VC 40.7). From this note in the archival file, several incongruities follow. First, only two months after receiving Schlesinger’s letter, Bishop served as an evaluator of other artists’ applications for Guggenheim support. Of the group she assessed in November 1977, Bishop found Ashbery’s application by far the most deserving but noted that he had already had two Guggenheims. (He won both within a decade, no less, in 1967 and 1973.) A bit of barb laces her invocation of and quotation from the stated priorities of the Guggenheim Foundation: “I know that the Committee’s opinion of granting three Fellowships is unfavorable. However, ‘on the basis of accomplishments of the highest merit’ as your letter says, John Ashbery would certainly qualify[.]” Next, and adding another link in a chain of deference Guggenheim officials alternately withheld from or afforded to Bishop, along with “the formal notice” of her \$21,000 award on March 15, 1978, the President of the Foundation, Gordon N. Ray, sent a letter of his “personal congratulations” and asked Bishop to lunch with him in New York (VC 40.7).

Unlike Bishop’s professional stature, neither the cover sheet nor the components

of the Guggenheim application changed much in thirty years. Minor updates to the application form itself do reflect gradual shifts in normative cultural assumptions about the gender and sexuality of grant applicants between 1946 and 1977, if not much real change in the recipients of such grants. In fact, Bishop's pair of Guggenheim Fellowships speaks to how little access to funding improved for professional-creative women over the three decades of her career: of the thirty-two fellowships awarded in the "Creative Arts, U.S. and Canada" in 1947, six went to women (18.7%); of the seventy-six winners of the same competition for 1978, seventeen (22.4%) were women.⁶ Still, at the end of the 1946 form, an FAQ-style section called "Suggestions Concerning Applications" makes a not entirely successful effort to avoid assuming that the artist-, scientist-, or scholar-applicant is a man. Suggestion 4 reads, "Whenever the space provided in the form is not suitable for an applicant to present fully the facts of his or her case, it is requested that they be stated in a separate document." Suggestion 5 reverts to masculine default, directing the applicant to send one copy of the application to the Guggenheim Foundation, while "the other may be retained by him for his files." With Suggestion 7, the form realizes that the second-person pronoun "you" will do the trick: "If you do not get a receipt for your application within a reasonable time, please notify the Foundation." The 1977 form addresses the applicant throughout as "you" (VC 40.7). Regardless, Bishop's family, romantic, and kinship bonds never could—or would—align with the governing social assumptions always manifest on bureaucratic forms, even as those assumptions began slowly to shift. One poignant point of comparison between Bishop's two Guggenheim forms arises out of her answers to a standard-issue application question. Asked in 1946 for "Name and address of nearest kin, if unmarried," Bishop listed her aunt, "Mrs. William W. Bowers" of Great Village, Nova Scotia; asked in 1977 for "Name and address of spouse or nearest kin," she wrote, in her favored affectionate code, "Alice Methfessel (friend)" (VC 40.7).

The dossiers for Bishop's first application and her bid "for further assistance" from the Guggenheim Foundation alike required a statement of accomplishments, a list of publications, references, and—the core of the application—a plan for work to be carried out during the fellowship term. This is standard grant application fare but Bishop's submissions, especially her plans for work, defy application norms. Reading her Guggenheim applications, one is struck, first, by their tonal and rhetorical echoes of her poems. Rather than the self-promotion and confident projection invited from, if not necessitated of, grant applicants across disciplines, Bishop's Guggenheim materials resonate with the celebrated modesty and reticence of her (early) poetics, the related hesitations and self-qualifications or self-corrections in her work. Even bracketing the ladylike connotations of modesty, restraint, and similar lingering terms in the Bishop scholarship, the Guggenheim

REFERENCES:
Submit a list of references from whom further confidential information may be obtained concerning your qualifications and from whom expert opinion may be obtained as to the value and practicality of your proposed studies.

Name of Reference	Position	Address
Miss Marianne Moore	poet	260 Cumberland St., Brooklyn, N.Y.
Mrs. X.B. White	editor	5 THE NEW YORKER, 25 W 42nd St. N.Y.
Mr. John Dewey	philosopher	1158 5th Ave., New York
Mr. Ferris Groves	editor	Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston
Mr. Edmund Wilson	critic & novelist	Windsor Inn, Windsor, Nevada
Mr. Horace Gregory	poet & critic	Palisades, Rockland Co., N.Y.
Mr. Philip Babw	editor	A PARTISAN REVIEW, 45 Astor Place N.Y.

If you have applied or expect to apply elsewhere for any fellowship or scholarship for the same period, state the facts regarding such applications:

If you apply elsewhere for any fellowship or scholarship after presenting this application, please notify the Foundation immediately.

SIGNATURE: _____

PLACE AND DATE OF MAILING: _____

SUGGESTIONS CONCERNING APPLICATIONS

1. If convenient, please type application and additional material.
2. Use paper the size of this sheet, 8 1/2" x 11", if possible, for writing all documents submitted.
3. Every page or document submitted must bear the applicant's name plainly written.
4. Whenever the space provided in this form is not suitable for an applicant to present fully the facts of his or her case, it is requested that they be stated in a separate document.
5. Only one copy of the application form should be submitted to the Foundation by the applicant; the other may be retained by him for his own files.
6. It is suggested that applications and accompanying documents be sent by registered mail, addressed to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 551 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y.
7. If you do not get a receipt for your application within a reasonable time, please notify the Foundation.

FELLOWSHIP APPLICATION FORM
JOHN SIMON GUGGENHEIM MEMORIAL FOUNDATION
551 FIFTH AVENUE • NEW YORK 17 • N. Y.

APPLICATIONS and accompanying documents must reach the Secretary of the Foundation not later than October 15 of each year. They are desired, for the convenience of the Committee of Selection, as early as possible.

In what field of learning, or of art, does your project lie? Poetry

Concise statement of project: Creative work in poetry.

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Name in full Elizabeth Bishop

Present address 46 Ring Street, New York 14, New York
Telephone Walker 5 - 1706

A permanent address X Houghton Mifflin Company, 2 Park St., Boston, Mass.

Present occupation writing

Place of birth Worcester, Mass. Date of birth February 8, 1911

If not a native-born American citizen, date and place of naturalization _____

Single, Married, Widowed, Divorced Single

Name and address of wife or husband _____

Name and address of nearest kin, if unmarried Mrs. William F. Bowers (sunt)
Great Village, Colchester County, Nova Scotia, Canada

Ages of children, if any _____

Have you any constitutional disorder or physical disability? _____

With this application please submit a small recent photograph.

On her first Guggenheim application form, in 1946, Bishop wrote as little as possible about her proposed project but listed as many impressive references as she could fit in the space provided. (VC 40.7; Courtesy of Vassar College)

applications document how these characteristics—or the performance of a certain uncertainty—worked as a part of her professional self-fashioning rather than exclusively as a laudable mark of the poet’s holding herself apart from professional demands or opportunities. Bishop won the funds and prestige with which to support her writing in no small part by declining, at least rhetorically, to play the game of self-aggrandizement or to treat poetry like a research project with expected worthwhile outcomes. Her application statements disdain to elaborate much on her proposed work, instead claiming for poetry an ineffable value that defies the bureaucratic forms, material or metaphorical, that would seek to contain them.

On the 1946 application, especially, Bishop’s concision might seem easily—or only—to burnish her reputation for modesty. What is certain, however, is the effect of her brevity. Like a person whose whisper makes everyone lean in to hear what she has to say, Bishop’s concision proved a winning strategy. Before even asking for the applicant’s name, the 1946 application form requested a “Concise statement of project” and provided six lines for a paragraph-long response. Bishop typed only “Creative work in poetry.”

The same concision applies to the “Accomplishments” section of the application. Bishop left the first two questions—“Positions held” and memberships

in “learned, scientific or artistic societies”—blank. She had to: she had held no positions, joined no societies. The third question requested a “full account of the advanced work, research, or creative work you have already done” and the fourth “a list of your publications.” On a separate half-sheet of typescript, Bishop drafted a single answer to both questions: “In 1946 I published NORTH & SOUTH a book of poems that received the Houghton Mifflin Poetry Fellowship for 1945. I have contribute [sic] poems and stories to most of the better ‘little’ magazines including Partisan Review and Life & Letters To-day, New Directions, also to The New Yorker, The New Republic, Forum, etc.” (VC 40.7). That “etc.” is an uncharacteristically vague throwaway and intriguing for being so. The offhand indication of unspecified work affects a casual confidence that Bishop did not in fact feel about her early career achievements.

What should have been the most thorough and compelling section of the 1946 application was “PLANS FOR WORK,” equivalent to today’s “statement of purpose.” In Bishop’s case, the Guggenheim’s boilerplate description of what these plans must include runs almost as long (113 words) as Bishop’s “plan” (148 words). The application prompt reads in full:

Submit a statement giving detailed plans for the work you would pursue during your tenure of a Fellowship. This statement should include, *inter alia*: a description of the project, including its character and scope, and the significance of its presumable contribution to knowledge, or to art; the present state of the project, time of commencement, progress to date, and expectation as to completion; the place or places where the work would be carried on, and the authorities, if any, with whom it would be done; your expectation as to publication of the results of your work; and your ultimate purpose as a scholar or artist. *This statement should be complete and carefully prepared.* (VC 40.7)

For readers familiar with Bishop’s correspondence of the late 1940s—or, for that matter, with her letters to poet-friends and others at just about any point in her career—this typical grant application fodder about plans for work reads as if designed to stir up the poet’s professional anxieties. They did not need stirring up in late 1946. In the early wake of *North & South*, Bishop’s embarrassment about how long it had taken her to finish the book and doubt as to the seriousness and depth of her work became painful refrains in her correspondence. Far from allaying these concerns, the encouraging reception of *North & South* exacerbated them. Some of the reviews remarked unnecessarily on how long it had taken her to write and publish the book. In *The New Yorker*, for example, Louise Bogan concluded her favorable review by chiding the poet, as if she were a student handing in a school

assignment after the deadline: “Miss Bishop has evidently put in eleven years” into “these thirty poems,” she wrote. “It is to be hoped that we shall get thirty more . . . in rather less than another decade” (183). Even as Bishop received compliments on *North & South*, “she apologized to everyone for its thinness” (Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop* 180).

Bishop’s statement in response to the application instructions is neither “complete” nor very “carefully prepared” nor does it pretend to self-confidence. Her brief outline of plans never addresses many of the points specified in the application form: Bishop makes no presumption as to the “contribution to knowledge, or to art” her work will make and no proclamation as to her “ultimate purpose as a scholar or artist.” Making quick work of the obligation to make and state plans, Bishop first claims the difficulty of giving “an exact idea of what poetry may turn out to be like, while it is yet in progress,” then gestures toward the new, “more serious” book that she has “quite well in mind,” and concludes by reiterating that “it is almost impossible to give a definite plan or estimate of poetry in advance.” Instead of trying to make such an estimate, she directs the selection committee back to *North & South* as an indication of her promise (VC 40.7).

Bishop’s description of her new book trades in vague phrasing: the book is only “tentatively called ‘Faustina and Other Poems,’” its “emphasis” only “seems to be more directly on real people[,]” and Bishop can only “hope [it] will prove to be more serious” than *North & South*. The plan, such as it is, also escalates over the brief statement from “It is difficult to give an exact idea of what poetry may turn out to be like” to “it is almost impossible to give a definite plan or estimate of poetry.” These refusals are categorical—about poetry per se rather than restrictively about Bishop’s own. Along with the sheer brevity and vagueness of Bishop’s plan, these outward marks of uncertainty also suggest, to my ear, a certain refusal to speak in accordance with the application prompt’s evident orientation toward scholarship and scientific research, as witness the syntactical afterthought of “or to art.” In other words, if this application statement seems to evince Bishop’s modesty, then it also leverages the comparative mystique of poetry.

At the end of her “plans for work,” Bishop directs her references and the Guggenheim selection committee back to her first book. Two of her references knew *North & South* well and had their own professional stake in the continued success of the book and the poet. Ferris Greenslet was Bishop’s editor at Houghton Mifflin; Katharine White was one of the judges who awarded Bishop the inaugural Houghton Mifflin Poetry Prize for *North & South*. Later in the fall of 1946, she offered Bishop her initial first-read contract with *The New Yorker*. But these small-literary-world alignments—or conflicts of professional interest—come to look

almost negligible when compared to the academic-institutional consolidation of prestige and opportunity recorded in Bishop's 1977 Guggenheim application.

In 1946, Bishop provided seven references in support of her application for a Guggenheim fellowship. Two, "Mr. John Dewey" and "Mr. Horace Gregory," were professors, but Bishop gave their "Position[s]" as "philosopher" and "poet & critic," respectively, rather than listing their academic titles and home institutions. Her other references in 1946 were the "poet" "Miss Marianne Moore"; editors "Mrs. E.B. [Katharine] White," "Mr. Ferris Greenslet," and "Mr. Philip Rahv"; and the "critic & novelist" "Mr. Edmund Wilson." Thirty years later, the updated Guggenheim application form provided space for four references and requested "Position (Full Title)." Under "Name of Reference," Bishop listed three professors—Harold Bloom (Yale), Helen Vendler (then at Boston University), Robert Fitzgerald (Harvard)—and Robert Giroux, "Editor-in-Chief" at Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Given that the academy exerted ever stronger gravitational pull on US poetry over the course of Bishop's career, this shift from literary and intellectual types in 1946 to mostly prominent academic literary scholars and critics in 1977 is not surprising. It is, however, significant. Bishop's list of references registers both the esteem in which academics held her—Bloom and Vendler had also both reviewed *Geography III*—and her sense that these recommenders would have the most pull with the Guggenheim Foundation. She could certainly have asked instead poet-friends such as Ashbery or James Merrill, both of whom had already won their first National Book Awards by 1977.

The archival file also contains a handwritten letter from Bloom that crystallizes this signal difference between Bishop's two Guggenheim applications. Dated October 6, 1977, the letter is at once sincere in its "homage" to Bishop and testament to the in-crowd power that coursed through such prestige competitions. In it, Bloom expresses himself "greatly honored to write a Guggenheim Fellowship on your behalf" and certain that "you will receive the Fellowship." He goes on to assert that "there is no poet now alive," writing in any language, "whose achievement is as beyond dispute" as Bishop's and encourages her to apply for still more fellowships than the Guggenheim. For "what matters is that you write more books of poems" (VC 40.7). As far as I know, Bishop had not asked Bloom for further patronage or advocacy, but the professor saw fit to offer it, and Bishop kept his affirmative letter.

The academic support of Bishop's second Guggenheim application lines up, albeit paradoxically, with the central strategy of the statements Bishop prepared for the application. Whereas the 1946 application embraces concision and preserves a kind of aura around poet and poetry, the 1977 application materials assert nothing so plainly as how burdensome Bishop found one aspect of her sometime imbrication in the academy: teaching.⁷ The two key documents of the later application

JOHN SIMON GUGGENHEIM MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

90 Park Avenue · New York, N.Y. 10016

APPLICATION FOR FURTHER ASSISTANCE

APPLICATIONS and accompanying documents should reach the office of the Foundation not later than the date specified in our announcement.

Name in full (surname in capital): Elizabeth BISHOP
 Preferred mailing address: 437 Lewis Wharf
 Boston, Massachusetts Zip Code: 02110 Telephone: 517-227-2005
 Home address (if other than above):
 Zip Code Telephone

Title of present position (include name of institution, if any): Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Professor of English, New York University

State the specific field of scholarship or art in which your proposal lies. Writing - mostly poetry.
some prose.
 State concisely the title of your project. A book of poems, tentatively entitled "Grandmother's Glass Eyes." Another book, one fairly long poem (partly written) tentatively called "Legs". Possibly more short stories.
 State where you intend to carry out your proposed plan. at my apartment, 437 Lewis Wharf in Boston, Massachusetts, with possibly a few weeks in Maine in the summer.
 Specify the inclusive dates of the period for which you are requesting a fellowship.
May, 1978-May, 1979

Place of birth: Worcester, Massachusetts Date of birth: 8 February 1911 Sex: Female
 Citizenship: U.S.A. If not a native-born citizen, give date and place of naturalization:
 Marital status: single Number and ages of children:
 Name and address of spouse or nearest kin: Alice Northfessel (friend), 60 Brattle Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138
 Social Security number (if U.S. citizen or resident): 071-32-8783

List the positions that you have held since your Fellowship award (professional, teaching, administrative, and business), beginning with your current position and working backwards.

Name of Institution or Organization	Position (Full Title)	Dates of Tenure	Compensation
New York University	Henry W. and Albert A. Berg	9/77-1/78	\$10,000
Harvard University	Professor of English	7/73-6/77	\$25,000/year
University of Washington	Visiting Prof. of English	3/73-6/73	\$12,000
Harvard University	Lecturer on English	7/68-7/73	\$12,000
University of Washington	Visiting Prof. of English (half time)	1/66-8/66	\$17,000
Library of Congress	Consultant in Poetry	9/49-8/50	\$5,000

REFERENCES:

List the names of four persons to whom the Foundation may write for expert judgment concerning your abilities, especially in relation to your proposal for the use of a Fellowship. (All statements by references to the Foundation are held in the strictest confidence.)

Name of Reference	Position (Full Title)	Address
Herold Bloom	Prof. of English, Yale Univ.	179 Lincolnton St., New Haven, Conn. 14 Fernside Drive
Robert Fitzgerald	Prof. of English, Harvard Univ.	Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138
Robert Giroux	Editor-in-Chief, Farrar, Straus & Giroux	100 Union Square West New York, New York 10003
Helen Vendler	Prof. of English, Boston Univ.	100-9111 Street Brookline, Massachusetts

If you have applied or expect to apply elsewhere for any fellowship or scholarship for the same period, state the facts regarding such applications:

If you apply elsewhere for any fellowship or scholarship after presenting this application, please notify the Foundation immediately.

You are advised that, in accordance with the provisions of the Federal Tax Reform Act of 1966, each successful applicant for a Fellowship will be required to agree, as a condition of his award, to submit at the conclusion of his term a report on what he has accomplished and an accounting for the funds he has received.

SIGNATURE

PLACE AND DATE OF MAILING: Boston, Massachusetts 14 October 1977

If you do not receive an acknowledgment of your application within a reasonable time, please notify the Foundation. If you move after filing this application, please notify the Foundation of your new address.

In 1977, the instruction to provide "Full Title" for each reference enabled doing away with the once customary notation of gender and marital status by mode of address (Mr., Mrs., Miss). The instruction also reflected a new expectation that references would be of significant academic or institutional standing. (VC 40.7; Courtesy of Vassar College)

start with teaching jobs Bishop has held. Not least because the first, a "statement of accomplishments" since the previous award, amounted to a summary of almost Bishop's entire career, it might well have begun with books published or awards won. Instead, she fashions herself first as a professor seeking a well-deserved break from teaching and in need of "enough money to live on." "Since 1947, I have had the following jobs" (VC 40.7), her statement of accomplishments begins. Except for her poetry consultancy at the Library of Congress, all are teaching jobs—at the University of Washington, Harvard, and New York University. At Harvard, where Bishop did most of her teaching, her position was lecturer; Washington and NYU honored her with the grander titles of Visiting Professor and Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Professor, respectively. After academic positions, the statement of accomplishments enumerates books published, with the list padded a bit to look as impressive as possible. *A Cold Spring* (1955) is listed as a standalone volume, though it was never published as such; and the Life World Library volume *Brazil* (1962) appears without any of Bishop's customary qualification of her compromised authorship of it (Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop* 327-28). From books, the statement of accomplishments runs, orderly enough, through "fellowships and awards," memberships in honorific professional organizations, and honorary degrees. It concludes with this

putatively uncharacteristic and refreshingly immodest note: “I have given readings and appeared in anthologies too numerous to mention” (VC 40.7). This is a matter of fact nod to Bishop’s prominence and the earned equivalent of “etc.” in the 1946 application.

The second key document of Bishop’s 1977 Guggenheim application, the statement of plans for the fellowship year, also begins with a recounting of the academic labor from which the fellowship would exempt her. She gives over the first half of her two-paragraph statement to what she frames as the burdensome distraction of teaching and flags with scare quotes what she regarded as a particularly contrived aspect of it: the teaching of “creative writing.” While teaching, which Bishop writes has occupied most of her time since the early 1970s, “I find I can do almost no work of my own.” Freedom from teaching and “enough money to live on” would, she explains, afford her the freedom “to concentrate for long periods of time on my writing” (VC 40.7). When Bishop won the Guggenheim, the \$21,000 award did allow her to bow out of teaching at Brandeis for the 1977-78 academic year.

For only one pained paragraph does Bishop’s statement of plans look forward to the fellowship and the writing it would allow her to do. Once again, she breaks customary rules of competitive applications for funding. *Possibly* and *tentatively* occupy crucial grant proposal real estate in what amounts to a brief, prospective bibliography of books Bishop means to write. She has two book-length poetry projects “tentatively” in mind and has had “ten pages or so” of one of them “in rough draft for five or six years.” She also means to supplement a handful of her published short stories with “a few more and possibly two or three travel sketches,” so as to make a book of prose. But Bishop is clear that her “immediate and most pressing interest is in” writing poems (VC 40.7).

Obvious tragedy resides in this projection of work, in that Bishop never would finish these books. But there is another, slower-burning sadness to this statement of plans, too. By the time she applied for “further assistance” from the Guggenheim Foundation, Bishop probably didn’t have to say much about the promise of her future work; she was as much a shoo-in as an applicant could be. Yet throughout her career, right up to her death, Bishop could never promise *enough* work, even to herself. In this instance, only after she piles on more promises—a half-dozen short stories, “possibly two or three travel sketches,” maybe to “make” another book—does she allow herself to return to her “pressing interest in completing the two books of poems.”

Like many readers and probably most scholars of Bishop’s work, I wish she had completed these books and that there were more of her poems. These wishes have run through much of the reception of Bishop in the twenty-first century. It is there in Ashbery’s blurb for *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and*

Fragments (2006), which begins, “For those who love Bishop, there can never be enough of her writing.” The wish for more Bishop is there, too, in early scholarly treatments of newer additions to the poet’s archive.

This last note points back especially to Bishop’s “letters” to Dr. Ruth Foster. So does the phrase “one long poem,” which echoes across those “letters” and her Guggenheim application of thirty years later. The Foster “letters” are, more accurately, a therapeutic assignment and chronology that Bishop wrote over one drunken weekend in February 1947; the “letters” are rhetorically addressed to Bishop’s psychiatrist, but material details suggest she might never have sent them. The letters describe, among other experiences, the trauma of Bishop’s childhood sexual abuse by an uncle, the wonder of some of her first erotic encounters with women, and the emergence of the dream-germ of “At the Fishhouses,” which she completed in February 1947. I noted at the outset of this chapter that my curiosity about how the Vassar archive might help us to revalue Bishop’s professional self-fashioning derived in part from a sense that accustomed psycho-biographical readings of Bishop tend to occlude her conduct of her career. The strangely eager reception of the Foster letters—they were one impetus for the NEH Seminar—only sharpened my curiosity. “Strangely eager” not because early readings of the letters proceed according to the entrenched biographical imperatives of a good share of Bishop scholarship. How else could readings of such letters proceed? Rather, I mean to flag the eagerness, in the first published account of them, to use the letters as a kind of master key (Goldensohn, “Approaching”) or, in Heather Treseler’s more circumspect account, the positing of the Foster letters as “something of an *ars poetica*” for Bishop (“One Long Poem”). It is neither to indulge in contrarianism nor to minimize Bishop’s—or anyone’s—trauma nor to weigh in on the endless debate about what Bishop did or didn’t mean to keep “private” that I suggest an ethos of proportion with respect to critical use of the Foster letters. The question, to my mind, is less *whether* than *how* to use the letters, or how much interpretive weight to make them bear with respect to Bishop’s poetics writ large.

Alongside stories about Bishop’s life that such new, compelling archival materials can deepen—or, one would hope, complicate—there remain untold and undervalued stories to be found in materials that have been there all along. One is the story of Bishop’s professional self-fashioning, which began in earnest right around the time of the Foster letters but cannot be wholly subsumed into their revelatory force. Put more evocatively, in reading through Series II: Professional Correspondence, Contracts, Financial Statements on-site at Vassar, one is reminded at every turn that the promise of the archival sublime—the major discovery, the boldface revelation—rests on and is conditioned by the presence of the archival mundane. If Bishop’s professional life continues to loom small in the study of her work, or if we

continue to fashion her romantically as a kind of miraculous anti-professional legible primarily according to often reductive psychological diagnostics or characteristics, then we miss a crucial historical instance—messy, textured, unscripted—of a woman gaining access to literary authority, public discourse, and professional life in the latter half of the twentieth century. If we skip over the outwardly unremarkable, ostensibly boring documents in her archive, then we also dodge the chance—the imperative—to do what Bishop’s poems, from “At the Fishhouses” to “Poem,” teach us to do: attend to the apparently unremarkable thing and discover what knowledge it holds.

NOTES

1. Six reviews of *North & South*, including those cited in the main text, are collected in Schwartz and Estess 177-93.
2. Rosenbaum notes that Bishop’s phrase “was partially ironic, given the small income generated by sales of poetry, but nevertheless indicated her discomfort with the commercial and institutional aspects of the profession” (63).
3. Bishop’s career also lined up with the concomitant devaluation of some professional fields as women moved into them and with widespread wage and salary discrimination against working women in the United States. A recent report by feminist historian Heidi Hartmann for the Institute for Women’s Policy Research includes relevant longer trend lines on women’s work and pay in relation to men’s, as well as the correlation of work and pay with level of education. In a related vein, Bethany Hicok tracks Bishop’s undergraduate education at Vassar, in the early 1930s, amid the backlash against women’s education that followed on women’s suffrage (*Degrees of Freedom*). Finally, my emphasis on women’s professional history does not mean to downplay the specific history of gay women—or of queer people broadly—in postwar workplaces in the United States. Margot Canaday unearths this history in her book-in-progress, *Pink Precariat: LGBT Workers in the Shadow of Civil Rights, 1945-2000*.
4. Bourdieu writes, “To understand the practices of writers and artists, and not least their products, entails understanding that they are the result of the meeting of two histories: the history of the positions they occupy and the history of their dispositions. Although position helps to shape dispositions, the latter, in so far as they are the product of independent conditions, have an existence and efficacy of their own and can help to shape positions. In no field is the confrontation between positions and dispositions more continuous and uncertain than in the literary and artistic field” (61). Only one “position,” Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, has much traction in the Bishop scholarship. See, for two examples, Roman 115-40; Javadizadeh, “Institutionalization” 130-39.
5. On Bishop’s professional arrival, and for a reliable biographical chronicle of milestones in Bishop’s professional career, see Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop 187-88* and *passim*.
6. Statistics are tallied from the website of the Guggenheim Foundation, which provides a searchable database of fellows. In 2018, 50.4% of Guggenheim Fellows in the Creative Arts (US & Canada) identified as women, <https://www.gf.org/fellows/all-fellows/>, accessed 30 Apr. 2019.
7. Several of Bishop’s drafts and notes toward revising her 1977 Guggenheim application indicate

that she had clerical help in preparing the materials, likely from Methfessel. At one point, on a mostly typescript sheet mapping out the various elements of the application, Bishop noted that the required list of publications “seems to be taken care of by the section called ‘Books’” in the statement of accomplishments. Methfessel dutifully prepared a separate list of publications anyway. At another point on the same page, Bishop asked “you” to compile her statement of accomplishments out of everything on that curriculum vitae (?) you have so kindly made out for me, that comes after my birth and ‘Vassar College 1934’” (VC 40.7). Judging by its dating and the document format, this “curriculum vitae (?)” likely refers to a clean typescript chronology of Bishop’s personal and professional life in VC 122.5.