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Sounding Two Notes: Re-Reading Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bishop

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Near the end of the first part of Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), "The Window," the Ramsay family and their invited guests have withdrawn for the evening after a feast of *boeuf en daube*—the children to bed, the guests to their rooms, and finally Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay to sit across from each other reading. Conscious of her husband's attention, Mrs. Ramsay wishes that he would not disturb her in this pleasant moment of reading but allow her to go on perusing lines of poetry at random and dreaming over them, that he would for once, for now, not demand her sympathy and attention. Woolf then changes the focus to Mr. Ramsay who is in a conciliatory mood, silently indulging his wife to go on but imagining she hardly understands what she reads. Mrs. Ramsay, granted this reprieve, reads a line of Shakespeare's sonnets to herself: "Yet seem'd it winter still, and, you away, /As with your shadow I with these did play" (123). Woolf writes,

she read, and so reading she was ascending, she felt, on to the top, on to the summit. How satisfying! How restful! All the odds and ends of the day stuck to this magnet; her mind felt swept, felt clean. And then there it was, suddenly entire; she held it in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here—the sonnet. (123)

This passage is an extraordinarily adroit observation of the strange pleasure felt when engaging with art—literature in particular. Further, as a scene about the powerful effect of reading, it signals Woolf's fascination with the ways in which our narrative horizons shape our lives. For Woolf, the narratives we are able to imagine are those we may be able to live.

This belief is why I have spent a life in school—teaching and reading literature with others. A book, an essay, a poem; these you turn to, live lives through, use to connect, use as foils and as sharpening steel. They hone our ability to imagine other horizons and other relationships.

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When asked by new students why they should study literature or asked by new acquaintances what I do, I tell them that reading literature is a powerful skill to acquire and cultivate. If the listener seems dubious, I discuss how experiencing new narratives expands our intellectual and emotional horizons, thus making change possible in the world. I also often have recourse to the historical sense literature instills, a reliably attractive answer. However, my listener frequently accepts this proof of literature's value with an unspoken qualification—that studying “real history” might be a more valuable mental exercise in acquiring knowledge of a culture and time than studying fiction. Consequently, most often my testimony to the value of reading literature is that reading is creative work, and engaging with literature is the means for us to both see ourselves and connect with others.

For me, reading and re-reading have offered the richest prospects for such engagement, particularly Woolf's novels and Elizabeth Bishop's poetry. As a critic and a novelist, Woolf sought to rout the conventions of the novel—specifically those of the Victorian novel that preceded her—that had constrained both inner and lived narratives. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf breaks from generic expectations, takes up the inner voices of her characters, and creates self-reflexive scenes of reading in which readers become conscious of their own involvement in the work.

Like Mrs. Ramsay, we are lifted out of our lives and enter into the art work or character while simultaneously engaging as an observing other. Woolf innovates the novel's form to get closer to what she saw as “life,” to capture “the thing itself” which requires that we, as readers, create and experience it (“A Sketch of the Past” 72). In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf asks how the writer can recreate in the reader “the thing itself” that is life if the writer is bound by the “thrall” of the novel's conventions to “provide a plot, to provide comedy,

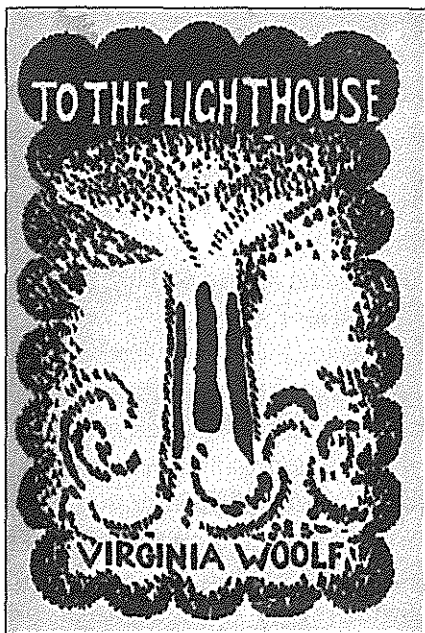


Virginia Woolf

tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole" (160). She asks, "Is life like this? Must novels be like this?" (160). It is a thrilling revolt, and the novels that followed provide us with a stunning array of departures from convention with innovations that startle readers into taking up and creating the life through the exchange of reading.

Although I have long enjoyed dwelling on the revolutionary aspect of Woolf's innovations, here my point is to note that her profound quarrel with form—the quarrel that is the common denominator of modernism—is hardly a discarding or devaluation of form in and of itself. Rather, Woolf argued, the novel is a form that can and must do more to capture life. Each of Woolf's novels is a new experiment in the novel form, just as Elizabeth Bishop's poems are an evocation and subversion of poetic form. I would like to briefly consider a form that recurs within several of Woolf's multifarious works and explore how Bishop similarly uses form and repetition to create a powerful inner experience in the reader. In contrast to Mrs. Ramsay's sonnet reading, which is "satisfying" and "restful," elsewhere Woolf uses a simple formal device to convey the opposite effect—an echo. Specifically, the name of a character repeated.

In part three of *To the Lighthouse*, after ten years and a world war have passed parenthetically, Lily Briscoe has returned to the vacation house on the sudden invitation of Mr. Ramsay, who has invited that day's other visitors as well and is now attempting to recreate the trip to the lighthouse with his grown children James and Cam. The attempt at repetition, however, founders given the absence of Mrs. Ramsay, whose death readers have learned of in a subordinate clause in part two's description of time passing. Lily takes up the unfinished canvas she began ten years before, a post-impressionist scene of the home and



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garden. The presence of Mrs. Ramsay holding and reading to young James in the window had previously anchored the scene, signified by Lily on her canvas as a purplish triangle. Now the work as a whole remains unfinished, the vision incomplete. The power of Mrs. Ramsay's presence (influencing and directing all the lives of the characters) and now its absence unsettles the otherwise unattached, independent Lily. Preparing to paint she looks at the window where Mrs. Ramsay had sat, and her heart leaps: "Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!" she cried, feeling the old horror come back—to want and want and not to have" (205). When Mr. Ramsay confronts her briefly on his way to depart, demanding a sympathy she cannot give, Lily again, now silently, calls Mrs. Ramsay's name twice. This doubling, the call without an answer, engenders in the reader an unresolved tension—the empty space of the steps, mirrored on Lily's canvas, is an uncanny evocation of absent presence.

The opening pages of Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) are likewise structured around an absent presence. Readers follow the life of Jacob Flanders from childhood to his death in the Great War through the point of view of women who have known him. At the end of the novel, Jacob's friend Bonamy stands in his bedroom and is overcome by his absence: "Jacob! Jacob!" cried Bonamy (176). Jacob's mother holds out "a pair of Jacob's old shoes," a material evocation of absence, asking, "What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?" (176). Both Lily's silent cry and Bonamy's evoke a shift from major to minor—from protest to sorrow. The familiar made strange—doubled—is a hallmark of the uncanny, and a powerful conduit to the expression of grief in these two scenes.

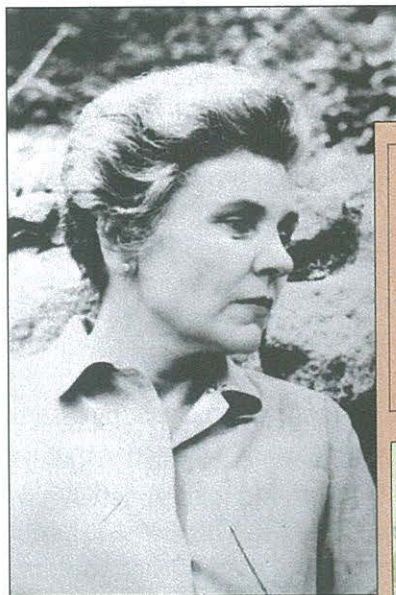
The echo of that cry is haunting, and the repetition of the technique in Woolf's work suggests to me that she has hit upon some fundamental reality of human life: a particular, rhythmic vocalism that is both a call to the absent to become present and a signification of absence. It is at once fundamentally human and poetically resonant. The powerful affect this technique evokes has likewise drawn me to Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art," which achieves a similar emotional haunting. Here I'd like to consider how grief is both performed and recreated in a work of poetry that is, like Woolf's writing, an invitation to engage the reader in the power of form to capture life while simultaneously asking the reader to interrogate art's work.

Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art" (1976) is a perfect villanelle of six stanzas—five tercets with end rhymes a/b/a (excepting the fourth stanza which is c/a/b) and a final quatrain of four lines with end rhymes d/a/b/c. All of that is to say, the poem is pointedly following a form of the sonnet, a villanelle, and draws attention to the poet's recourse to it. Without saying "I," the poem immediately creates a powerful sense of who our speaker is. The opening two stanzas establish an insouciant voice:

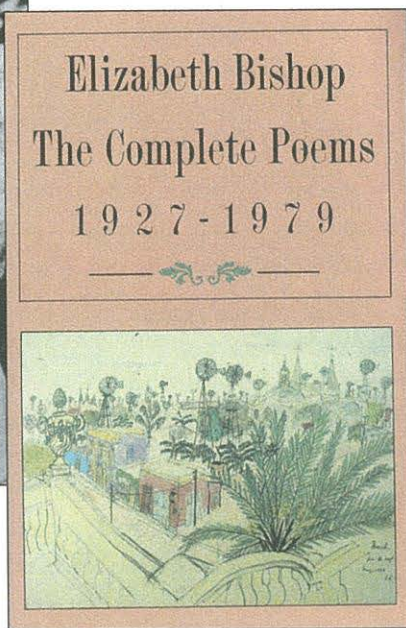
One Art

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.



Elizabeth Bishop



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Here, we are on familiar ground, perhaps a bit charmed by the speaker's deprecation of loss as commonplace and unexceptional, and happily we read on for further absolution and perhaps commiseration. Having thus playfully established the "ease" of loss, the speaker continues in instructing the reader in the art:

Then practice losing farther; losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

There is a shift in tone here, as subtle as light on a blade or a wave. The hinge of "meant" dictates the downbeat of the next two words, "to travel," and as readers we must then pause and draw breath to complete the line. The imperative tone instructing us in how to practice this art reveals itself as subtly dark, but the abstraction of the examples of what is lost (places, names, intended journeys) and the nonchalance of the repetition in the last line ("None of these will bring disaster") carries us nimbly on to the next stanza. Here, however, the speaker gives quite specific examples of loss as evidence that belies the previous refrain:

I lost my mother's watch. And look! My last, or
next to last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

For the reader, the unknowable meaning of the watch that was lost and the profoundly "loved" homes is a point of possible identification with a more personal voice. Further, it introduces a particular strain in that voice, which the repetition of the refrain attempts to check by asserting once again "The art of losing isn't hard to master." The stanza that follows opens outward toward the import of displacement, shifting the tone from an insouciant bravado to a more remote insistence.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

Of course, our speaker in no practical sense could possess any of these objects (cities, realms, rivers). Nonetheless, the lines speak to how our sense of self is rooted to time and place. What is remarkable, then, is that we are able to experience their displacement as not “disaster” but as integral to life’s inevitable but survivable losses. It seems the “art of losing” is indeed simply part of any life’s journey, and thus any loss can and should be surmounted by practicing the “One Art” masterfully. Yet, in the space between this penultimate stanza that has testified to the speaker’s mastery and the next, the final stanza, a more deliberate pacing emerges and the bravado of the preceding lines wavers.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident
the art of losing’s not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

The weight of “you” shifts the open address to a personal one. However, whether the addressee of the poem will hear these words is unlikely. The poem’s manner instead suggests a reading in which the speaker is addressing an absence, a “you” present only in memory. This moment of pain, revealed in the parenthetical details of “(the joking voice, a gesture / I love),” is nonetheless resolutely capped, not only by parenthesis but also the insistence “I shan’t have lied.” The speaker reverts to the poem’s original imperative tenor of instruction in a known art. As if having demonstrated a mathematical proof, the voice adds the flourish “It’s evident” to the repetition of the opening line, “The art of losing’s not too hard to master.” Nonetheless, as if in the attempt to quickly complete the next before doubts or questions can arise, no period ends the line. In the final line, the speaker’s stoicism cracks, as another parenthetical confirms. The tenor of its inclusion is protest, a determination to refuse the overwhelming tragedy of loss. Yet the second, final parenthetical in the stanza “(*Write it!*)” also sounds the speaker’s sorrow. Together, the two parentheticals of protest and sorrow reveal the speaker’s contrary emotions—on the one hand, to deny the grief of loss, and, on the other hand, to witness it.

Bishop’s “One Art” and Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* capture a profound aspect of our living—how the experience of loss is a movement from

protest to grief. The latter does not negate the former. Although the two notes (protest, grief) sound one after the other, the fact of their shared signifier recreates in the reader the haunting effects of absence and desire. The speaker of Bishop's poem and Lily in Woolf's novel express the haunting pain of that combination. They are able to do so through the formal use of repetition. Bishop's repeated insistence that the art of loss isn't hard to master parallels the two moments in *To the Lighthouse* when Lily calls Mrs. Ramsay's name consecutively. The sequential repetition in each instance evokes Freud's notion of the uncanny, a term originally known as the *unheimlich* or unhomely. These works are not only emblematic of our experience of absence and desire through the emotions of protest and grief, but also of our need to control and contain these emotions in the face of their inevitability given our relationship to time and place. The major to minor notes sounding sequentially captures the awful fact of present absences, the uncanny aspect of our lives. Form offers our only recourse; the work of art (that is, work in the sense of creative action, and work in the sense of a completed object) offers a means to articulate protest while simultaneously embodying and containing the formlessness of grief.

Woolf once theorized in her essay "Moments of Being" that if she had a "philosophy," it was that there is a "pattern" behind the "cotton wool" incidentals of daily life, claiming, "the whole world is a work of art; [...] we are parts of the work of art." Artists and their art are "the truth about this vast mass that we call the world [...]; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself." Woolf's work, writing, is for her a means to master the formlessness of living. When dealt a blow, she no longer feels it as "simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order" and by "putting it into words" she makes it "real" and its "wholeness" then revokes its "power to hurt me." This sense of triumphant wholeness life returns us to Mrs. Ramsay's scene of reading, in which she finds in "the sonnet" a sense "beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here" (123). Just as Mrs. Ramsay likens her reading to climbing a summit, achieving a revelatory view, Woolf herself attests to a "great delight to put the severed parts

together." Woolf's reflection on her work as a writer here speaks to the consolations of form, even if form itself points obliquely to its inadequacy. It is for literary form's consolations and its self-confessed, necessary limitations that Woolf's and Bishop's works appeal to me. My ambition to understand how such works "work" for and upon us is perhaps a desire to understand something in the "pattern" of human life, a desire for revelation in the formlessness of day to day existence. Writing this essay, then, might suggest my own recourse to form in re-reading and reconsidering how these works continue to serve as haunting presences. Form enables us to "go on." It offers a means to both realize and contain an apprehension of our existential nature—the wonder that we live, the wonder that we die, the absurdity and the marvelousness of both experienced in love and loss. ■