



‘Hear How the Imagery Aestheticises?’: Elizabeth Bishop, Mark and the Dangers of Poetic Appropriation.

María López Penalva

May 2024

‘Posing as a captive slave for Michaelangelo’ (Doty, Sweet Machine, 39-40)

When Terrance Hayes writes ‘I lock you in an American sonnet’, (11) he establishes a precedent for thinking of the poem as place, a site of power where images are captured, appropriated and imbued with meanings by the speaker. This is present throughout the poetry of Mark Doty and Elizabeth Bishop, both of whom are incessantly invested in aesthetic craft and the process through which a subject is transfigured into poetry. An exploration of the limitations of poetry ensues when Doty shifts from holding artificiality at the core of his work to dealing with real, feeling poetic subjects—sharing Bishop’s concerns with the epistemic violence that inevitably occurs through the reduction of deeply complex beings to mere surface.

Doty uses the imagery of glass in ‘Favrile’ and ‘Murano’ to explore the relationship between art and morality, and artists’ self-imposed need to create depth out of artifice. In these poems, the text itself, as a crafted art piece, is the place wherein art’s value is questioned. This is demonstrated through Doty’s description of ornate Tiffany glass, which—occupying almost half of ‘Favrile’—conveys the importance he attaches to ‘extravagance’. However, a concern with the ethics of aestheticisation is complicated in ‘Murano’ and Bishop’s ‘The Fish’ due to their shift towards sentient poetic subjects. In ‘Favrile’, Doty’s speaker begins by examining the craftsmanship involved in the creation of glass, the attention to detail which is required in order to imitate what occurs naturally in ‘dragonfly and beetle wings’ (5-6). Nonetheless, the focus on plastic art forms eventually shifts to a story about the puppet opera. The narrative forms of storytelling and opera generally attempt to imitate and explore the depth and complexity of human emotions, rather than nature. Thus, one could argue that becoming so involved in a performance that one ‘forgets [...] these were puppets’ (53-54) is a most appropriate response; however, the fact that the speaker explicitly exposes the artificiality of these dolls, made up of ‘wire/ and plastic’ (55-56) renders Jimmy’s ‘operatic’ (61) weeping excessive and indulgent.

Opera epitomises performative narrative, meaning that the conflation of Jimmy's genuine emotion with this artistic expression will inevitably lead to a blurring of the boundaries between authenticity and artifice—destabilising the relationship between narrative and the emotional reaction it evokes. His reaction further provides the story with a layer of parody, as his emotions are shown to be manipulated in the same way the puppets are. Moreover, when the speaker follows this story by stating that it is 'too much to be expected to believe' (62-63) he blatantly undermines the artificial catharsis achieved by mimetic art and reclaims the value of self-consciously beautiful objects that have no tangible emotional or physical function. This is then exemplified by the lamp that is both 'perfect' (76) and 'too dim and strange to help us read' (77-78). Functionality, or the way in which art may provide its consumer with 'vague suggestions/ of [their] depths' (67-68) becomes irrelevant and unnecessary, a concept most poignantly expressed through the statement that aesthetic endeavours will 'end in grace or at least extravagance' (91-92). The parallel between grace and extravagance is enforced by the speaker as, although 'grace' implies a sense of divinity, it simultaneously connotes a religious morality which entails that there is a duty in art; yet, by linking this concept to 'extravagance' this duty is immediately undermined. The poem ultimately places extraordinary value in art that is mere artifice, a conduit for fun and excess, as emphasised by a final return to the campy 'puppet queen' (94).

On the other hand, in 'Murano' the quantity of ornate description decreases so as to give way to more overt questions about the morality of art, as the poetic subject changes from inanimate objects to the addressee of the poem, a person whose identity is essentially being flattened to the 'thin/ and gleaming stuff/ of craft' ('Favrile' 43-45). Doty uses the form of an elegy in order to make sense of his grief after the loss of his lover, using glass as a metaphorical medium that he may 'colonise'(Fulton 392) for this purpose. However, the speaker seems apprehensive about this approach, as demonstrated through the pervasive

rhetorical questions directly addressed to his subject, such as ‘was that your intention,/ to break apart just enough/ to shine?’ (16-18). Moreover, ‘Murano’ complicates the concept of the elegy by establishing Venice as its setting, a city trying to preserve its glory despite being in a state of perpetual decadence. This is illustrated through the allusions to ‘canopic jars’ (67), used in Ancient Egypt to store Pharaohs’ viscera, and to a ‘reliquary’ (111) that traditionally holds sacred remains. Nonetheless, the desperate attempts to protect the remains of Venice’s greatness are shown to be vaporous and futile, as in spite of the stored ‘perfumes’, the city still ‘smell[s] of piss and dissolution’ (137).

Furthermore, despite being designed with the intent of ‘giv[ing] back light’ (31) Venice is everything but illuminating, being repeatedly described as unstable, evading the speaker and proving impossible to capture. The inextricable link between Venetian reflection and ‘instability’ (27) is epitomised through the juxtaposition of a ‘shiny American mirror’ (57) and ‘foggy Venetian glasses’(58-59). The former is reflective of the speaker’s present reality, a concept which is reinforced through being Doty’s home and the place where Robert is inescapably dead. On the other hand, Venice provides a temporary escapism, making it a more suitable setting for ‘Murano’, which aims to transfigure the beauty and joy of the addressee’s life into poetry. However, the interpretative aspect of this artistic form makes it an inherently ‘unstable ground’ (66) which ‘distort[s]’ (64) and blurs the speaker’s memories. As he becomes increasingly aware of the futility of his attempt to capture his lover’s essence, reflected in the city’s antithetical description as a ‘gorgeous scrap heap’ (151), the tercet structure established after line 62 momentarily breaks down. The poem is no longer a ‘solid place to stand’ (161-162), allowing the poet to interrupt his idealisation of the dead addressee. The speaker is no longer able to justify his lover’s self-imposed ‘break’ as he asks ‘why break yourself/ further and faster?’ (157-159). Although this cathartic loss of foundations is merely momentary, as shown by the return of the tercet structure, a concern with his lover being

‘tormented into form’ (196) remains prevalent. This is poignantly illustrated through the scene of the ‘golden birds welded’ (209-210) and ‘hammered leaves’ (211) which imbricate craft with violence. Together with the physical alienation of the subject in the last line, the speaker implies that the seemingly benign desire to fix a loved one into a perennial form may be an act of immorality. Place in this poem is thus used both at the level of Venice, which is allegorically used to demonstrate the way in which reliquaries and elegies and their ‘permanence/ outside of time’ (146-147) only serve to remind one of the profound distance of the past, and of the poem in and of itself. The latter is a site of intense questioning, but also a space where a person is ultimately transfigured into ‘glass, transient existence becoming fixed, not in heaven but in art’ (Morrissey 225).

Elizabeth Bishop is also invested in the way in which poetry appropriates its subject through an aestheticisation that ultimately derives its own meaning from an external independent agent. This is exemplified through ‘The Fish’, where an act of violence is explicitly carried out against the titular animal, who has undergone a physical attempt at possession. The speaker holds it in the threshold space of ‘half out of water’ (3), paralleling Doty’s ‘dock’ and illustrating the ‘conflict between observation and recollection’ (Ellis 76). Moreover, it is repeatedly personified when establishing that ‘he hadn’t fought at all’ (6), which simultaneously asserts him as an autonomous being and conveys his passivity in allowing himself to be thoroughly examined. The speaker uses similes, ‘find[ing] points of reference’ (Gill 182) to render the fish intelligible, as shown through the comparison of his skin to ‘ancient wallpaper’ (11). However, as attention to detail increases, indicated when she says it is ‘infested with tiny white sea-lice’ (19), the complexity and unattainable depths of this animal—which holds an entire ecosystem within itself—begin to be disclosed. Furthermore, as the speaker observes the contrast between the ‘terrible oxygen’ (23) and ‘frightening gills’ (24), the unbridgeable difference between speaker and fish is reinforced, as

that which is life-giving for the former would choke the latter, and the ‘gills’ that provide the fish with the ability to respire would harm the speaker, who explicitly states that they ‘can cut so badly’ (26). Thus, the way in which Bishop’s incessant listing allows her to ‘examine her subjects’ (Knorr 146) demonstrates that, as one becomes more familiar with the subject itself, they paradoxically become more estranged from it as alienating intricacies are unveiled.

However, much like Doty’s ‘foggy’ (58) glasses, the fish does not ‘return’ the speaker’s ‘stare’ (42), preventing her from transcending a surface understanding of the poetic subject, and consequently perpetuating the use of human terms like ‘face’ (45) and ‘lower lip’ (48) in her description. Yet, she is again forced to face the difference between her and the creature when attention is brought to the ‘five big hooks’ (54) attached to the fish’s mouth. This ‘five-haired beard of wisdom’ (63) is what ultimately consolidates the subject as an agent worthy of respect and compassion. The fish’s hooks are a tangible, intelligible proof of its strength because they demonstrate that he has already faced other humans, and succeeded. Nonetheless, it endows him with the dignity of being let go at the end, accompanied by the image of ‘rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!’ (75), which is shown to be caused by ‘oil’ (69)—reminiscent of Doty’s ‘engine oil’ that ‘swirls like endpapers’ (36). Although it is a pollutant which will inevitably cause harm, in these passages oil is transfigured into an artificial marker of wholeness, marking the confines of a book in ‘Murano’ and the release of the fish. Moreover, the rainbow itself is an optical illusion that exposes ‘the unsteadiness of human perception’ as ‘we make what we see, or make it make sense’ (Burt 334), distorting reality like the Venetian glasses. Its damaging and illusionary nature hence complicates the otherwise optimistic relinquishing of the fish, as it suggests that a capturing has already occurred in the form of the poem written as a result of this violent encounter. The fish has been utilised for the poet’s benefit. Hence, Bishop reinforces Doty’s concerns with poetry as a site wherein complex beings are appropriated and reduced to mere words on a page.

Bishop and Doty both become more explicit in their discussion of the poem being a site of aesthetic appropriation through the heightened intrusivity conveyed when possession becomes not only artistic but also sexual. Whereas Bishop creates a parallel between herself and the Portuguese conquistadors in 'Brazil, January 1st, 1502', Doty conflates the image of a young drug addict on the subway station and an underwear model in 'Sweet Machine'. Instead of being in the already inscribed Venice, Brazil is depicted as a hereto undiscovered place which has the potential to be conquered both literally and artistically. Similarly to 'The Fish', the speaker of 'Brazil' personifies nature; however, whereas the fish refuses to acknowledge her, in this poem 'Nature greets [their] eyes' (1). Nevertheless, this statement is complicated by the opening epigraph, which introduces the theme of transfiguring 'landscape into art', exemplifying it through the image of 'embroidered nature'. Moreover, the concept of painting is later used to describe the foliage as 'fresh as if just finished/ and taken off the frame' (14-15). The speaker thus subverts 'Favrile's 'metallic lustres/ in reference to/ natural sheens' (3-5), instead posing nature as merely imitating artistic creation, which in turn deifies the poet. This concept is reified by the semantic field pertaining to Christianity which undermines the claim to reciprocity with Nature, as the latter is inevitably being intercepted and interpreted through the tourist/coloniser's prejudiced perspective.

This is further reinforced through the way in which the poem differs from 'The Fish' in its lack of alienation, instead being replaced by a forced familiarisation with the landscape, shown in the relegating of 'big symbolic birds' (21) to a realm of deeper signification, and a pervasive sense of 'Sin' (24). The antithetical 'hell-green flames'(29) highlight the forcefulness of the speaker's association of Brazil's Edenic evergreen landscape with Hell, and exposes the connection between the contemporary god-like poet and fourteenth century colonisers, as she replicates the 'civilising mission' language which in turn justifies both figures' desire to 'bend [Brazil] to their will' (Travisano 140). Thus, Bishop imbues her

speaker's speech with the 'grace' that 'Favrile' satirises in order to covertly criticise the excessive exultation of the poet figure. Moreover, predatory sexuality is naturalised within the description of the lizards, where 'the femme fatale remains in evidence' (Travisano 139) in the demonisation of the female, who has a 'wicked tail' that is 'red as a red-hot wire' (35-36). This then creates a sense of permissiveness, as may be perceived through their attempt to 'catch an Indian for [themselves]/ one of those maddening little women' (50-51) which is reduced to a mere replication of the behaviour they have observed. Moreover, the conflation of 'Mass' (47) and the violence implied by 'L'Homme armé' (48) explicitly exposes the hypocrisy of the civilised, churchgoing man who commits a crime of sexual violence. This further emphasises the concept of appropriation, the desire to capture and own a person, which is but an extreme demonstration of what the artist and the speaker do when capturing the Brazilian landscape through artistic form.

Doty similarly utilises an artistic lexicon to describe the young man in 'Sweet Machine'. Although he begins by creating an abhorrent image of him being 'almost powdered' (4), the speaker admits that his subject is 'by a slight stretch of the imagination,/ lovely' (7-8). The reference to imagination implies a sense of artistic appropriation, which is later explicitly illustrated through 'rough trade/ posing as a captive slave for Michaelangelo' (39-40). Having already depicted him as portraying different 'violent tableaux' (27), the parallel to a slave alludes to the history of using the body of underprivileged boys to create masterpieces, and how the speaker himself perpetuates this by using the young man as his muse. This is further conveyed by the term 'trade' which could simply refer to queer slang, but also holds a darker sense of the boy being a replaceable commodity. In contrast with 'Murano', where the poet appears thoroughly concerned with this issue, and attempts to communicate with his subject—although his dead addressee is inevitably unable to respond—in 'Sweet Machine' the speaker merely exposes it. Furthermore, the boy is not only

aestheticised but thoroughly sexualised. Although the initial description of his masturbation ‘scratching and rubbing’ (18-19) is anything but sensual, the later statement of ‘these might be flashes of the pornographic’ (38) does not reflect the compulsive pleasure of the central figure, but rather the morbid ‘fascination’ (34) of the voyeuristic subway-goers.

The subway boy’s sexualisation is further accomplished by the conflation of him and the ‘sleek boy’ (48) in ‘black underwear’ (49) whose picture is scattered across the city. The latter has been explicitly dehumanised and objectified, as shown by his photographer rendering him ‘headless’ (51), and the vulgar writing which explicitly exposes what the advert is already suggesting: ‘I am a sweet/ suck and fuck machine’ (55-56). The sibilance and the assonance of /uck/ makes the statement both sexual and violent, mirroring the aggressive sexuality used as a marketing strategy and employed against the young male body, which has ultimately become a mere product. Whilst Bishop is implicit in her critique of the colonising mission and its underlying capitalist motive, Doty amalgamates these two figures to demonstrate how these men are desirable only when first perceived and appropriated by artists. It is done entirely outside of their own terms, much like Nature in ‘Brazil’. Moreover, Doty plainly exposes his speaker’s excessive involvement when, after possessively stating ‘my boy’, he says ‘I wish... what?/ I don’t know’ (62-63). The use of ellipsis acts as a space for reflection, as the artist stops himself right when he starts inscribing the young man’s desires without considering his agency. This echoes the instance when the speaker of ‘The Fish’ is forced to recognise her excessive humanisation of the creature when she interjects her own narrative by stating ‘if you could even call it a lip’ (49). The setting of a subway station in ‘Sweet Machine’, where everyone is ‘on-the-way-to’ (43) juxtaposes the central figure’s static nature, as although he is ‘nothing/ as fixed as marble’ (75-76), the speaker both fixes him within his poem, and implies that the cycle he has been caught in is incessant through the ending ‘start[ing] all over again’ (88). Hence, nothing has changed, save for the speaker’s

cathartic realisation of how ‘the imagery aestheticises’ (74) after his revision of the opening couplet. Similarly, the end of ‘Brazil’ transfigures nature into a ‘hanging fabric’ (49) behind which the women will attempt to ‘retreat’ (53); yet, the temporal disconnect highlights what has already been alluded to through the image of ‘ripp[ing] away’ (49), namely that the conquest of both the nature and people of Brazil is inevitable.

In conclusion, both Doty and Bishop hold the poem as a site where appropriation is simultaneously occurring and being questioned. Although Doty expresses a predilection for art wherein one can simply relish in extravagance and surface, the moment in which the poetic subject becomes sentient, the oversimplification which inevitably ensues haunts both poets. Moreover, in poems where appropriation is explicit, as most poignantly illustrated through the sexualisation depicted in ‘Brazil’ and ‘Sweet Machine’, the perpetuation of violence which occurs proves the destructive power of the artist’s transfiguration of three-dimensional beings into a flattened surface that can only provide illusions of depth.

Works Cited

- Bishop, Elizabeth. *Complete Poems*. Chatto & Windus, 1991.
- Burt, Stephanie. "Elizabeth Bishop at the End of the Rainbow". *Reading Elizabeth Bishop: An Edinburgh Companion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2019, pp. 321-336.
- Doty, Mark. *Sweet Machine*. London: Cape Poetry, 1998.
- Ellis, Jonathan. *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop*. Ashgate, 2006.
- Fulton, David. 'Addressing the problem: Gunn, Doty and the AIDS elegy'. School of Arts, Brunel University, 2007. <http://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/4410>
- Gill, Jo. 'Poetry and Place.' *Women's Poetry*. Edinburgh University Press, 2022, pp. 166–86.
- Hayes, Terrance. *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin*. Penguin Books, 2018.
- Knorr, Alyse. 'Elizabeth Bishop's Queer Lists.' *Prose Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2021, pp. 129–49.
- Morrissey, Sinéad. 'Republic of Instability': Artifice, Death and the Afterlife in Mark Doty's 'Murano'.' *Religion & Literature*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2013, pp. 220–27.
- Travisano, Thomas J. *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development*. University Press of Virginia, 1988.