

**Sizing Up, Scaling Down:
Dickinson, Moore, Bishop, Niedecker, Ryan**



Camilla Yourong Chen

St Edmund Hall
Faculty of English Language and Literature

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
University of Oxford
Trinity Term 2019

Acknowledgements

This thesis is the biggest thing that I have ever undertaken. I could not have done it without the help, support, and kindness of numerous people, some of whom I would like to name.

First, thank you to Matthew Bevis, for discussing small poems at great length with me. This work benefited from his guidance across different scales: my ideas were augmented by his knowledge; my prose, made sharper for his meticulous reading of countless drafts. Several other members of the English Faculty at Oxford provided valuable feedback and invaluable encouragement at various stages in the project: Rebecca Beasley, Erica McAlpine, Peter McDonald, and Seamus Perry. Without the support of teachers during my undergraduate and Masters degrees, particularly David Farrier, James Loxley, Diane Purkiss, Tara Stubbs, and Andrew Taylor, I might not have had the courage to undertake doctoral study in the first place.

Funding from the Rothermere American Institute and St Edmund Hall afforded me time and space for research and writing, for which I am grateful. I would also like to thank Elizabeth Fuller, for facilitating my archival research at the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia in September 2016; and Cathy Cook, for personally ensuring that I received a copy of her film, *Immortal Cupboard: In Search of Lorine Niedecker*.

I had the privilege of sharing the postgraduate journey with Alicia Forsberg, albeit at opposite ends of the country; I am glad for the continued privilege of her friendship, even with an ocean now between us. I thank Debbie, Michael, and Ben Goldman, for their warmth, generosity, and humour. Joey Goldman was unfailingly there to amplify each triumph, and to alleviate every setback – I thank him for all of this, and for so much more.

I left home to begin my undergraduate degree in the UK in 2010. Nearly a full decade later, this thesis is finally dedicated to my family. I'm sorry that I've been away for such a long time, and that I've missed so many important moments as a daughter, sister, and aunt. To my sisters, Joan and Mandy: thank you for supporting me from half a world away, and for cheering me on from long before I even took my first, small step. To my parents, who have always shown me that the most meaningful things make themselves known in modest ways: I am grateful to you beyond all measure.

Abstract

This is a thesis about smallness and modern American poetry, as exemplified in and by the work of five poets: Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Lorine Niedecker, and Kay Ryan. I conceive smallness in two ways: first, the physical smallness of certain poems themselves; secondly, the way in which smallness is thematised, staged, and explored in poetry.

Being a suitably small-scale method of reading, close textual analysis is at the forefront of my approach. By building upon each poet's particular version of smallness, I present a collective examination of the poetic stature that smallness can engender. In my first chapter, I explore Dickinson's fascination with insects, and the ways in which these tiny creatures represent larger ideas in her writing. My second chapter examines the relationship between the part and the whole across various scales in Moore's work. The private interior is the focus of my third chapter, where I consider the small, contained spaces of Bishop's work. In my penultimate chapter, I unpack Niedecker's description of a poet's work as 'condensery'. Finally, in my fifth chapter, I think about Ryan's compact, comic poems in terms of motifs of survival.

Seen more generally within the framework of a modern preoccupation with smallness in its various manifestations, the work of these poets opens up different ways of thinking about the attendant ideas of size, scale, and perspective. In their work, nothing is too small: varieties of blue in an artichoke; a little granite pail; the octopus's suction cups. Cumulatively, these details also amount to a defense against a certain large-scale way of reading poetry, in which the minutiae of individual perspective is at risk of being lost.

Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
Contents	iii
List of Figures	iv
Introduction	1
Miniaturising the world	1
A modern poetic smallness	7
Miniature thinking	19
1 The Bee in Emily Dickinson's Bonnet	29
1.1 'A pensive Custom': the nineteenth-century insect	32
1.2 'A dim capacity for Wings': the enigmatic insect	41
1.3 'a sort of speck piano': the humming and thrumming insect	49
1.4 'My little lot': the transformative insect	60
2 Apprehending Marianne Moore	69
2.1 The standard and the scale	73
2.2 Industrious observations	84
2.3 Apprehension and unease	103
3 Elizabeth Bishop's Rooms with Views	119
3.1 Windows	123
3.2 Bubbles	140
3.3 Cameras	157
4 Lorine Niedecker's Rocky Relations	175
4.1 Solidity, liquidly	178
4.2 Echoes	195
4.3 The lapidary	212
5 Turning Out Kay Ryan	232
5.1 'how well / some separate part might manage'	239
5.2 'a tiny but powerful / kit for adapting'	245
5.3 'whatever you think of, it wants to live'	253
5.4 'the biggest little poems going'	258
5.5 'nothing but a game for children'	268
Afterword	281
Bibliography	290
Primary texts	290
Secondary texts	291

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Frontispiece, <i>Religious Lectures</i>	37
Figure 2.1 <i>The Daily Scale</i>	73
Figure 2.2 Questions to the Editor of <i>The Scale</i>	75
Figure 2.3 ‘Great find for the Fleabody’	76
Figure 2.4 Editorial note, <i>The Daily Scale</i>	78
Figure 2.5 Front matter of Moore’s 1924 reading notebook	79
Figure 2.6 Reading notebook 1930-43	88
Figure 2.7 Reading notebook 1930-43, continued	88
Figure 2.8 Reading notebook 1924-30, index	89
Figure 3.1 Joseph Cornell, <i>Observatory: Corona Borealis Casement</i> (1950)	134
Figure 3.2 Joseph Cornell, <i>Untitled (Hôtel de L’Etoile)</i> (1954)	
Figure 3.3 Joseph Cornell, <i>Hotel du Nord</i> (1950)	134
Figure 3.4 Elizabeth Bishop, <i>Cabin with Porthole</i> (undated)	138
Figure 3.5 Jean Siméon Chardin, <i>Soap Bubbles</i> (c.1733-34)	141
Figure 3.6 Joseph Cornell, <i>Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)</i> (1936)	142
Figure 3.7 Four photographs, accompanying letter of 31 January 1938	160
Figure 3.8 Close-up of first two photographs	161
Figure 3.9 Close-up of fourth photograph	161
Figure 3.10 Close-up of third photograph	162
Figure 3.11 Joseph Cornell’s stereopticon	164
Figure 3.12 Joseph Cornell, <i>Monsieur Claude</i> (c.1933)	167
Figure 4.1 Lorine Niedecker, page from handmade book titled <i>Schoolcraft</i>	229

Introduction

‘...for whom small things could be great things – someone
exceptional – *vir amplissimus*.’
–Marianne Moore¹

‘...I am so sick of Poetry as Big Business...’
–Elizabeth Bishop²

‘o o. Sometimes I puzzle – what’s really big? what’s intensity,
passion, world-inclusive – when here is this tiny *art*, not
engulfing, but *art*.’
–Lorine Niedecker³

Miniaturising the world

This is a thesis about smallness and modern American poetry, as exemplified in and by the work of five poets: Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Lorine Niedecker, and Kay Ryan. I conceive smallness in two ways: first, the physical smallness of certain poems themselves, and secondly, the way in which smallness is thematised, staged, and explored in poetry. For, when Moore describes how ‘small things could be great things’, Bishop declares that she is ‘so sick of Poetry as Big Business’, and Niedecker observes the presence of a ‘tiny *art*’, they all demonstrate a resistance to the big. Why might this be the case?

First, there is a sense of an increasing preoccupation with smallness in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In order to keep up with the circulation of related ideas during this time, the dictionary was expanding to include such small

¹Marianne Moore, ‘Robert Andrew Parker’, in *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, ed. Patricia C. Willis (London: Faber, 1987), 503.

²Elizabeth Bishop, letter to Randall Jarrell (26 April 1950), in *One Art: The Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Chatto, 1994), 202.

³Lorine Niedecker, letter to Louis Zukofsky (3 February 1963), in *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1930-1970*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 329.

words and phrases as *teeny* (1802), *small-minded* (1811), *under-size* (1820), *miniaturist* (1848), *small scale* (1851), *miniscule* (1871), *bitty* (1892), *diminutise* (1896), and *miniaturise* (1909). The *OED* also records the first usage of the idiomatic phrase ‘It’s a small world’ as having occurred in 1873. Before I turn to the ways in which poets navigated this seemingly newly small world, it is worth first taking a step back and thinking about specifically modern contexts of the small, starting with the arena of science, where the matter of size relates to the size of matter. Gaston Bachelard described, in *The Poetics of Space*, how ‘All small things must evolve slowly, and certainly a long period of leisure, in a quiet room, was needed to miniaturise the world’.⁴ He was referring specifically to the miniaturists of the Middle Ages, whose intricate detailing and portrayal of entire scenes within small areas of parchment embellished and illuminated medieval manuscripts. His description, however, is also applicable to the historic trajectory leading up to modern scientific discoveries in the realm of the small.

In the seventeenth century, the question of ‘How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?’ poked fun at medieval scholastic theology,⁵ the absurdity of this question deriving in large part from the implied impossibility and pointlessness of answering it. Four centuries later, in the Physics issue of a journal titled *Annals of Improbable Research*, the same question is addressed in a paper titled ‘Quantum Gravity Treatment of the Angel Density Problem’. The language of the paper retains the humour of the originally satirical question, considering such conditions as ‘If the angels dance very quickly and in the same direction’, and ‘Assuming that each angel contains

⁴Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin, 1964), 159.

⁵The first known version of this question was ‘whether a million of angels may not sit upon a needle’s point’. William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation*. 1687. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), 12.

at least one bit of information (fallen/not fallen)’;⁶ it is clearly not meant to serve as a groundbreaking work of scientific research. Yet, as it rightly points out in its final ‘Discussion’ section, ‘Angel physics has until now mainly employed theological methods, but as this paper shows, modern information physics, quantum gravity and relativity theory provide powerful tools for exploring the dynamics and statics of angels’.⁷ These tools, coming into being in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, might therefore be seen as the result of a long period of learning about matter at the smallest possible level – of miniaturising the world, so to speak.

If ancient Greek philosophers such as Leucippus and Democritus had formulated abstract ideas about atomic theory,⁸ it was not until the nineteenth century that an atomic-molecular hypothesis was discussed by both chemists and physicists, drawing the two fields together.⁹ From the second half of the century, scientific inquiries into, and conclusions about, atomic structure proliferated: in 1897, for instance, Joseph John Thomson co-discovered the electron; in 1911, Ernest Rutherford proposed that atoms comprised electrons revolving around a nucleus; in 1915, Niels Bohr interpreted electron behaviour in terms of quantum activity; and, in 1925, Heisenberg translated the classical equations of motion into a new system of quantum mechanics.¹⁰ The birth of quantum mechanics enabled physicists to detail the behaviour of light and matter on the smallest atomic scale, giving them a framework for making calculations regarding

⁶Anders Sandberg, ‘Quantum Gravity Treatment of the Angel Density Problem’, *Annals of Improbable Research* 7.3 (May/June 2001). <https://www.improbable.com/airchives/paperair/volume7/v7i3/angels-7-3.htm>.

⁷Sandberg, ‘Quantum Gravity Treatment of the Angel Density Problem’.

⁸Bernard Pullman, *The Atom in the History of Human Thought*, trans. Axel Reisinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 31.

⁹Hans-Werner Schütt, ‘Chemical Atomism and Chemical Classification’, *The Cambridge History of Science, Volume 5: The Modern Physical and Mathematical Sciences*, ed. Mary Jo Nye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 239-40.

¹⁰Olivier Darrigol, ‘Quantum Theory and Atomic Structure, 1900-1927’, *The Cambridge History of Science, Volume 5*, 337-38; 343.

the minute activities of angels on needlepoint. Scientists in other fields were undertaking similarly small-scale work during this period: Gregor Mendel's findings about biological inheritance in pea plants in 1866 were rediscovered in 1900, and served as foundational work for modern genetics; the word *gene* was proposed in 1909, thanks to Mendel's work, to describe the basic physical unit of heredity detected in living organisms (OED).¹¹ Gustav Fechner's 1860 work *Elemente der Psychophysik* fathered the field of psychophysics with his discovery of a way to measure the magnitude of sensations, and therefore to make quantifiable minute sensations such as the weakest possible detectable stimulus (the 'absolute threshold'), and the smallest difference between detectable stimuli ('noticeable difference').¹² Coming one and a half centuries after Robert Hooke's 1665 *Micrographia*, made possible by the invention of the microscope, various cultures and strains of scientific smallness thrived in the petri dish (itself a small invention from 1887) of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries.

There was a growing demand for similarly small things in art and popular culture. Miniature portraits thrived during the late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth centuries, particularly in America. They were as highly prized as full-sized portraits, which themselves often featured these diminutive versions in the hands or dress of their subjects.¹³ Continental European portrait miniaturists arrived en masse to America, with its art academies and wealthy clientele, opening schools in miniature painting for

¹¹Sarah A. Leavitt, 'Deciphering the Genetic Code', *Office of History, National Institutes of Health*. 2010. https://history.nih.gov/exhibits/nirenberg/HS1_mendel.htm.

¹²David Heeger, 'Perception Lecture Notes: Psychophysics', *New York University Department of Psychology*. 2009. <https://www.cns.nyu.edu/~david/courses/perception/lecturenotes/psychophysics/psychophysics.html>.

¹³Dale T. Johnson (ed.), 'An Introduction to the History of American Portrait Miniatures', *American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990), 13.

young women.¹⁴ These portraits would only fall gradually out of favour in the mid-nineteenth century due to the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, the earliest photographic process – another means of visually capturing the world and its subjects in a small, portable manner. Miniature houses had existed in some form for a few centuries, but it was only after the Industrial Revolution that they began to be mass-produced and popularised as children’s toys: the *OED* thus traces the first instance of the term *doll’s house* to 1783. In turn, the first documented model railway appeared in 1859, commissioned by Napoleon III for his son.¹⁵ These were attempts to recreate or reenact reality in miniature, with its new structures and technologies intact; originating as toys for children, however, the subsequent appeal of both the doll’s house and the model railway for adults was evident in Queen Mary’s extravagant doll’s house in 1921, as well as in the growing number of model railway companies catering to adult railway modellers in the early-twentieth century.¹⁶ We might situate these adult tastes within changes, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, in the perception of childhood and treatment of the child. The notion of the child as parent to the adult, previously suggested by Wordsworth, was now coming back into fashion, particularly in early-twentieth century psychology and psychoanalysis.¹⁷ This celebration and emphasis on the importance of the child, and perception of the adult self as an extension of the child, is yet another iteration of a modern narrative of humans conceiving ourselves in small(er) terms.

Something that might be kept in view is the fact that the world itself was starting to look or feel smaller towards the end of the nineteenth century: in 1889 the Eiffel

¹⁴Johnson, ‘An Introduction to the History of American Portrait Miniatures’, 21-23.

¹⁵Simon Garfield, *In Miniature* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2018), 156.

¹⁶Ron Hollander, *All Aboard!: The Story of Joshua Lionel Cowen & His Lionel Train Company* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2000), 147.

¹⁷See Simon May, *The Power of Cute* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 138-39.

Tower was opened to a public who, climbing it, found that ‘975 feet above the world people become pigmies [...] all that looked large had disappeared’.¹⁸ The advent of air travel, from the hot air balloon at the turn of the eighteenth century, to the Wright brothers’ first airplane flight in 1903, made it possible for people to see more of the world more conveniently than ever before. In less literal terms of travel, the electrical scientist Nikola Tesla would, in 1926, anticipate Marshall McLuhan’s concept of the ‘global village’¹⁹ made possible by media technology, when he described how ‘When wireless is perfectly applied the whole earth will be converted into a huge brain, which in fact it is, all things being particles of a real and rhythmic whole. [...] A man will be able to carry one in his vest pocket’.²⁰

This image of the world as a huge brain that nonetheless is able to fit in a man’s vest pocket is a little grotesque in its incongruities or difficulties of scale. A juxtaposition of the phrase ‘It’s a small world’ against McLuhan’s ‘global village’ similarly encapsulates this feeling of confusion as to where and how the human might be positioned in relation to the world: in the former, adjectival emphasis lies in the relative smallness of what had previously been large (the world), such that everybody is one’s neighbour. In the latter, however, the otherwise close-knit community of the village appears to have grown. Against such vertigo, the instruction of a child in the early 1950s, as described by McLuhan, is simultaneously a piece of wise advice, and a poignant lament:

When Sputnik had first gone into orbit a schoolteacher asked her
second-graders to write some verse of the subject. One child wrote:

The stars are so big,
The earth is so small,

¹⁸As quoted in Garfield, *In Miniature*, 12.

¹⁹Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 31.

²⁰Nikola Tesla, ‘When Woman Is Boss’, interview with John B. Kennedy, *Colliers* (30 January 1926). <http://www.tfcbooks.com/tesla/1926-01-30.htm>.

Stay as you are.²¹

Was the world getting larger or smaller, and how did humans fit within it? After all, as composite beings, our own position within larger background processes of evolution had, at this point, only recently been clarified with the theory of descent with modification that Darwin introduced in 1859.²² Regardless of how one might answer this question, it was evident that with the modern vantage points made available by advancements in technology, travel, and architecture, alongside the colossally consequential effects and explanations made possible by scientific study of the miniscule, ideas about size and scale were in busy circulation during the period.

A modern poetic smallness

My focus is on poetry, which was having to reckon with its own issues of relative size and stature during the nineteenth century. Philip Davis describes how, ‘Swamped by the thought of its questionable relevance within a new mass industrial and democratic society, poetry became self-consciously peripheral’ in the Victorian period.²³ Matthew Bevis elaborates on the predicament:

If poeticalness was becoming an increasingly defined category, then it was also an increasingly marginal or distant or debatable one – as though people harboured suspicions that the real article (Poetry with a capital P) was disappearing from view or being dispersed into a competing set of definitions and questionable voices.²⁴

²¹Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (1964), Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1994, 34.

²²Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1859), 171.

²³Philip Davis, *The Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 457.

²⁴Matthew Bevis (ed.), ‘Introduction’, *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

In contrast to the hefty novels that proliferated during the time, I want to think about the kind of poetry that was slowly burgeoning from a position of marginality or minority, and that would lead T. E. Hulme to observe that 'The old poetry dealt essentially with big things [...] But the modern is the exact opposite of this'.²⁵ Indeed, for James Longenbach, modern poetry grows from a sense 'that the great claims made for poetry by the romantics were no longer viable',²⁶ and David Bromwich, too, identifies the modernness of Edward Thomas's 'Cock-Crow' as having something 'to do with an undersong, a pitch that suggests it will hold for a moment only, that needs attending to and so commands attention'.²⁷ The undersong of smallness in the poetry is what I am interested in. In further contrast to the well-examined Yeats-Eliot-Pound trifecta of Modernist poetry with a capital M, moreover, I want to consider a certain branch of modern poetics that crosses movements, appears to be predominantly American, and particularly cleaves to an aesthetics of the 'strategically circumscribed world' that Longenbach goes on to describe.²⁸

Hugh Kenner has read modern American poetics as 'austere and astringent', and a result of the way in which 'The poets were courting no one, and were hardly read [...] [They] might have prayed for a large readership, but they had the good sense not to'.²⁹ He describes this poetics in diminutive terms, as being 'a homemade art, like the sampler wrought in cross-stitch'.³⁰ The work of Marianne Moore, for Kenner, exemplifies this poetics, and it is with Moore's poems that he begins his narrative of the

²⁵T. E. Hulme, 'A Lecture on Modern Poetry', in *Selected Writings*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 2003), 63.

²⁶James Longenbach, 'Modern poetry', *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 101.

²⁷David Bromwich, 'An Art Without Importance', in *Skeptical Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5.

²⁸Longenbach, 'Modern poetry', 102.

²⁹Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), xvi-xvii.

³⁰Kenner, *A Homemade World*, 110.

‘homemade world’. I think that he might as well have also been describing the poems of Emily Dickinson, which Louise Glück rightly characterises as ‘introduc[ing] a type of veiled disclosure that will found whole schools of poetry, disclosure so charged, so encoded, so intent on limited selective revelation as to privilege the reader’.³¹

Both Kenner and Glück’s mention of a kind of spare, tightly controlled, limited American poetry is particularly interesting, given that we do not immediately associate America with the small. On the contrary, America as a global superpower (a descriptor, notably, itself made up of three large adjectives) conjures up associations of magnitude: the upward possibilities of the American dream, the metaphor of expansion as represented by the frontier, the Hollywood blockbuster. In Charles Olson’s 1947 work *Call Me Ishmael*, the poet-critic declares: ‘I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.’³² ‘To MAGNIFY is the mark of *Moby-Dick*,’ he continues, ‘It is the technical act compelled by the American fact’.³³ This begs the question of subject: whose American fact is this? We get the sense that it is not Sarah Manguso’s, for instance. In a recent essay, she writes:

I’m weary of the American idea that unless one is reaching toward the next, greater goal, one is effectively choosing failure. This cultural pressure to think big – to equate size with ambition – is especially burdensome for writers who cannot follow, or choose not to follow, in the footsteps of Great Men – who don’t fit the Hemingway-Mailer-Roth-Franzen mold.³⁴

³¹Louise Glück, ‘American Narcissism’, *American Originality: Essays on Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 11.

³²Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (New York: Grove Press, 1947), 11.

³³Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 71.

³⁴Sarah Manguso, ‘In Short: Thirty-six ways of looking at the aphorism’, *Harper’s* (September 2016), no. 28. <https://harpers.org/archive/2016/09/in-short/>.

Manguso's essay, concerning aphorisms, itself takes the form of a series of aphorisms, a choice that undertakes a formal resistance to any fact extolled by the Great Men; in her words, this supposed fact is merely an idea – the implication being that there are other possible, and equally American, ideas and traditions.

What does it mean, for example, when Randall Jarrell describes Moore as being 'a natural, excessive, and magnificent eccentric', but with the parenthetical qualification that this is true 'On a small scale, of course; like all cultivated Americans, she is afraid of size'?³⁵ The 'cultivated Americans' to whom Jarrell refers appear to occupy a very different space to the Great American novelists named by Manguso. They seem to relate, instead, to Hannah Arendt's description of a 'Modern enchantment with "small things," [...] preached by early twentieth-century poetry'.³⁶ Arendt is referring to European culture here, but this is nonetheless relevant.

Since the decay of their once great and glorious public realm, the French have become masters in the art of being happy among "small things," within the space of their own four walls, between chest and bed, table and chair, dog and cat and flowerpot, extending to these things a care and tenderness which, in a world where rapid industrialization constantly kills off the things of yesterday to produce today's objects, may even appear to be the world's last, purely humane corner. This enlargement of the private, the enchantment, as it were, of a whole people, does not make it public, does not constitute a public realm, but, on the contrary, means only that the public realm has almost completely receded, so that greatness has given way to charm everywhere; for while the public realm may be great, it cannot be charming precisely because it is unable to harbor the irrelevant.³⁷

Following Arendt, Sianne Ngai has gone on to read various twentieth-century poets, all American (William Carlos Williams, Frank O'Hara, Lee Ann Brown, Gertrude Stein,

³⁵Randall Jarrell, 'The Humble Animal', in *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 163.

³⁶Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 52.

³⁷Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.

Harryette Mullen), in terms of this modern enchantment with small things. Ngai's larger point is that in the 'hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism',

...it is easy to see how the commodity aesthetic of cuteness becomes a special issue for twentieth-century poetry, by way of a tendency within the genre that has made it widely, if not always correctly, associated with short, compact texts preoccupied with small, easy-to-handle things.³⁸

In turn, a tension and subversive potential arises out of the cute as 'not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for "small things" but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further'.³⁹ For Ngai, experimental, avant-garde poetry thus 'gives us surprising leverage [...] on the closeness between the artwork and the commodity' by drawing attention to, or otherwise manipulating, this tension.⁴⁰ I take Ngai's point, but want to think more about the poetry itself, and how, instead of merely being symptomatic of a modern enchantment with small things, its interest in smallness might be seen as a deliberate form of resistance, specific to a certain kind of poetry itself.

The five poets of my study all demonstrate a sustained interest in what we might refer to as thematic smallness, particularly as informed by modern scientific ideas and technologies: Dickinson's microscopic view of the insect; Moore's biologist's eye, trained to dissect, and to see the part in the whole; Bishop's brief work experience in lens grinding, and hobby of photography; Niedecker's love and knowledge of geological processes and rock specimens; Ryan's interest in evolutionary biology and natural selection. Additionally, they share a poetic disposition that is characterised by an

³⁸Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1.

³⁹Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 3.

⁴⁰Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 4.

inclination towards the 'limited selective revelation' as described by Glück, and a common resistance to, and distrust of, poetry as 'Big Business'. The latter is particularly significant.

To begin with, none of these poets might be seen as easily fitting within molds, or within the schools and movements that dominated the landscape of American poetry in the twentieth century. Dickinson's reclusive and reticent reputation precedes her; the few poems of hers that appeared in periodicals during her lifetime were published anonymously. Moore and Niedecker are now associated with the Modernist and Objectivist poets respectively; their significance within these groups, however, has only been belatedly acknowledged by scholars, despite the clear influence that they had on their better-known peers. Jenny Penberthy, who edited and published Niedecker's correspondences with Louis Zukofsky in 1993, clearly hoped that the publication of the letters might go some way towards correcting the imbalance in reputations of the two poets: 'Postmodernism has overlooked an important forebear,' Penberthy remarks of Niedecker, 'her poetics remains largely unexamined'.⁴¹ Having spent a large proportion of her career travelling and living abroad in Brazil, Bishop was geographically separate from her American contemporaries, a position she appears to have deliberately chosen: 'I guess I have liked to travel as much as I have because I have always felt isolated and have known so few of my "contemporaries"'.⁴² Finally, Ryan, the most recent of the five, was Poet Laureate of the United States from 2008-10, but this position has been described as a 'surprising laureateship [that] capped years of outsider-status in the poetry world'.⁴³ Just three years prior to her appointment as Laureate, she had been

⁴¹Jenny Penberthy, 'Introduction', *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1930-1970*, 3-4.

⁴²Bishop, *One Art*, 154.

⁴³'Kay Ryan', *The Poetry Foundation*. 2019. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kay-ryan>.

described by the Executive Director of the Association of Writers & Writing Programs as an ‘earnest and lonely outsider’.⁴⁴

We might thus conceive this “smallness” as related to relative marginality. Notably, however, if their outsider position was a predicament, it was also a choice. In the 1950s, Jarrell relates how ‘Miss Moore’s *Collected Poems* is a neat little book [...]; a reader could, with a reference to size, rather easily put her into her minor place, and say – as I heard a good or even great critic say – that it is easy to see the difference between a poet like this and a major poet’.⁴⁵ The tone of irony here is particularly present in Jarrell’s aside, emphatically suggesting that size does not at all amount to stature, and that these ‘good or even great critics’ might want to reconsider the assumption that anything be ‘easy to see’ merely ‘with a reference to size’. Wary of any straightforward associations to do with size, all five poets in this thesis perceived or positioned themselves in terms of the small, or else, as Ryan describes of herself: ‘didn’t want to wear the cloak of the poet [...] I couldn’t even say “poet”, because it was just too embarrassing, even to say to myself’.⁴⁶ Introducing herself in a letter, Dickinson described the way in which ‘I have a little shape – it would not crowd your Desk, nor make much Racket as the Mouse, that dents your Galleries’.⁴⁷ Moore, in turn, spoke trivially about her long poem ‘Marriage’ in terms of mere whim, discounting her role in its creation when she described it as being ‘but a little anthology of terms and phrases that had entertained me’.⁴⁸ This modest attitude pervades the poetry itself. Penberthy observes Niedecker’s ‘habit of

⁴⁴David Fenza, ‘Letter to the Editor’, *Poetry* 187.1 (October 2005), 65.

⁴⁵Jarrell, ‘Her Shield’, *Poetry and the Age*, 185.

⁴⁶Kay Ryan, interview with Skip Wiltshire-Gordon and Melanie Wolfe, Free Food for Thought, podcast audio, April 2019. <https://soundcloud.com/freefood4thought/kay-ryan>.

⁴⁷Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), 409.

⁴⁸Moore, ‘A Burning Desire to be Explicit’, *Marianne Moore: The Complete Prose*, 607.

belittling her achievement’;⁴⁹ Margot Peters, too, picks up on this ‘stance of militant self-effacement’: ‘At her boldest, [Niedecker] might announce, “I think I’m making a small insect buzz in this prairie grass...”’.⁵⁰ In turn, Bishop worried about the ‘slightness of subject-matter’⁵¹ in her poems, and described herself as being ‘a minor female Wordsworth’.⁵²

Just what does it mean to be a minor female Wordsworth, though? I read this phrase in terms of Longenbach’s observation about the difference in claims made for poetry by Romantic and modern poets respectively; nonetheless, I detect in it a stake being claimed, an ambitiousness that is present in Bishop’s comparison of herself to the Romantic poet (why bring him in otherwise?). This tension is similarly present in her admission that, ‘No matter how modest you think you feel or how minor you think you are, there must be an awful core of ego somewhere for you to set yourself up to write poetry’.⁵³ Elsewhere, writing to her friends Kit and Ilse Barker on 29 August 1953, Bishop revealed that ‘I am also reading at bedtime all of Dickens, volume by volume, with the strange ambition of writing, or rather finishing, one sonnet about him’.⁵⁴ This is certainly ambitious; the process of reading all of Dickens, volume by volume, only to produce one sonnet, is labour-intensive. It also implies a belief that a fourteen-line

⁴⁹As quoted in *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky*, 4.

⁵⁰Niedecker, as quoted in Peters, *Lorine Niedecker: A Poet’s Life*, 5.

⁵¹Bishop in a letter to Moore, as quoted in Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 156.

⁵²Bishop in a letter to Robert Lowell (11 July 1951), *One Art*, 222.

⁵³As quoted in Andrew Motion, ‘Chatterton Lecture on Poetry: Elizabeth Bishop’, 8 November 1984, 304-5. The British Academy. 2019.
https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/pubs/proc/files/70p299.pdf?_ga=2.99928669.236443486.1568049251-98617807.1568049251.

⁵⁴As quoted in *One Art*, 272. Similarly, when asked to write the introduction for Pound’s *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, Moore ‘resolved not only to reread all of Pound’s own prose but also to read everything Pound had read before she opened *A Draft of XXX Cantos*. “I have about two or three thousand pages to read for this little article I’m doing,” she told [her brother] Warner’. See Linda Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), 258.

poem might somehow encapsulate, or at least relate to, all of the Victorian author's prose.

Comparably, Ryan positions herself against Whitman when she announces: 'I don't read Whitman because I don't need Whitman's big stride, his wide, encompassing arms, his hug. [...] When I think of Whitman I think of bulk.'⁵⁵ As a claim for independence, to carve out a different legacy from that of a heavyweight figure of American poetry, this is substantial. Nonetheless, I think that Ryan is outlining an inclination towards a careful, non-complacent ambitiousness ('My poets don't cherish even the illusion of ease and camaraderie').⁵⁶ We might also think about this counter-intuitive, deliberately lean ambitiousness in terms of Bishop's calling out of her 'awful core of ego somewhere' despite 'how modest you think you feel or how minor you think you are': in other words, it is always possible to be even *more* modest or minor, to turn modesty itself into an ambition.

Of course, it is Whitman's reputation, and what the poetry appears to stand for, rather than the actual poetry itself, which Ryan opposes; this is clear from the outset of her piece: 'I have promised myself not to go back and look into Whitman or I'd be cheating, since I'm supposed to be writing about a writer I don't read. Also, if I did, I know that I would be undone, drawn in, persuaded'.⁵⁷ This description is in jest, but it is nonetheless loaded with real, gendered implications. A review by Moore of the work of Louise Bogan, for instance, is richly suggestive as to how ambitious modesty and modest ambition might be a particularly appealing strategy for a female poet. 'Women are not noted for terseness', Moore states, before applauding the way in which 'Bogan's

⁵⁵Kay Ryan, 'Antagonism: Walt Whitman', *Poetry* (October 2004), 50-51.

⁵⁶Ryan, 'Antagonism: Walt Whitman', 50.

⁵⁷Ryan, 'Antagonism: Walt Whitman', 50.

art is compactness compacted [...] She uses a kind of forged rhetoric that nevertheless seems inevitable'.⁵⁸ Women are not noted for terseness – by whom? Moore's echoing of this received opinion is itself terse, and tersely ironic in what it leaves out, opening up questions about the gendered dynamics of public authority, and the right to speak, or be spoken about.

A compact poem of Moore's, titled 'I May, I Might, I Must', is a perfect example of this strategy:

If you will tell me why the fen
appears impassable, I then
will tell you why I think that I
can get across it if I try.⁵⁹

This is poetry as a staged response that quietly topples its naysayer. Its drawn-out, repetitive syntax makes reading the poem as much of an effort as is indeed implied by its title about the task at hand. And yet Moore's poem, with its unexpectedly neat structure of end-rhymes and lines with equal syllables, appears to be itself a sort of surprisingly self-fulfilling and compact solution to the situation of conversational impasse that it describes, a tightly constructed bridge across the seemingly impassable fen. It may well be that the 'you' addressed by the poem is a male authority figure. Against this male figure's verdict regarding the passability of the fen, Moore's speaker's diction is impeccably ambiguous: 'If you will tell me why the fen / appears impassable' is simultaneously subservient ("If you will deign to tell me, please") and resigned ("If you will inevitably insist on telling me"), achieving in a single word (*will*) the compactly compact art of making a point about one's predicament, without appearing to do so. In

⁵⁸Moore, for *Nation*. As quoted in The Poetry Foundation, 'Louise Bogan', 2019. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/louise-bogan>.

⁵⁹Moore, 'I May, I Might, I Must', in *New Collected Poems*, ed. Heather Cass White (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 210.

response, 'I then / will tell you why I think that I / can get across it if I try', is similarly ambiguous: on the one hand, it could be read as humbly suggesting that "I shall merely plead my case, and it is but my opinion". On the other, it subtly makes an assertive claim: with the metric stress falling for the first time on 'I' at the end of the third line, Moore's speaker suggests that what is deemed impossible by her interlocutor might actually be possible for her.

Before I go on to outline my specific approach in the thesis, two points must be addressed regarding the issue of gender. First, it is not my intention to suggest in a dangerously essentialist manner that what these five poets are doing is exclusive to poetry written by women, much less that it is the only kind of poetry that female poets are able to write. Marjorie Perloff, in accord with a point made by Susan Howe in *My Emily Dickinson*, remarks that 'To place Dickinson in a hypothetical canon of women writers [...] is to cut off one of the most important dimensions of her work'.⁶⁰ Bishop herself objected to being considered a specifically female poet: 'I have always refused to be in any collections, or reviews, or special numbers, etc., of just women'.⁶¹

Nonetheless, against the common dream of largeness that lingers behind the poems of various male American poets, however otherwise fragmentary (I am thinking, for example, of Whitman's *Song of Myself*, Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, Pound's *Cantos*, Zukofsky's "A", Williams's *Paterson*), there are notably fewer similarly epic poems by their female counterparts. This penchant for poetic smallness is demonstrably a choice, a deliberate aesthetic; in other words, the poets whose work I examine do not only happen to write small poems; they expressly avoid ostensibly big

⁶⁰Marjorie Perloff, 'Canon and Loaded Gun: Feminist Poetics and the Avant-Garde', *Poetic License* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 39.

⁶¹Bishop in a letter to May Swenson (7 November 1971), in *Elizabeth Bishop: Poems, Prose, and Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 883.

ones. As Bishop plainly put it, 'I'm not interested in big-scale work as such'.⁶²

Undoubtedly, various male American poets move in and out of this aesthetic as well: Pound was interested in the Japanese *haiku*, for instance; Williams's plums and red wheelbarrow also come to mind, as does some of the work of A. R. Ammons, and several others. However, it is the women who appear repeatedly and deliberately to be more drawn towards it; as such, it is the women whose work I will focus on.

Secondly, there is a tendency, in comparative studies of exclusively female American poets, to consider Dickinson's influence upon later generations; in doing so, scholars frequently draw upon the qualities of confinement and isolation that are associated with her. I am thinking, for instance, of Lesley Wheeler's *The Poetics of Enclosure: American Women Poets from Dickinson to Dove* (2002). Zofia Burr's *Of Women, Poetry, and Power*, in turn, posits 'how the canonization of Dickinson has consolidated limited assumptions about women's poetry in twentieth-century America'.⁶³ In *Our Emily Dickinsons*, Vivian R. Pollak considers how Moore and Bishop, as well as a few other female American poets, engage in both different and also evolving ways with Dickinson's legacy, and the experience of writing in the shadow of her tradition. Ultimately, for Pollak, 'Dickinson represents the intimacies of difference: the sociability that draws us together and the profound self-absorption that keeps us apart'.⁶⁴ Undertaking a study concerning poetic smallness and including Dickinson, my thesis might appear to position itself similarly. However, while acknowledging that to be a female American poet is, to a certain extent, to write after and in the shadow of the

⁶²As quoted in Ashley Brown, 'An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop', in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 295.

⁶³Zofia Burr, *Of Women, Poetry, and Power: Strategies of Address in Dickinson, Miles, Brooks, Lorde, and Angelou* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), jacket copy.

⁶⁴Vivian R. Pollak, *Our Emily Dickinsons: American Women Poets and the Intimacies of Difference* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 266.

figure cut by Dickinson, I am less interested in investigating the influence of Dickinson on later female American poets. Instead, I am more concerned with exploring these poets' common interest in a smallness, compactness, or condensery that, to return to Bishop and Moore's words, was itself a 'strange ambition', something that required work to achieve. In the work of each poet, this common interest makes itself manifest in distinctively individual ways, as shaped by the circumstances and interests that are unique to her.

Miniature thinking

There remain two matters to be addressed, before we move on to looking at the work of each poet in more specific detail. I mentioned at the start that I conceive poetic smallness not only as a formal quality (i.e., as observed of physically compact poems), but also as the ways in which smallness is thematised, staged, and explored in poetry. To my knowledge, there has not, as yet, been a sustained study of poetic smallness. There have been, however, glimmers of it in discussions of the miniature and the aphoristic, as well as in literary minimalism.⁶⁵ I will draw variously from these, in order to elucidate the kinds of ideas and ways of thinking for which the term 'smallness' will stand as shorthand in this thesis.

To begin with, writing about the minimalist prose of Roland Barthes, Diana Leca emphasises that Barthes's practice is 'connective', where 'correlative logic is abandoned in favour of disjunctive arrangements of unadorned "co-presences"'.⁶⁶ Minimalism, thus

⁶⁵My work encompasses and makes use of that which is described by all of these categories or models; as such, I have not explicitly wedded myself exclusively to any one in particular. In fact, I think that despite their categorical differences, there are certain qualities that are common to all of them, and that are thus common to a certain kind of smallness as more broadly conceived in this thesis.

⁶⁶Diana Leca, 'Roland Barthes and Literary Minimalism', *Barthes Studies* 1 (2015): 102; 104.

characterised, demonstrates a ‘willfulness towards leveling hierarchies’,⁶⁷ celebrating every one of these co-presences as they are. In spirit, it is very similar to the way in which the miniature, as described by Susan Stewart, ‘moves away from hierarchy’;⁶⁸ and the way in which the aphoristic, for Ben Grant, ‘can be seen to break down boundaries of all kinds’, and ‘by its nature resists logical sequence and hierarchy’.⁶⁹ For all the poets in this thesis, smallness embodies this spirit common to the minimalist, miniaturist, and aphoristic, as described by Leca, Stewart, and Grant. It therefore sits in general opposition to the dogmatic and imposed in the way in which it, as Stewart neatly summarises, ‘concentrates upon the single instance and not upon the general rule’.⁷⁰

Lia Purpura considers a defining characteristic of the miniature to be that it ‘is unto itself, not a mere part of a whole’.⁷¹ This is a definition that is reframed in Cynthia J. Hallett’s distinction between the miniaturist, who ‘produces a version smaller in area than the original image but does not delete a single detail’, and the minimalist, who ‘produces a partial version contained in a space so carefully condensed that one must infer from the part exposed exactly what has been omitted, what lies beneath, *i.e.* the whole picture’.⁷² However different the miniature and the minimalistic are made out to be, though, there is nonetheless an ultimate focus that falls upon the whole picture,

⁶⁷Leca, ‘Roland Barthes and Literary Minimalism’, 107.

⁶⁸Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 47.

⁶⁹Ben Grant, *The Aphorism and Other Short Forms* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 2; 4.

⁷⁰Stewart, *On Longing*, 48.

⁷¹Lia Purpura, ‘On Miniatures’, *Brevity* 21 (Summer 2006).
http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/craft/craft_minis.htm.

⁷²Cynthia J. Hallett, ‘Minimalism and the Short Story’, *Studies in Short Fiction* 33 (Fall 1996): 488. For Hallett, ‘repressed or compressed emotion is a key function of minimalism – emotion resounding below a deceptively mute surface’; this ‘version of life and literature has been a latent American condition since the 1960s’. This is in response to A. Walton Litz’s suggestion, as quoted by Hallett, that American fiction writers ‘were led to the short story in part by [...] the “thinness” of American life, its lack of a rich and complex social texture’. Litz’s remarks concern the very male group of Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, Melville and James. However, Hallett’s invocation of Dickinson’s injunction, to ‘Tell the Truth – but tell it slant’, resonates with the poetic smallness exemplified in and by the work of my female American poets.

whether this is one that has been inferred from a smaller metonymic part, or one that is itself small and already complete (that is, without a single part deleted). We might think about this in terms of the tension that Beverly Coyle identifies, between the centrifugal ('projective') and centripetal ('self-contained') forces at simultaneous work in the aphorism.⁷³ As will be demonstrated over the course of the thesis, an interest in the small is an interest in the relation between the part and the whole, however this relationship makes itself manifest.

Finally, Marc Botha has recently proposed that 'minimalism is best grasped as an *existential modality*: a way of existing in the world'. For him, aesthetic minimalism may specifically be defined as 'the investigation of the least possible and the least necessary across a range of media and works'.⁷⁴ This is particularly useful for conceptualising smallness in the poetry of the five poets whom I study. In leaving its terms relative (the 'least possible' and 'least necessary' can only be determined in relation to an overall goal, the 'whole picture'), this framework not only makes room for the microcosmic, enormously tiny or tinily enormous quality of the small as suggested by the part/whole model; it also, crucially, introduces the factors of scale and perspective that are relevant to a discussion of size. This model of minimalism presents, as Purpura similarly observes of the miniature, 'the familiar, reduced to unfamiliarity', as well as 'changes of scale by which we measure ourselves anew [...] invit[ing] us to leave our known selves and perspectives behind'.⁷⁵ In other words: in existing in the world alongside the small, we are deeply implicated in bigger ways than we might imagine.

⁷³Beverly Coyle, *A Thought to be Rehearsed: Aphorism in Wallace Stevens's Poetry* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 13; 14; 25.

⁷⁴Marc Botha, 'Preface', *A Theory of Minimalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), xiii-xiv.

⁷⁵Purpura, 'On Miniatures'.

Being a suitably small-scale method of reading, that attends to each poet in their own words and on their own terms, close-reading is at the forefront of my approach in this thesis. Close-reading smallness entails paying attention to nuances of size and scale within the poems. Significantly, however, the practice also induces shifts of its own in size and scale. Jimena Canales's work on the significance of the tenth of a second is richly suggestive about the ways in which focusing on the small can open up larger perspectives. Responding to observations by philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault on the tension in the modern era between '[a] search for constants, absolutes, and universals', and 'a fascination with the ephemeral, the fleeting, the unstable', Canales posits that the tenth of a second is an embodiment of this tension, 'both representative of the increasingly fast pace of modernity and a placeholder for an instant of instability'.⁷⁶ As such, it is possible to conceive this unit, discovered in the nineteenth century to be constitutive of human consciousness, 'as modernity' itself.⁷⁷ At the end of her book, Canales acknowledges the work of Walter Benjamin, whose reference to the unit in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 'reminded us of the mismatch between general knowledge and that arrived at through instruments'.

What is particularly interesting about Benjamin's views of the tenth of a second is that an instrument's revelation of this moment of time did not occur through a simple expansion of time. It did not represent a straightforward, ever-increasing ability to peer into shorter and shorter periods. It was not necessarily knowledge that was more "precise." Just like the "enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible" so the magnification of these moments did not simply increase our knowledge of them. This magnification, instead, served to disclose an entirely different nature.⁷⁸

⁷⁶Jimena Canales, *A Tenth of a Second: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 206.

⁷⁷Canales, *A Tenth of a Second*, 14.

⁷⁸Canales, *A Tenth of a Second*, 224.

This reading of Benjamin illuminates a rich seam of thinking about size and scale, the relationship between the two, and the possibilities, ‘entirely different’ from the straightforwardly proportionate, that are achievable within a certain kind of magnified disclosure.

An experiment conducted by the University of Tennessee’s School of Architecture, as related by Stewart in her writing on the miniature, provides an empirical example of such possibilities, as they relate to time experienced. In this experiment,

...researchers had adult subjects observe scale-model environments 1/6, 1/12, and 1/24 of full size. The environments represented lounges and included chipboard furniture as well as scale figures. The subjects were asked to move the scale figures through the environment, to imagine humans to be that scale, and to identify activities appropriate for that space. Then they were asked to imagine themselves to be of “lounge scale” and picture themselves engaging in activities in the lounge. Finally, they were asked to tell the researchers when they felt that they had been engaged in such activities for 30 minutes. The experiment showed that “the experience of temporal duration is compressed relative to the clock in the same proportion as scale-model environments being observed are compressed relative to the full-sized environment.” In other words, 30 minutes would be experienced in 5 minutes at 1/12 scale and in 2.5 minutes at 1/24 scale.⁷⁹

For Stewart, this study is significant in demonstrating how ‘miniature time transcends the duration of everyday life in such a way as to create an interior temporality of the subject’.⁸⁰ She reads this transformation of time as ‘parallel[ing] the miniature’s transformation of language’, such that ‘A reduction in dimensions does not produce a corresponding reduction in significance’; rather, ‘writing about the miniature achieves a delirium of description. The arrested life of the miniature object places it within a still

⁷⁹Stewart, *On Longing*, 66.

⁸⁰Stewart, *On Longing*, 66.

context of infinite detail'.⁸¹ Bachelard, who describes the need for small things to evolve slowly, has similar ideas about the infinite and delirious (that is, the teeming and the non-logical, nearly hallucinatory) qualities invoked by small things. For him, 'values become condensed and enriched in miniature. Platonic dialectics of large and small do not suffice for us to become cognizant of the dynamic virtues of miniature thinking. One must go beyond logic in order to experience what is large in what is small. [...] miniature causes men to dream'.⁸² Stewart and Bachelard are particularly important to my discussion; as landmark theorists on how we respond to the miniature imaginatively, their work has been used in the consideration of small objects in a variety of fields,⁸³ and their ideas similarly lay the foundation for my exploration of the small in literary terms.

Moore writes to Bishop, in late August 1937, that 'It may be a mistake to pore over minutiae as I do, but it makes such work as the carved capitals on the cards of the Madeleine, an active growing poem'.⁸⁴ She is characteristically understated: there is no mistake here; she knows exactly what she is doing, and what her poet's eye is keen to see. If the metaphorical poem here is an organism of its own that transcends inherent size, the poems that both poets write urge their reader to pore (that is, take time) over their minutiae. Only then, Moore's words suggest, does the growing occur, this process being an integral part of the experience and impact of the poem. In other words, close-

⁸¹Stewart, *On Longing*, 66; 43; 46-47.

⁸²Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 169-70.

⁸³S. Rebecca Martin and Stephanie Langin-Hooper, too, make use of Stewart and Bachelard to anchor their discussion of what they identify as being a recent theoretical turn, in the archaeological and anthropological study of miniature or seemingly fragmentary objects of the ancient world, towards not only considering the representational properties of these objects, but also acknowledging that they are 'more than simply semiotic icons, signifying by mimetic properties alone'. See Martin and Langin-Hooper (eds.), 'In/Complete: An Introduction to the Theories of Miniaturization and Fragmentation', *The Tiny and the Fragmented: Miniature, Broken, or Otherwise Incomplete Objects in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1; 2-3.

⁸⁴Moore, letter to Bishop. From 'Bishop correspondence', V:04:31, The Marianne Moore Papers, The Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum & Library.

reading, a specifically literary form of miniature thinking, is able to toy with size and scale because it rejigs the temporality of how we experience a poem. To read closely is to read slowly, and to give the poem not simply the space, but also the time, required in order for it to grow; that is, to open up and, as Bachelard describes it, reveal ‘what is large in what is small’.

As such, heeding the Bachelardian miniaturist’s challenge to ‘Take the time needed to see all these little things that cannot be seen all together,’”⁸⁵ my focus will be on close-reading the poems, while shaping my readings to the particular context of each poet, and anchoring them to a thematic framework that is specifically relevant to her. Making use of biographical material (letters, biographies, and, in Moore’s case, archival material), I consider the poets’ geographical circumstances; their cultural environments; their influences and interests, both literary and otherwise. After all, for Botha, minimalism is applicable across a range of media and works, and, for Grant, the variability and multiplicity of the aphorism is what enables it to be an inherently interdisciplinary genre that facilitates new connections.⁸⁶ My approach will thus pay similarly close attention to the different shapes that smallness can take. What will emerge from my discussion will be five miniature portraits, five distinctive versions of a common interest in poetic smallness.

In my first chapter, focusing on Dickinson, I explore the poet’s fascination with insects, and the ways in which they appear in her writing. By considering entomological discussions in the cultural, scientific, and biblical contexts with which she would have been familiar, I suggest that the enduring human fascination with the insect, as highlighted by Dickinson, has something to do with its seemingly unknowable

⁸⁵Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 177-78.

⁸⁶Grant, *The Aphorism and Other Short Forms*, 2-3.

smallness. Examining the insects in Dickinson's work, I think about how they might serve as surrogates for the poet and her poems, ultimately lending themselves to a poetics informed both by the Christian framework of according the most attention to the most apparently minor of subjects, and by the mysteries surrounding, and questions inspired by, the entomological.

I then turn to the work of Moore, considering the relationship between the small and the big as it surfaces in that between the part and the whole. Drawing on archival work with Moore's papers at the Rosenbach Library in Philadelphia, I consider how an early preoccupation with notions of scale and practices of assemblage (traceable within her juvenilia) could be mapped out to the shifts in scale and the means of organising information that are present in her later poetry and working methods. Taking into account Moore's own tendency to accumulate and collect, and her interest in the animal world, I think about the latent risk of appropriation within poems that have been described by the poet as being a 'little anthology'.

My third chapter is concerned with Bishop, and takes as its focus her particular smallness of the private interior, the small, contained space as relative to the larger exterior space of the world. I explore how rooms in her work frequently complicate any fixed notion of the contained or closed up. I navigate these rooms through the motifs of the window, the bubble, and the camera, demonstrating how they relate to the room, and how they negotiate the relationship between interior and exterior. Throughout the chapter, I draw upon the work of Joseph Cornell. Featuring similar motifs, Cornell's art (with which Bishop was familiar) illuminates and visually renders the ideas of space and perspective that are present in Bishop's work.

In my penultimate chapter, I introduce Niedecker's version of smallness via her own description of a poet's work as 'condensery', and I discuss how this differs from the dense, rock-like quality of the work of Ezra Pound, for instance. I navigate the relationship between focal points (the small and discrete) and the processes that surround or spread out from them (the ever-expanding and dispersed). In doing so, I make use of rocks as a solid sounding board for their various fluid resonances: their relationship with water, their relationship with sound, and their relationship with light. For Niedecker, rocks bear traces of vast, historical processes of natural evolution; in writing about them, the poet draws our attention to similarly vast processes of evolution made manifest in words as organic material.

Finally, I study the poems of Ryan. Her work is visually small: thin, vertically compact poems that typically comprise single stanzas. Drawing on Ryan's interest in motifs of survival, as well as in her own description of poetry in terms of the nonsensical or comic, I consider the poet's use of humour and play as a strategy that is particularly powerful when employed from a compromised or otherwise vulnerable position of the diminutive or diminished. Ultimately, making use of the analogy of a parent-child relationship, I think about how her poems might be said to resist the reader, and how her single stanzas both grow on us, and away from us.

It must finally be emphasised that this thesis is in no way comprehensive; indeed, the desire for comprehensiveness could be said to go against the spirit or disposition of poetic smallness. Rather, my intention is to identify a few poet-specific versions or tendencies of poetic smallness, in order to open up a larger conversation about what it might entail, and how it might make itself manifest. Seen more generally within the framework of a modern preoccupation with smallness in its various forms, the work of

the poets studied in this thesis opens up a number of different ways of thinking about the attendant ideas of size, scale, and perspective. If, for Botha, ‘Minimalist objects habitually clarify questions of form, scale, and process’,⁸⁷ and for Purpura, ‘Miniatures do nothing less than alter our sense of, and relation to time and space’,⁸⁸ then ultimately my aim is to ask: what does a poetics or a poetic imagination look like that admits and accommodates these ideas about size and scale, and our own position in relation to them? How might we conceive this poetic smallness as a potentially potent form of resistance, but also one that, with such counter-intuitively large stakes, is not without risks of its own?

⁸⁷Botha, ‘Preface’, xvi.

⁸⁸Purpura, ‘On Miniatures’.

1 The Bee in Emily Dickinson's Bonnet

Emily Dickinson was physically petite, by her own admission: to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she describes how 'I have a little shape – it would not crowd your Desk – nor make much Racket as the Mouse, that dents your Galleries –'; and again, how she is 'small, like the Wren'.¹ More significantly, though, she was also small-minded:

Better than larger values –
However true their show –
This timid life of Evidence
Keeps pleading – 'I don't know.'

(696: 342-43)²

'This timid life of Evidence' repeatedly surfaces in her writing, a body of work in which minor figures play major roles, and in which Dickinson expands upon the narrow, the small and the lowly, in order to address larger unknown quantities. Of these minor figures, certain ones recur: floral and gemstone imagery, for instance, and the figure of the child.³ To attempt to account for all minor figures would be too much. Taking a leaf from Dickinson's own circumscribed book, I choose therefore to focus on insects, 'the pretty people in the Woods' (111: 53), those citizens of the 'minor Nation' (1068: 485).

As an avid gardener who was 'known among her friends for her detailed knowledge of the flora around Amherst',⁴ the poet accumulated and labelled more than 400

¹Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Belknap Press, 1958), II: 409; 411.

²Unless otherwise specified, the edition from which I take both poem and page numbers is *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber, 1970).

³See Domhnall Mitchell, *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); Wendy Barker, 'Emily Dickinson and Poetic Strategy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 77-90.

⁴Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, vol. 2 (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 345.

botanical specimens in her herbarium during her school years.⁵ Her knowledge of the flora of Amherst, however, is inextricable from the interest that she also took in its fauna. Among the dried artefacts that she frequently enclosed in her written correspondences, there would therefore not only be floral sprigs, but also the occasional cricket, fly, or bee, from her garden. In *The Poet as Botanist*, M. M. Mahood explores the close affinity long shared between poets and plants, making a distinction between ‘poet-botanists’ and ‘poet-ecologists’:

...whereas in the long reign of botany [biophilia] took the form of a feeling for the organism, since the rise of ecology [which Mahood dates to 1953] it has taken the form of a sense of the whole: of the relationships, that is, of organisms with their surroundings and with each other.⁶

While Dickinson, with her herbarium, certainly belongs within the tradition of poet-botanists like George Crabbe and John Clare, she nonetheless also displays the poet-ecologist’s sensitivity for the interdependence of flora and fauna; in fact, in addressing insects, she sometimes identifies herself with flowers, a move that I will eventually explore in further detail.

Henry David Thoreau, too, pays attention to the significance of insects in relation to flowers when he advises in a journal entry on 10 February 1852 that ‘[t]he botanist should make interest with the bees if he would know when the flowers open and when they close’.⁷ The presence of Thoreau on the Dickinsons’ library shelves⁸ suggests that Dickinson the keen botanist might indeed have taken this advice seriously; after all, she

⁵Martha Dickinson Bianchi, ‘Emily Dickinson’s Garden’, *Emily Dickinson International Society Bulletin* 2.2 (Nov/Dec 1990): 1-2.

⁶M. M. Mahood, *The Poet as Botanist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 253.

⁷Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, 1837-1861*, ed. Damion Searls (New York: New York Review Books, 2009), 169.

⁸Dickinson family library collection (1810-1943), Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard University, 2019. <https://holisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/resources/6412>.

considers the bee a close acquaintance of hers when she boasts to her nephew Edward in 1864 that she ‘knows a Man who drives a Coach like a Thimble, and turns the Wheel all day with his Heel – His name is Bumblebee’.⁹ Likewise, in another poem, ‘an aged Bee’ serves as the officiating minister at a funeral service for summer (18: 14).

In fact, as entomologist Louis C. Rutledge has helpfully noted, insects (arthropods) feature in 180 of Dickinson’s 1,775 poems.¹⁰ Yet a great deal more scholarly attention has been devoted to Dickinson’s garden and its flowers, than to the insects that dwelled in it. This is not to say that nothing has been made of insects in relation to the poet: Paula Bernat Bennett and Alexandra Socarides, for instance, have separately associated Dickinson with the spider as artist or craftsman in the poems 605 (‘The Spider holds a Silver Ball’), 1138 (‘A Spider sewed at Night’) and 1275 (‘The Spider as an Artist’). For Bennett, Dickinson’s spider is deliberately gendered as male, while carrying out the traditionally feminine activities of spinning and sewing; as such, for her it serves to hold together gendered conventions of art – isolated masculine artistry and feminine material labour – in an attempt to achieve the immortality of the former while remaining grounded in her own historical circumstances.¹¹ Socarides, too, asserts that the spider was a representation of feminine labour, ‘the unemployable merit and genius of this creature who makes art amongst the items of the household’.¹²

Significantly, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, with whom Dickinson would later in her life exchange substantial correspondence, and who served as a mentor to her, was

⁹Dickinson, *Letters*, II:432.

¹⁰Louis C. Rutledge, ‘Emily Dickinson’s Arthropods’, *American Entomology* (Summer 2003): 72. Throughout this chapter, I employ the term *insect* as shorthand for all arthropods, thus including spiders in my study.

¹¹Paula Bernat Bennett, ‘Emily Dickinson and her American women poet peers’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Martin, 215-35.

¹²Alexandra Socarides, *Dickinson Unbound: Paper, Process, Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 145. Aside from these creature-specific readings, however, the only extensive study of the entomological in Dickinson’s oeuvre, as far as I can tell, is a dissertation by Frank Rashid. See Rashid, ‘“Minor Nations”: Emily Dickinson and the Entomological’. Ph.D. diss. University of Detroit, 1980.

himself a keen entomologist. In his essay 'Butterflies in Poetry', Higginson asks: '[W]hy do we not [...] hear more of them by fame in literature? [...] when they enter poetry they do it with yet more grace; but fewer authors describe them, and those few more charily'.¹³ In *Outdoor Studies*, he again laments that 'Literary amateurs go the tour of the globe to renew their stock of materials, when they do not yet know a bird or a bee or a blossom beside their homestead door'.¹⁴ While these comments only appeared in print shortly after Dickinson's death, they nonetheless give us a sense of a literary interest in insects, to which Dickinson might have been exposed, but that she certainly exemplified.

The aim of this chapter is therefore to reinforce the significance of insects within the work of the poet. By considering Dickinson's depiction of insects in relation to the relevant contextual vocabularies of nineteenth-century science and Christian iconography, as well as the literary and cultural connotations that would have been known to her, I will demonstrate that her portrayal of insects illuminates something about the enduring human fascination with the entomological, as is evident in all of the aforementioned contexts. Similarly preoccupied with these miniscule creatures, 'The most important population' who 'Unnoticed dwell' (1746: 707), Dickinson assigned substantial roles to them, making use of them to navigate large, complex ideas throughout her writing.

1.1 'A pensive Custom': the nineteenth-century insect

Frank Rashid has noted the prevalence of observations and metaphors relating to insects in the letters exchanged between Dickinson and her brother William Austin

¹³Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 'Butterflies in Poetry', *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 1904): 748.

¹⁴Higginson, *Outdoor Studies* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1900), 114.

Dickinson (“Austin”) from the 1850s, while the latter was teaching in Boston, and then studying at Harvard; for Rashid, ‘insects had private significance for Austin, Emily, and some of their friends’.¹⁵ In fact, the Dickinsons’ interest in insects could be seen as representative of their particular time and place: abuzz with enthusiasm for insects, nineteenth-century Massachusetts played a significant role in American contributions towards the previously Eurocentric field of entomology. The Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture, for instance, was founded in Boston in 1792; in the following century, it awarded prizes for insect studies, and installed a natural history professorship at Harvard College that was filled by an entomologist. Reassembled from the Linnaean Society of New England in 1830, the Boston Society of Natural History also centered its focus on insect studies, and supported the work of many American entomologists in the period.¹⁶

The naturalist and educator Edward Hitchcock was a close family friend of the Dickinsons. He was the president of Amherst College from 1845-54, during which time Dickinson’s father served as its treasurer, and Austin attended it as a student. Hitchcock had been responsible for appointing the Harvard librarian Thaddeus William Harris to report on the state’s insects as part of a zoological and botanical survey of Massachusetts in the late 1830s. What eventually grew out of Harris’s findings was the 1841 *Report on the Insects of Massachusetts, Injurious to Vegetation*, the first American book on agricultural entomology, and one of the first on the subject in the world.¹⁷ Hitchcock himself was also a natural theologian, with whose work Dickinson was familiar. She acknowledged to Higginson, for instance, the solace that she derived

¹⁵Rashid, “Minor Nations”, 25.

¹⁶Willis Conner Sorensen, *Brethren of the Net: American Entomology, 1840-1880* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 6.

¹⁷Sorensen, *Brethren of the Net*, 69-70.

from the former's lectures on the relevance of the cyclical nature of the seasons to the Christian notion of Resurrection: 'When Flowers annually died and I was a child, I used to read Dr Hitchcock's Book on the Flowers of North America. This comforted their Absence – assuring me they lived'.¹⁸ This is also evident when she writes to Louise Norcross:

I miss the grasshoppers much, but suppose it is all for the best. I should become too attached to a trotting world.

My garden is all covered up by snow; picked gilliflower Tuesday, now gilliflowers are asleep. The hills take off their purple frocks, and dress in long white nightgowns.

There is something fine and something sad in the year's toilet.¹⁹

In reducing a larger yearly cycle to the more familiar and therefore manageable daily cycle of taking off one's frock and putting on one's nightgown at bedtime, Dickinson's choice of metaphor of the changing seasons as 'the year's toilet', both reproduces and bears traces of the comforting reason extended to a young Emily by Hitchcock's work: if hills may be personified as little girls with their frocks and nightgowns, and if the gilliflowers are merely asleep, then perhaps one need only wait before sleep and subsequently, waking in heaven, allows reunion with the dear and departed. This was a comfort that was firmly grounded in the 'timid life of Evidence' around her – the tiny organisms observable in her garden – that was, in turn, extendable to her grapple with the bigger, human losses and absences experienced in her daily life.

Corresponding to familiar tropes in the pastoral elegy, there is nothing particularly new in such a reading: as Hitchcock himself acknowledges in his *Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomena in the Four Seasons*, '[t]he analogy of the seasons to human life [...] has

¹⁸Sewall, *Life*, II:348.

¹⁹Dickinson, *Letters*, II:370.

long since been sung by the poet',²⁰ and he supports this with examples from James Thomson's 1730 poem cycle *The Seasons*. Dickinson would have been aware of the prevalence of this trope, not only from Hitchcock's writings, but also from her own encounter of it throughout Thomson's work – the Dickinsons owned both the 1817 and 1828 editions of *The Seasons*.²¹

Yet while she thus makes manageable bigger losses by looking to the flowers, she does not account for the grasshoppers mentioned in the same letter. Rosemary Scanlon has asserted that:

Dickinson repeatedly turns to nature to assuage her doubts about the character of God, the purpose of life in the face of the inevitability of death, and the possibility of salvation, discovering in its subtle and intricate processes and relationships, endless fecundity, and perpetual celebration [of] evidence of a creation divinely ordered and maintained, a creation in which every member serves a unique and distinct purpose and is equally deserving of the attention and love of God.²²

However, this reading accords far more certitude to the natural world than appears to be the case in much of Dickinson's work. Against the agency exercised by the hills and the gilliflowers in respectively undressing and going to bed, Dickinson's final line is wistfully, passively vague: 'There is something fine and something sad in the year's toilet'. In contrast to her proactive strategy of self-consolation through metaphor, there is a similar twinge of resignation in 'suppos[ing] it is all for the best'. Unlike the flowers, who put on their nightgowns and go to sleep in the earth, and are nonetheless present in their dying, 'a trotting world' is one that is moving, that gets away, and that will not stay for long enough to be satisfactorily managed in elegiac metaphor-making. Not

²⁰Edward Hitchcock, *Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomena in the Four Seasons* (Amherst: J.S. & C. Adams, 1850), 85.

²¹Dickinson family library collection (1810-1943), items 334-35.

²²Rosemary Scanlon McTier, *An Insect View of Its Plain: Insects, Nature and God in Thoreau, Dickinson and Muir* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2013), 105.

necessarily all of nature assuages her doubts, to use McTier's overly reassuring verb; the fact that Dickinson repeatedly turns to nature, and particularly to insects, suggests that for her there was something within it, and about them, that was resolutely unknown, unknowable, unresolved.

Examination of Hitchcock's lectures reveals that they share such a sense of the unresolved mysteries of the insect world. The lectures describe the metamorphosis of insects as a subject that 'has long been thought an illustration of [Christian resurrection]' – but also point out that this is nonetheless an imperfect piece of evidence:

Now so striking is the analogy between these metamorphoses and the reanimation of man, that many able writers on natural theology have considered them as direct proof of his future resurrection. But unfortunately there is one defect in the analogy, that seems to have been overlooked. When man is laid in the grave, we know that no vestige of life remains. [...] Not so with the chrysalis. In its most torpid state, you can always find marks of vitality, or rather, if you cannot discover signs of life, it will never come forth as a perfect insect. The conclusion, therefore, is that the curious facts respecting insect metamorphosis, although a beautiful emblem of man's resurrection, are but a poor argument in direct proof of the doctrine. They do, however, show us in what widely different states the same animal may exist, and what curious means nature has provided, by which they may pass from one of those states into another...²³

As is suggested in Hitchcock's repetition of the adjective 'curious', however, the matter of insect metamorphosis as a specific subcategory of seasonal cyclicity is more resistant to literary allegorisation.

There is little further entomological mention in the *Lectures*; Hitchcock goes on to make use of mainly botanical and geological phenomena as examples in his natural theology. And yet perhaps it is the quality of curiousness, of the yet unanswerable,

²³Hitchcock, *Religious Lectures*, 34-35.

ineffably miraculous process of insect metamorphosis, that nonetheless recommends the use of a painting by Hitchcock's wife, depicting the life cycle of a butterfly, as the frontispiece to the *Lectures*:



Figure 1.1 Frontispiece, *Religious Lectures*

If the nineteenth-century natural theologian found insect life resistant to his work, Harris, the entomologist whose work he had commissioned, only referred to religion occasionally in his writings, despite being the son of a minister; even then, these references were merely used stylistically, rather than to support any substantial religious argument.²⁴ Having noted the more general absence of religious undertones in American entomological work of the time, Willis Conner Sorensen considers this to be especially striking when considered alongside the religious terminology which otherwise permeates contemporary studies from adjacent sciences, such as agricultural chemistry.²⁵ If religion could not easily account for insects, then perhaps this recommended them as objects of study for the entomologists, who sought increasingly to align themselves with a more European, post-Enlightenment tradition.

²⁴Sorensen, *Brethren of the Net*, 64.

²⁵Sorensen, *Brethren of the Net*, 63.

Certainly, this would line up with John F. Clark's assertion that insects were 'potentially powerful ideological tools as the authority of science grew'.²⁶ For Clark, 'By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, [...] insects became attractive subjects precisely because of their apparent distance from humanity'.²⁷ It was this 'utterly alien morphology',²⁸ when paired with their impossible smallness, that William Paley found 'dubious' and 'obscure' about 'the insect tribe', and that therefore necessitated a distinct chapter of its own in his 1802 work, *Natural Theology*: 'The structure, and the use of the parts, of insects, are less understood than that of quadrupeds and birds, not only by reason of their minuteness, or the minuteness of their parts, (for that minuteness we can, in some measure, follow with glasses) but also, by reason of the remoteness of their manners and modes of life from those of larger animals'.²⁹ There is an implicit suggestion, in Paley's words, of a relationship between these two reasons; in other words, that, by resolving the problem of insect minuteness, we might make substantial advancements towards resolving the problem of their remoteness from 'larger animals'. After all, as is indicated by his mention of glasses, the first entomological explorations were a matter of scaling up, a possibility enabled by developments in optic technology: the earliest microscopes, called *flea glasses* or *fly glasses*, enabled Stelluti's 1625 *Anatomy of the Bee, as Revealed by the Microscope*, as well as Hooke's 1665 depiction of the eye and foot of a fly in *Micrographia*. Quickly following these advances, the eighteenth century was rife with insect-related discoveries.

²⁶John F. Clark, *Bugs and the Victorians* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), 8.

²⁷Clark, *Bugs and the Victorians*, 8.

²⁸Clark, *Bugs and the Victorians*, 8.

²⁹William Paley, *Natural Theology, or Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, collected from the appearances of nature* (1802), ed. Matthew D. Eddy and David Knight (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 170.

If their smallness was thus part of the difficulty or resistance of insects in the face of both religious and scientific attempts to account for them, it seems to have been the smallness, too, that kept both religious and scientific thinkers persisting. Thomas Moffett wrote in *Insectorum sive minimorum animalium theatrum*, his unfinished entomological encyclopedia of 1634, that ‘*In minimis tota es*’: everything is contained within the small. Hugh Raffles traces this notion to a widely held Platonistic cosmology, ‘in which the relationship between small and large was conceived as that between microcosm and macrocosm, with each being containing within it a seed of the entire cosmos’.³⁰ On this view, the tiny, intricately built insect reflects the perfection of divine design, its minute stature a means of taking stock of the immense. Dickinson would have encountered this idea, and she was also familiar with the recurring notion in Christian thought that it is the meek, the lowly, and the humble who ultimately inherit the most: that ‘he giveth grace unto the lowly’ (Proverbs 3.34), and ‘Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 18.4). In a letter of 1858, she therefore mentioned “little children,” of whom is the “Kingdom of Heaven”. How tiny some will have to grow, to gain admission there!’.³¹ Such a blurring of lines, or crossing of boundaries, between the very small and the very large, thus existing in the spheres of both science and religion, provides a very large impetus for closely attending to the very small.

This relationship assumes another iteration when we consider the enormous body of cultural connotations borne out of these diminutive creatures. Take, for instance, the bee: Claire Preston has interpreted the abstemious bee in Dickinson’s poem 806 as having inherited the economic virtuousness typical of apian symbolism, an example of

³⁰Hugh Raffles, *Insectopedia* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 125.

³¹Dickinson, *Letters*, II:336.

which is the beehive depicted in the paper bills issued by the American Republican Congress in 1779.³² In addition to such a national rhetoric, Dickinson would also have inherited a richly diverse body of varying significations in her reading and education, both at school and from her family library. Aside from representing economic virtue, bees appear in Dickinson's beloved Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 2*, as 'an angry hive' who 'care not who they sting',³³ for instance, as well as 'Rapacious, arrogant, and vain, / Greedy of power, but more of gain' in John Gay's satirical 1714 fable 'The Degenerate Bees'.³⁴ Yet they also feature in seventeenth-century Puritan writings as paragons of civic virtue in their industrious foraging,³⁵ in Christian writing of the Middle Ages as God's winged servants, the only prelapsarian escapees of Eden,³⁶ and, as the titular character in Isaac Watts's 1715 didactic poem 'How Doth the Little Busy Bee', to 'Improve each shining hour'.³⁷ To briefly consider the example of another insect: the name of Satan's henchman Beelzebub, from the Hebrew *ba'al z'bub*, translates to 'lord of flies'³⁸ – and yet the fly was also lauded for its heroic qualities by ancient writers such as Homer, Lucian and Alberti.³⁹

What is particularly noteworthy is not so much *what* these insects have signified, but just *how much* they have signified. Because of the utterly alien morphology compounded by their smallness, insects could be made to articulate a variety of often opposing traits and values. Like so many before (and after) her, Dickinson was fascinated with these

³²Preston, *Bee*, 70-72.

³³William Shakespeare, 2 *Henry VI*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), III.2.125-27.

³⁴John Gay, *The Poetical Works of John Gay*, ed. Thomas Park (London: Stanhope Press, 1806), 127.

³⁵Preston, *Bee*, 79.

³⁶Thomas D. Seeley, 'Foreword', in Benjamin P. Oldroyd and Siriwat Wongsiri, *Asian Honey Bees: Biology, Conservation, and Human Interactions* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), ix.

³⁷Isaac Watts, *Works*, ed. Rev. George Burder, vol. 4 (London: J. Barfield, 1810), 399.

³⁸*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 381.

³⁹Connor, *Fly*, 20-23.

creatures, repeatedly making mention to them in her poetry. Unlike the work of science and religion, whose engagement with these enigmatic creatures entailed taking a microscope to them and striving to solve, or to entirely account for, their enigma, the poet found much to be made of these insects in their tiny complexity. Her insects dynamically gesture towards different things at different points in the poetry: sometimes they are surrogates for the poet, at other times they stand for a particular idea, or suggest a certain mood; in all of their appearances, however, they imaginatively take the lead.

1.2 ‘A dim capacity for Wings’: the enigmatic insect

As has been mentioned, Dickinson has been associated with the spider, her labour of writing poems thus comparable to the arachnid’s domestic work of weaving webs. That she identified with the spider is true, but it is not the only insect with whom she identifies – she also considered herself as the humble housefly, thus addressing, once again, her acquaintance, the bumblebee:

You’ll get my Letter by
The seventeenth; Reply
Or better, be with me –
Yours, Fly.

(1035: 474)

The cricket, too, was her companion, as she explains to her young nephew Edward that ‘the Cricket and I keep House for the Frost’;⁴⁰ she likewise counts herself among the butterflies when she asks:

What tenements of clover
Are fitting for the bee,
What edifices azure
For butterflies and me.
What residences nimble

⁴⁰Dickinson, *Letters*, II:513.

Arise and evanesce
 Without a rhythmic rumor
 Or an assaulting guess.

(1338: 579)

These instances of apparent camaraderie belie a deeper sense of the enigma of these 'Forest Folk' (173: 82). Despite the partnership that may be suggested by the collective identification of 'the Cricket and I' and 'butterflies and me', we more frequently get the impression in Dickinson's writing that in dispatching her missive to the bumblebee, she does not always get the response that she desires and solicits. Nor is there an answer to the questions posed in poem 1338, which closes without even 'an assaulting guess'.

Underlying this sense of community with insects is the alienness or alterity that they pose to the human, as well as the implications that they might nonetheless bear for the latter. In a letter dating to late 1850 to her childhood friend Abiah Palmer Root, a twenty-year-old Dickinson declares that 'We are very small, Abiah – I think we grow still smaller – this tiny, insect life the portal to another; it seems strange – strange indeed'.⁴¹

The strangeness of this tiny, insect life was an idea and image that would continue to preoccupy her.

Concluding his demographic survey of insects in Dickinson's oeuvre, Rutledge's article finishes with his pronouncement that:

To my knowledge, no other major poet has given so much attention to entomology as Emily Dickinson. More than 10% of her poems make at least some mention of arthropods. Although her poems are idiomatic and sometimes difficult to interpret, the interpretation, when found, is always worthwhile. Entomologists with an interest in poetry will find much to admire in Dickinson's oeuvre.⁴²

⁴¹Dickinson, *Letters*, I:103-4.

⁴²Rutledge, 'Emily Dickinson's Arthropods', 74.

Rutledge does not acknowledge it, but there is rarely the guarantee of a conclusive ‘interpretation’ to be ‘found’ in Dickinson’s insect poems. If the poet did not explicitly account for what is ‘strange indeed’ about this tiny, insect life, its mystery emerges even more acutely in the poetry. If the reason why he recommends Dickinson’s work to fellow entomologists is that, like them, she shares their sense of the mystery of insects, Dickinson’s entomological work is nonetheless different from that of the scientist; in contrast to the latter’s work to ultimately understand the little creatures, the poet repeatedly dwells in, and thereby highlights, their ultimate unknowability.

In poem 1128, for instance, despite the references to ‘Eminence remote’ and ‘His figure intimate’ that might otherwise characterise a poem about the presence of divinity as revealed by thunder and lightning, Dickinson’s focus lies elsewhere:

These are the Nights that Beetles love –
 From Eminence remote
 Drives ponderous perpendicular
 His figure intimate
 The terror of the Children
 The merriment of men
 Depositing his Thunder
 He hoists abroad again –
 A Bomb upon the Ceiling
 Is an improving thing –
 It keeps the nerves progressive
 Conjecture flourishing –
 Too dear the Summer evening
 Without discreet alarm –
 Supplied by Entomology
 With its remaining charm –

(1128: 506)

Anthropomorphising the beetles, the first line adopts the consolatory register that one might employ to assuage ‘The terror of the Children’. If elsewhere Dickinson describes ‘how We sung / To Keep the Dark away’ (850: 408), the creation of this fiction is a similar means of managing or mitigating a larger darkness (i.e., night) by framing it in

terms of a smaller one (the beetle). Why *do* beetles love thunder-filled nights? The two possess a common capacity to keep 'Conjecture flourishing', a capacity that Dickinson emulates in her enigmatic treatment of the subject.

As 'A Bomb upon the Ceiling', thunder, in keeping 'Conjecture flourishing', is aligned with the 'discreet alarm - / Supplied by Entomology'. But the poem, concerned with the subject of Conjecture, is itself difficult to parse, soliciting the reader's own conjecture. This is a result of Dickinson's use of dashes and run-on lines, which create discrete syntactical units that may be read against one another in a number of different possible ways. If we cannot definitively know why beetles might love thunder-filled nights, perhaps the point is simply that we can say that they do, and that they are unafraid of them; in thus saying so, we assure ourselves that we do not have to be afraid, either. This conjecture, and the singing, then, might be the key to keeping darkness at bay. The reader is therefore shown not only the 'remaining charm' - i.e., the 'Fascinating quality; charmingness, attractiveness' (*OED*) - of Entomology that warrants Dickinson's poetic meditation, but also the poem itself, with its rhyming lines, *as* charm - 'The chanting or recitation of a verse supposed to possess magic power' (*OED*) - remaining after the thunder has subsided and the beetles have scuttled away.

Another poem, this time involving a different insect, appears to have more to do with the business of divine exegesis:

My Cocoon tightens - Colors tease -
I'm feeling for the Air -
A dim capacity for Wings
Demeans the Dress I wear -

A power of Butterfly must be -
The Aptitude to fly
Meadows of Majesty implies
And easy Sweeps of Sky -

So I must baffle at the Hint
 And cipher at the Sign
 And make much blunder, if at last
 I take the clue divine –

(1099: 496)

The butterfly imagery here finds its place in a long tradition associating the butterfly with the soul: the Greek word *psyche* refers to both ‘soul’ and ‘butterfly’; Plato, for instance, speaks of the winged soul in his *Phaedrus*. This association likewise appears in the butterflies appearing on tombstones and mosaics as an emblem for the resurrected soul in Christian iconography. Dickinson would likely have been familiar with such a trope, especially considering that it also surfaces in the work of Higginson, who writes in his poem ‘The Soul of a Butterfly’ of how butterflies are ‘Changed thenceforth to immortal things’.⁴³ In ‘Butterflies in Poetry’, he similarly writes about how ‘they of all created things have furnished man with the symbol of his own immortality’.⁴⁴

Yet if Hitchcock is unable to account precisely for the evidence of Resurrection in the metamorphosis of insects, for Higginson, the chief charm of butterflies lies precisely in the resistance that they put up against human attempts at interpreting them; in his words, that ‘with all their varied life and activity, they represent an absolutely silent existence’.⁴⁵ On the basis of this silence, he concludes that:

There is doubtless among these airy creatures something akin to the mind’s visions, else why in various nations and under varying religions should the same insect have represented immortality; or why, when the most gifted of recent French writers of fiction, de Maupassant, lost control of his mind and said perpetually, “Où sont mes idées?” should have fancied that he found them in butterflies?⁴⁶

⁴³Higginson, ‘The Soul of a Butterfly’, in *The Afternoon Landscape* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co, 1889), 23.

⁴⁴Higginson, ‘Butterflies in Poetry’, 182.

⁴⁵Higginson, ‘Butterflies in Poetry’, 182.

⁴⁶Higginson, ‘Butterflies in Poetry’, 191.

Higginson's piece gives us a sense of the creative connotations of butterflies that were prevalent around the time at which Dickinson was writing, and that is similarly exemplified by the 'Butterfly upon the Sky,/ That doesn't know its Name' in poem 1521 (637). It also provides a useful survey of butterflies in contemporaneous American poetry, of which the following, by Alice Archer James, opens thus:

I am not what I was yesterday,
God knows my name.
I am made in a smooth and beautiful way,
And full of flame.⁴⁷

As Higginson asserts, the silence of butterflies, along with their capacity to undergo transformations to be 'not what I was yesterday', characterises them as mysterious, riddle-like (only 'God knows my name'), and therefore invests them with an indescribable, ineffable quality 'akin to the mind's vision'.

For Eleanor Cook, 'It is [the] troping ability of a riddle that can transform it into poetry'.⁴⁸ She writes following the Israeli poet Dan Pagis, who has also described the riddle as 'another kind of poem', given its 'metaphoric texture'.⁴⁹ Even more evocatively, Paul de Man has described the lyric poem, a specifically small kind of poem, as 'an enigma which never stops asking for the unreachable answer to its own riddle'.⁵⁰ Such a notion of the poem as riddle is certainly evident in James's poem, reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxon riddle, for instance: the use of the first-person pronoun in these lines aligns the voice of the subject with that of the poem itself, making us consider the ways in which the poem as a carefully crafted, craftily elusive creature, might bear

⁴⁷Quoted in Higginson, 'Butterflies in Poetry', 200.

⁴⁸Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 28.

⁴⁹Dan Pagis, 'Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle', in *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*, ed. Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 98.

⁵⁰Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 186.

resemblance to the butterfly; but also how, conversely, the butterfly, here speaking for and *as* the poem, might be the metaphoric embodiment of the enigmatic poem.

This ineffability, difficult to capture and pin down by lepidopterist, writer, and reader alike, resonates with and is embodied by Dickinson's 'My Cocoon tightens – Colors tease –', whose speaker, similarly vaguely and tentatively 'feeling for the Air', has notably not yet achieved full metamorphosis, and is still left in the dark of the cocoon, so to speak. As with 'These are the Nights that Beetles love –', no straightforward answers are offered; instead, ambiguity abounds. It is rendered, for instance, by line breaks that accommodate a reading based on syntactic inversion ('The Aptitude to fly / Meadows of Majesty implies'), or one that takes the two clauses as discrete units, the latter left suitably inconclusive in its refusal or inability to determine just *what* is implied. If we approach Dickinson's lines with the hope of gleaning a conclusion from clues that have been provided, we are left equally baffling, blind as the pupa in its cocoon, ciphering and possibly making blunder by the end.⁵¹

It might therefore be more productive to approach the poems differently – as an imaginative exercise, for instance, as with its speaker's tentative 'feeling for the Air'. Given the context set by the poem's first line, such 'feeling for the Air', 'A dim capacity for Wings', evokes the physical, sensory experience of a pupa breaking from the darkness of its cocoon. It also describes the poet's imaginative exercise – as worked out in and evidenced by this resulting poem – of experiencing the world as a pupa/butterfly, of feeling for the butterfly's air, and developing its wings. Indeed, the poet's human

⁵¹For further general discussion on the riddle-like quality of Dickinson's work, see: Rebecca Patterson, *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1951); David Porter, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981); Christopher Benfey, *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); Ted Hughes (ed.), 'Introduction', *Emily Dickinson: Poems Selected by Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964; repr. 2004), xvii.

presence asserts itself in 'the Dress I wear'. Granted, Dickinson elsewhere refers to the colours of the butterfly in terms of human fashion; writing to Mary Schermerhorn in August 1861, for example, she asks if 'I shall catch her a Butterfly with a vest like a Turk'.⁵² That 'the Dress I wear' could refer metaphorically to the butterfly's patterning does not preclude a reading of the dress as being that of the human poet; this ambiguity between and entanglement of human and butterfly is possible via the poem as a space for personification, metaphor, metamorphosis.

Thus the human choice of attire may be read as an aspiration towards the style of the butterfly's wings: if 'A dim capacity for Wings / Demeans the Dress I wear', the human speaker is perhaps thus driven 'to behave, conduct or comport oneself' (*demean*, v.1, OED) in the fashion or demeanor of the butterfly. Physiologically smaller, the insect nonetheless emerges in Dickinson's depiction as superior to – 'lower[s] in condition, status, reputation or character' (*demean*, v.2, OED) – the human. This is because it represents the kind of imaginative freedom that the poem itself attempts. Marina Warner's description of a 1705 volume of entomological observations and illustrations by Maria Sibylla Merian (*Of the Metamorphoses of the Insects of Suriname*) serves productively as an imaginatively freeing mode of reading that takes its cue from its subject, the metamorphic butterfly:

[Merian's] vision of metamorphic hatching is also a vision of mutual interdependence [...]. She represents the individual specimen of the species in a mesh of relations with other life forms, some of which are its own earlier embodiments, but others are different species altogether, without which it could not grow and reach its final flowering.⁵³

⁵²Dickinson: *Letters*, II:377.

⁵³Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 82.

Warner goes on to point out that Merian's work was atypical of its time; compared to traditional emblem-book representations of the life cycle of the butterfly, Merian 'did not incline to allegory', choosing instead to engage directly with its subject.⁵⁴ In its representation of mutual interdependence and relational identification among species, Merian's butterfly serves as a kindred spirit to that which inspires Dickinson's human 'feeling for the Air', as experienced by the insect in its cocoon. If, as Warner concludes from Merian's work, 'the scandal that lies at the core of metamorphosis itself' is that 'the same spirit/soul/essence appears to occupy different forms and yet remain itself',⁵⁵ this vision of metamorphosis thus accommodates an interpretative model in which the poet (and her reader) may similarly occupy different forms, in an attempt to identify with the insect. Such a model aligns with Higginson's observation that 'The butterflies being thus silent, it is not, perhaps, strange that we do not interpret them better, but that each observer makes his own interpretation'.⁵⁶ Higginson's (and Dickinson's) butterfly, in its silence, is similarly no longer an emblem, if to be an emblem is to fit neatly within a representational framework, and to be thus made to articulate in a certain straightforward way. Instead, the Dickinsonian insect signals an experiential mode, a kind of praxis, for its dreaming and ciphering human interlocutor.

1.3 'a sort of speck piano': the humming and thrumming insect

We might therefore think about the insect in terms of the interstitial, and across different scales. Certainly, the imaginative freedom as both embodied and encouraged

⁵⁴Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, 82.

⁵⁵Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, 118.

⁵⁶Higginson, 'Butterflies in Poetry', 184.

by the insect repeatedly enables Dickinson to consider its other freedoms as relative to the human:

Could I but ride indefinite
As doth the Meadow Bee
And visit only where I liked
And No one visit me

And flirt all Day with Buttercups
And marry whom I may
And dwell a little everywhere
Or better, run away

With no Police to follow
Or chase Him if He do
Till He should jump Peninsulas
To get away from me –

I said “But just to be a Bee”
Upon a Raft of Air
And row in Nowhere all Day long
And anchor “off the Bar”

What Liberty! So Captives deem
Who tight in Dungeons are.

(661: 328-29)

The ability to ‘flirt all Day with Buttercups’ might not be the notion of freedom that first springs to mind, yet on closer scrutiny, there is more at stake in these seemingly small pleasures. As in ‘It would have starved a Gnat –’, the disruptive change in pronouns after ‘Or better, run away’ performs a shift of perspective: Dickinson’s speaker, in letting her imagination run away with the meadow bee, has also managed to run away from herself – at least for a stanza. Dickinson on the fly is, like the winged insect, in flight mode herself. Here, the bee is expressly masculine, and Dickinson’s playful, apparently inconsequential imagery is making a larger statement about the gendered nature of certain freedoms that might have been unavailable to her in Puritan nineteenth-century Amherst.

Consider also, for instance, the fact that insects are famously promiscuous: Aristotle writes in *The History of Animals* of the sexual stamina and persistence of insects, who in coitus ‘are separated from each other with difficulty, for the act of intercourse in such animals occupies a long time’.⁵⁷ For Wordsworth, offering a critique of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* to Emerson, the work is ‘full of all manner of fornication [...] like the crossing of flies in the air’.⁵⁸ Dickinson’s bee, with its ability to ‘flirt all Day with Buttercups’, and elsewhere ‘seeketh his felicity / Too often’ at the flower’s door (206: 96), here becomes an imaginative outlet for desires unable to be freely expressed in other ways. The work of metaphor enables the poet to take liberties otherwise forbidden to her.

Perhaps she is taking a cue from the flirtatious bee, too, when she jumps from one imagined position to another. For instance, if she was the bee visitor previously, she is also the flower host, coyly eluding both bee and reader:

The Flower must not blame the Bee –
That seeketh his felicity
Too often at her door –
But teach the Footman from Vevay –
Mistress is “not at home” – to say –
To people – any more!

(206: 96)

Making use of the language and imagery of the natural world, this is *her* kind of freedom: the ability to wander and wonder from flower to flower, position to position, picking up seeds for poems just as the bee collects its pollen. If any creature most exemplifies the ability to occupy multiple positions, it is the insect, whose perceived promiscuity results partly from its physical freedom and mobility, as evoked in Plautus’s

⁵⁷Aristotle, *The History of Animals*, trans. Richard Cresswell (London: George Bell & Sons, 1878), 106.

⁵⁸Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and English Traits*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2009), 337.

observation of the fly in *The Merchant* – that it ‘is everywhere, / Enters all places, sacred, or profane’⁵⁹ – as well in as the Russian proverb that ‘Flies and priests can enter any house’. Perhaps this ubiquitous quality accounts for the ease with which they are allegorically co-opted by writers; that is to say, if human beings find themselves unable to keep these little creatures away from their living spaces, perhaps this explains why they invariably turn up in their writing, too.

Belying the adventures facilitated by this imaginative freedom is the solitude that characterises the insects in the poems above: the meadow bee is solo in its wandering (‘And visit only where I liked / And No one visit me’); for the flower, it appears also to be a single, specific bee that ‘seeketh his felicity / Too often at her door’. There is something about the idea of the small, solitary insect in which Dickinson is particularly interested, or to whom she could most relate:

It would have starved a Gnat –
To live so small as I –
And yet I was a living Child –
With Food’s necessity

Upon me – like a Claw –
I could no more remove
Than I could coax a Leech away –
Or make a Dragon – move –

Nor like the Gnat – had I –
The privilege to fly
And seek a Dinner for myself –
How mightier He – than I –

Nor like Himself – the Art
Upon my Window Pane
To gad my little Being out –
And not begin – again –

(612: 301-2)

⁵⁹Plautus, *The Merchant*, in *The Comedies of Plautus*, trans. Bonnell Thornton (London: J. Lister, 1767), II.4.29-30.

Among the smallest of organisms, the one gnat is nonetheless ‘mightier’ than the human speaker in its ability to live in a larger way, with ‘The privilege to fly / And seek a Dinner’ – and, more cryptically, ‘the Art’, it is implied, ‘To gad my little Being out – / And not begin – again –’. Perhaps Dickinson was familiar with Aesop’s fable concerning the gnat and the lion, in which the former, in stinging the latter, overturns natural hierarchies within the animal kingdom. In what is considered to be the first entomological work in Europe, Italian naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi, too, takes similar notice of such minute might, describing how ‘the Lion surpasses all animals, in strength, spirit and body, but the tiniest midge in Mesopotamia subdues it’.⁶⁰ Like the ‘power of Butterfly’ in the previous poem, this might is associated with freedom, here made manifest in the physical mobility of the butterfly’s ‘Aptitude to fly’, and the gnat’s ‘privilege to fly’.

Dickinson repeatedly foregrounds notions of scale in the poetic space via her constant movement between human and insect, each shrinking or growing to identify with the other: the gnat is personified in its ability to ‘seek a Dinner for myself’, the pronoun carrying the speaker’s identification of herself in its position. In turn, she assumes the physiologically tiny viewpoint of the insect when she considers her human necessity for food ‘like a Claw / I could no more remove’ – belonging to a cat or a bird, for instance, that would pose a bigger threat to gnat than human – or when she punningly imagines herself as another, equally small, insect when she gads herself out against the windowpane. This choice of pun is particularly suggestive as a conclusion to the poem, given the aptness of the word *gad*, in both the meaning of the verb (‘to rove, stray, wander’), as well as that of the noun from which the insect etymologically derives

⁶⁰Connor, *Fly*, 80.

(‘a stick or whip used as an instrument of punishment’) (*OED*). In this final stanza, Dickinson’s pronouns, having corresponded fairly straightforwardly to self and gnat up to this point, enact the speaker’s inextricable identification with the gnat, her desperate longing for its position.

Páraic Finnerty has observed that ‘it is a testament to Tennyson’s popularity in the Dickinson household that the family library had more editions of his works than of any other poet’.⁶¹ Dickinson might have had Mariana in mind while writing this poem, considering that the latter’s refrain (‘I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!’),⁶² published just over thirty years earlier, resonates with the sentiment of the final stanza of her poem. For both Tennyson’s heroine and Dickinson, the insect serves as a model of strength despite its diminutive frame. As Dickinson again describes in a letter dating from the same year as this poem, the bee ‘made gay music with his might’, her description punningly enclosing another tiny insect within the word *might*.⁶³ If Tennyson’s ‘blue fly sung in the pane’, Dickinson’s speaker, likewise slightly blue, is singing in her pain. After all, the poet had herself admitted, to Louise and Frances Norcross, how ‘I noticed that Robert Browning had made another poem, and was astonished – till I remembered that I, myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps’.⁶⁴ Comparing herself to Browning, published and publicly read when she was not, Dickinson’s description of her own ‘smaller way’ at poetry by no means diminishes its value; again, the act of versification – the ability to sing – works as a charm, a form of might, a means ‘to Keep the Dark away’.

⁶¹Páraic Finnerty, “‘Dreamed of your meeting Tennyson in Ticknor and Fields –’: A Transatlantic Encounter with Britain’s Poet Laureate”, *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 20.1 (2011): 60.

⁶²Alfred Lord Tennyson, ‘Mariana’, in *The Works of Alfred Tennyson* (London: Macmillan, 1884), 7-8.

⁶³Dickinson, *Letters*, II:391.

⁶⁴Dickinson, *Letters*, II:436.

In the early summer of 1859, Dickinson introduced to Louisa Norcross a small creature that was not only her latest friend and housemate, but, although not a ‘blue monster’, was similarly comparable to Tennyson’s fly, in being a musician dwelling in the pane:

I enjoy much with a precious fly, during sister’s absence, not one of your blue monsters, but a timid creature, that hops from pane to pane of her white house, so very cheerfully, and hums and thrums, a sort of speck piano.⁶⁵

According to the *OED*, the word *speck* was commonly used in the nineteenth century to apply to ‘things rendered extremely small by distance or by comparison with their surroundings’. The key here is ‘by comparison’, Dickinson demonstrating, in her metaphorical association of fly and piano through the capacity of both for music-making, that there is perhaps no such thing as inherent size; humming and thrumming, the fly could be a piano as long as one views or experiences it from a certain perspective.

However, it is not only the piano that might be rendered small by comparison with its surroundings. In poems previously discussed, Dickinson’s description of the meadow bee, ‘Upon a Raft of Air’, and of the pupa’s ‘feeling for the Air – / A dim capacity for Wings’, bear the suggestion that the sound of freedom is a specific one: an air, after all, is also a piece of music, typically one ‘with suggestion of lightness or liveliness’ (*OED*). By contrast, the indoor humming of the ‘timid creature’ in her letter to Norcross is a different kind of music, one that is not as straightforwardly mellifluous or easy on the ears. In an early letter to Joseph Lyman, a close friend of the Dickinson family, the poet had related an anecdote about bumblebees, which the former transcribed:

We had a merry talk about them the other day. Austin wanted me to say what is their music. So he buzzed like one and I mocked the

⁶⁵Dickinson, *Letters*, II:353.

wee hum they make down in the calix of a holly hock. I'm sure I don't know much about bumble bees tho' I have seen them a hundred times go thump down on a buttercup head & never come out. But Father came out from the sanctity of his Sunday nap and said he was glad to see the little people enjoy themselves.⁶⁶

The 'wee hum' that a bumblebee produces 'down in the calix of a holly hock' is different from the buzzing produced by one in the open air, and Dickinson was keenly attuned to this difference. The phrasing of 'the little people' is ambiguously applicable to both the children and the bumblebees that they were mimicking; 'Father came out from the sanctity of his Sunday nap', in other words, to find Emily and Austin buzzing outdoors, enjoying themselves in their 'merry talk'.

In comparison, Dickinson's precious fly companion, in her sister's absence, 'hums and thrums', and the latter verb is particularly suggestive: to 'thrum' is 'to compress, condense' (*OED*), and while this connotation is long obsolete, there is a possibility that the poet was aware of it, given her use of the expression, 'speck piano', in the same passage. Alternatively, to 'thrum' is also 'to press or crowd in; to cram' (*OED*), a meaning with similar implications to the first: in the close quarters that they share, with its consequently forced proximity, the fly's humming is magnified. This predicament is comparable to that of the speaker in poem 612, for whom 'to live so small as I' is to focus on the comparatively larger gnat 'Upon my Window Pane', instead of looking through the glass. In both situations, being alone indoors is a predicament evoking a particular mood that might be characterised by a propensity to focus on, and thus magnify or amplify, in close range, the small and otherwise unnoticed.

⁶⁶As quoted in Richard B. Sewall, *The Lyman Letters: New Light on Emily Dickinson and Her Family* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1965), 79.

The fascination held by insect noises for human beings is well documented. Preston notes, for instance, the particular fascination held by the sound of bees for the nineteenth century, in which the ‘bee glee’ as a distinctive music genre flourished from 1811 on.⁶⁷ The music made by Dickinson’s insects is small, but particularly enduring in its smallness. We might think about it in terms of the earworm, which did not come to acquire its connotation as ‘a catchy tune, piece of music, or (occasionally) phrase which persistently stays in a person’s mind’ until late in the twentieth century, but whose modern-day connotation has its roots in the use of the word from the seventeenth century, used interchangeably with *earwig*, to refer to ‘a person who whispers insidiously in people’s ears’ (*OED*). These meanings derive etymologically from the long-standing belief about the earwig’s tendency to crawl into the human ear. This is an unfounded belief, but one that has nonetheless survived because of the plausibility of the predicament, given the diminutive form of the insect.

What is arguably the most well known of all of Dickinson’s insects is a tiny bluebottle fly that, like the modern earworm, persists in making itself heard during a moment of great import.

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
 The Stillness in the Room
 Was like the Stillness in the Air –
 Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
 And Breaths were gathering firm
 For that last Onset – when the King
 Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
 What portion of me be
 Assignable – and then it was
 There interposed a Fly –

⁶⁷Preston, *Bee*, 110.

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
 Between the light – and me –
 And then the Windows failed – and then
 I could not see to see –

(465: 223)

The specific noise generated by this fly is a ‘buzz’: the ambient background sound of ‘busy talk, “hum”’ (OED) that is simultaneously ‘a condition of busy activity, stir, ferment’ (OED), and that thus remains resolutely at the fore of any situation. It is befitting of a creature that is sufficiently small to be easily ignorable, and yet whose presence nonetheless cannot be denied. The music that Dickinson’s poetry makes is not altogether straightforwardly mellifluous, either, but composed with the ‘uncertain stumbling Buzz –’ of half-rhymes (‘Room’/‘Storm’, ‘firm’/‘Room’, ‘be’/‘Fly’), and thus made all the more complex and piercing for it.

The presence of a fly at the moment of death is not a surprising notion, given the penchant of flies for decaying matter. Their short life span and the ease with which they may be swatted down are likewise factors for their allegoric use as a reminder of our own mortality: Gloucester in *King Lear*, for example, observes how ‘As flies to wanton boys are we to th’gods / They kill us for their sport’.⁶⁸ Yet flies might also be thought of as the bridge between life and death, death and life, in the ways in which they facilitate the process of organic decay and regeneration. Preston cites a reading of the bee and other insects as having been excluded from Noah’s Ark, and attributes this to their association with corruption and decay, a relation forged by early Greek writers who observed that insects were born from rotting matter.⁶⁹ This is an observation similarly present in

⁶⁸Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare*, IV.1.37-38.

⁶⁹Preston, *Bee*, 92.

Samson's discovery, in the Book of Judges, when 'he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion: and, behold, there was a swarm of bees and honey' (14.8).

Dickinson's fly certainly seems to feed into such a tradition, occupying (or even embodying) the liminal position between life and death, 'interposed' 'Between the light - and me -'. The poem takes its cue from this disintegrative role of the fly, breaking everything down into ever-smaller components, and considering interstitial parts such as 'the Stillness in the Air - / Between the Heaves of Storm': the bystanders present are simply 'Eyes' and 'Breaths'; and the speaker considers 'What portion of me be / Assignable', before stumbling towards the simultaneously minute precision and hazy indeterminacy of what it might mean to 'see to see'. To 's[i]ng off charnel steps', then, may be interpreted not only as singing in order to keep the dark away, but also to sing on (the subject of) death. Just as this phrase is thus ambiguous, the fly appears during a moment of expectation for 'that last Onset - when the King / Be witnessed - in the Room', prompting a similarly equivocal juxtaposition between a powerful ruler and a common household pest that is not unlike that which surfaces at the end of poem 612:

Nor like Himself - the Art
Upon my Window Pane
To gad my little Being out -
And not begin - again -

Etymologically deriving as a variant of *God*, the poet's choice of the word *gad* is significant, particularly in close proximity with the evocative mention of 'my little Being'. Insects embody the interstitial in Dickinson's poetry, enabling her speakers to imaginatively occupy multiple positions, and facilitating changes in size and scale; in both of these poems, there is the suggestion that the most diminutive and earthbound of creatures might hold the key to 'that last Onset', the most enduring one of all.

1.4 'My little lot': the transformative insect

After all, a substantial world is opened up when one measures by the supposed smallness of the insect. Nineteenth-century scientists such as Leo Hartley Grindon argued that there are as many degrees of size between the smallest known organism and the common housefly, as there are between the latter and the largest known organism.⁷⁰ Closely tied up with the notion of perspective is therefore that of context and expectation. At first glance, Dickinson's bee repeatedly appears to be the envied being who most values the seemingly smallest and simplest of pleasures, its creature comforts apparently unperturbed by larger considerations:

The Pedigree of Honey
Does not concern the Bee –
A Clover, any time, to him,
Is Aristocracy –

(1627: 669)

Over and over again in her oeuvre, its concerns initially appear resolutely small:

Auto da Fe – and Judgment –
Are nothing to the Bee –
His separation from His Rose –
To Him – sums Misery –

(620: 306)

And yet, most significantly, if of greater import to it than the grave and very public penalty of auto-da-fé is its private day-to-day work of pollination, this work is nonetheless the literal stuff of life and death; after all, entire ecosystems are dependent on the work of bees. Dickinson's work demonstrates an awareness of this role played by insects in transmission, mediation, and enabling larger cycles of growth; in other words, the substantial consequences of what might initially appear to be inconsequential:

⁷⁰Leo Hartley Grindon, *The Little Things of Nature Considered Especially in Relation to the Divine Benevolence*, 2nd ed. (Boston: T.H. Carter and Son, 1866), 81.

I keep your lock of hair as precious as gold and a great deal more
so. I often look at it when I go to my little lot of treasures...⁷¹

Such seemingly petty keepsakes are the wealths of young girls, to which Dickinson elsewhere refers when she declares 'Myself, a "Millionaire" / In little – wealths – as Girls can boast', writing to Susan Gilbert in 1862.⁷²

This is encapsulated in the pun within 'my little lot': these may be modest items, but they are all we have, our allocated portion in 'this tiny, insect life', and precisely, perhaps paradoxically, worth a lot because they remind us of just that. This principle informs poem 1374, which opens by observing how 'A Saucer holds a Cup / In sordid human Life / But in a Squirrel's estimate / A Saucer hold a Loaf', and concludes that 'Convicted – could we be / Of our Minutiae / The smallest Citizen that flies / Is heartier than we –' (591). In light of the fact that the lifespan of the average worker bee is 26-40 days, it might make more sense to the human perceptor that Dickinson's bee is more concerned with its immediate, present encounter with clover, than in considering the pedigree – the ancestry, the historical context – of honey: such little time in which to undertake such great, far-reaching work! If 'this tiny insect life' is 'the portal to another', the dashes in these poems not only trace the bee's voyage through the air, but, by open-endedly closing the poems, they also serve as portals that lead the reader into possibilities beyond the immediacy privileged by their bee protagonists.

Dickinson's continued preoccupation with insects, then, could be framed as driven by a preoccupation with the potential that they facilitate, her poems themselves serving as portals, spaces which are not self-contained but expansively gesturing towards other, bigger possibilities. They are thus suitably embodied and represented by the humble bug

⁷¹Dickinson, *Letters*, I:9.

⁷²Dickinson, *Letters*, II:400.

that mediates larger environmental processes, and that also serves as a poetic vehicle. In their otherness and their unknowable ways, insects inspire reveries, inviting the poet to look at and think about them in terms of other things; in other words, to make use of metaphor. This is, once again, a matter of perspective:

Size circumscribes – it has no room
 For petty furniture –
 The Giant tolerates no Gnat
 For Ease of Gianture –

Repudiates it, all the more –
 Because intrinsic size
 Ignores the possibility
 Of Calumnies – or Flies.

(641: 318)

If this poem suggests that the gnat, in being intolerable to the giant, somehow threatens the latter's 'Ease of Gianture', that might be because this ease is complacent and undiscerning, a fraudulent stature against which Dickinson warns. That the giant 'Repudiates it, all the more' is telling, given that to repudiate something is to 'cast off, disown (a person or thing previously claimed as one's own or associated with oneself)' (OED). In fact, as the giant might wish to permanently tether the gnat to its reputation as something insignificant and easily cast off in its smallness, it appears to be ignorant to the fact that it is only a giant in dependent contrast to the gnat. If a fly can be a piano depending on its surrounding context or the distance from which it is perceived, this poem suggests an alternative perspective: the 'intrinsic size' of this poem's 'Giant' circumscribes because it leaves no room: the larger the inhabitant, the smaller the space it leaves behind. The gnat is therefore capable of being greater than the giant because it facilitates the space of potential or possibility, just as Dickinson, sending Higginson an invitation to visit in 1866, informs him that 'You would find a minute Host but a

spacious Welcome –'.⁷³ Here, as elsewhere, Dickinson is suspicious of 'intrinsic size', believing that size is not an immutable property, but a perspective, and a relational one at that.

She frequently refers to this inverse relationship between size and space in her written correspondence. In her letters to her loved ones, there appears to never be sufficient space:

...I can say no more now as my paper is all filled up.⁷⁴

Susie, what shall I do – there is'nt room enough; not *half* enough, to hold what I was going to say. Wont [sic] you tell the man who makes sheets of paper, that I hav'nt the *slightest respect* for him!⁷⁵

But my paper is getting low, and I must hasten to tell you that we are very happy to hear good news from you...⁷⁶

There's no more room tonight, Austin – much love for you – Write.⁷⁷

While she appears to lament the physical limitation of insufficient paper on which to write, she is nonetheless also aware that this is once again a question of perspective and relativity; that is, that there may never be enough paper for the enormous sentiments that she often wishes to express:

My paper *will* go away, my minutes will go with it, naughty paper – and naughty time [...] Seems to me I could write all night, Jennie, and then not say the half, nor the *half of the half* of all I have to tell you...⁷⁸

Dickinson ultimately limits herself to inscribing her lines on tiny scraps of paper such as envelope flaps. One of these, measuring a mere 11.5cm by 5cm, reads: 'In this short Life

⁷³Dickinson, *Letters*, II:450.

⁷⁴Dickinson to Abiah Root (7 May 1845), *Letters*, I:14.

⁷⁵Dickinson to Susan Gilbert (February 1852), *Letters*, I:184.

⁷⁶Dickinson to Austin Dickinson (18 March 1853), *Letters*, I:231.

⁷⁷Dickinson to Austin Dickinson (June 1854), *Letters*, I:297.

⁷⁸Dickinson to Jane Humphrey (April 1852), *Letters*, I:198; editor's italics.

/ that only [merely] lasts an hour / How much – how / little – is / within our / power'.⁷⁹ If 'Size circumscribes' by leaving little room for anything else, the tiny is inversely, infinitely promising in its suggestion of what lies beyond.

How might we then think about the spaces of Dickinson's poems in relation to insect life? Critics have repeatedly pointed out that in referring to her self-assembled packets of writing as 'fascicles', Dickinson herself used the botanical term for floral clusters. Most commonly, the flowers that appear in her poems are depicted as spaces inhabited or frequented by bees and butterflies: the bee in poem 211, upon 'Reaching late his flower, / Round her chamber hums – / Counts his nectars – / Enters' (98). In poem 994, too, 'The Rose is an Estate – In Sicily' (462), landed property for the bee. In poem 206, previously examined, the flower is also figured in terms of the architectural, possessing a door and a 'Footman from Vevay'. If we take this footman to be the bee that is mentioned in the poem's first stanza, he becomes a co-conspirator in his complicity with the flower's self-absention from 'people'. Just who are these people, though? If a fascicle is a cluster of poems, Dickinson's short, enigmatic poem, in creating this question for its reader, might be the flower itself, with its mistress absent and withholding her answers.

In imagining Dickinson as the tiny mistress of a flower, we return once again to her aspiration towards the insect, as earlier explored in poem 1099 ('My Cocoon tightens – Colors tease –'). And if that poem serves as a transformative space, where the poet/speaker is able to undertake the imaginative process of becoming a butterfly, then another means of conceiving space in Dickinson's poems might be to consider them as the tiny dwelling spaces constructed by insects themselves:

⁷⁹Dickinson, *The Gorgeous Nothings*, ed. Marta Werner and Jen Bervin (New York: Christine Burgin/New Directions, 2013), 62-63.

...if this saucy page did not here bind and fetter me, I might have
had no end.⁸⁰

Dickinson's description of her limited writing space contains a suggestion of just 'How much – how / little – is / within our / power'. This is the power of potential: the potential space left behind by a gnat, in occupying less room than a giant, as well as that of the butterfly within the cocoon, harnessing its 'Aptitude to fly'. It is also the ability of bees, in the rigid, dark cells of their hive, to perform productively intelligible dances, and to manufacture so much sweetness.

Above all, it is the potential demonstrated by insects themselves, whose self-constructed dwelling spaces, however narrow, are themselves spaces of transformation, production, and generation:

Cocoon above! Cocoon below!
Stealthy Cocoon, why hide you so
What all the world suspect?
An hour, and gay on every tree
Your secret, perched in ecstasy
Defies imprisonment!

An hour in Chrysalis to pass,
Then gay above receding grass
A Butterfly to go!
A moment to interrogate,
Then wiser than a "Surrogate,"
The Universe to know!

(129: 60)

Here, Dickinson performs her own dances. As 'Stealthy Cocoon' suggests, with its assignment of intentionality to a dwelling space that might not seem to possess it, there is life and vitality in the form of a container; Dickinson's poem, after all, is a form containing *and* enabling her dances. 'All the world' shrinks the larger entity of *everybody*

⁸⁰Dickinson to Susan Gilbert (June 1852), *Letters*, I:210.

to a population laughably smaller in its collective ignorance of the Cocoon's secrets, the quantifier 'all' assisting in this process of diminution. Against the prolonged suspense of what is suspected but never ascertained, the butterfly's mere moment of interrogation conversely leads to the guaranteed certitude of a full Universe. The abundance of vocabulary relating to knowledge (*suspect, interrogate, wiser, know*) in these lines again associates the insect with a mode of imaginative or epistemological enquiry.

What this poem suggests, when considered alongside Dickinson's description, elsewhere, of the worm as 'A "Savant"' (70: 36), is that in this practice of enigma – of leaving things, for the most part, unsaid – she takes her cue from the insects encountered in her garden, inviting readers to take their cue from the butterfly in interrogating, instead of merely suspecting. For, what the butterfly recognises, or at least what Dickinson attributes to it as recognising, is that it is precisely this 'hour in Chrysalis', the experience of being bound and fettered by the saucy page in the present, that also presents the promise of what lies just beyond, and that which words can only begin to indicate:

I found a little moth in my stores the other day – a very subtle
moth that had in ways and manners to me and mine unknown [...] it
taught me dear Abiah to have no treasure here, or rather it tried
to tell me in it's [sic] little mothy way of another enduring treasure,
the robber cannot steal which, nor time waste away.⁸¹

These words carry echoes of certain scriptural passages: Matthew 6.19 warns, for instance, to 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt'. The Book of Isaiah describes the fate of those who condemn as being that 'they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up' (50.9), and again: 'the moth shall eat them up like a garment' (51.8). In the Book of Job, this analogy is also

⁸¹Dickinson, *Letters*, I:130.

used in the description of ‘a rotten thing, consumeth, as a garment that is moth eaten’ (13.28). Just as the biblical moth is repeatedly associated with destruction and the impermanence of earthly possessions, Dickinson’s moth unmistakably ‘taught me [...] to have no treasure here’ – that much is certain. When the poet presses it for answers regarding ‘another enduring treasure’, however, its ‘ways and manners to me and mine unknown’ return to the forefront as it vaguely ‘tried to tell me in it’s little mothy way’; the moth is ultimately non-conscious, unable to make any guarantees of salvation.

Dickinson openly acknowledges here that the answers are ‘unknown’ to her, just as Hitchcock admits that the curiousness of insect metamorphosis, if emblematic of religious resurrection, can only ever be an imperfect, limited argument in direct proof of the doctrine. The nineteenth-century historian and naturalist Jules Michelet, too, writes of the pupating insect: ‘The legs will not again be the legs ... The head will not be the head’. It is ‘a thing to confound and almost to terrify the imagination’⁸² – perhaps because of its inexplicability and its potential implications for human bodies. These implications would certainly have loomed large during the time at which Dickinson was writing, when Paley’s 1802 argument from design came up against Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859). As the moth fails to explain its treasure to her in its ‘little mothy way’, however, Dickinson’s writing represents and demonstrates her own attempt, in the face of this terror and this awe, to view things from an other, insect perspective. As such, although a sense of the ultimate unknown nonetheless repeatedly presents itself in her enigmatic, cocoon-like poems, their awareness of precisely these other perspectives suggests that perhaps there *are* no answers that ultimately fit or satisfy all.

⁸²Jules Michelet, *The Insect*, trans. W. H. Davenport Adams (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1883), 111-12.

For Hitchcock, insects ‘show us in what widely different states the same animal may exist, and what *curious* means nature has provided, by which they may pass from one of those states into another’. It is as if Dickinson, in articulating the insect in the tightly wound cocoons and intricately woven webs of her own concise, compact poems, strives to experience or inhabit the same capacious potential for different states and ways of being. For her, then, the insect inspires the process of looking, and reminds us that, while our only guarantee is that of contingency and relativity, there is value in the very practice of even asking the questions at all, be we poet or reader; in other words, in knocking, as the bee does, at the flower’s door.

In *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson observes how the treatment of bees in both Shakespeare (in *Henry V*) and Virgil ‘pokes fun at bees and their pretensions to humanity, and so, with a sad and tender generosity, elevates both parties in the mind of the reader by making a comparison between them’.⁸³ Dickinson does not poke fun at bees, or at any insect at all, although they are certainly characterised playfully in her work. There is a similar sense of elevation as that described by Empson, however, in the meticulous attention that she devotes to these citizens of the ‘minor Nation’. If she is herself alternately flower and bee, the way she looks at insects in turn offers us an understanding of the way she, or her work, looks, and a means by which we might begin to look at it.

⁸³William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930; repr. 1949), 112.

2 Apprehending Marianne Moore

Marianne Moore opens her *Harper's Bazaar* article in April 1962 with an account of her desire 'to try a two-syllable-line, two-line-stanza piece about a crow – My crow / Pluto // the true Plato // adagio'.¹ Although this minute ode is eventually subsumed into Moore's larger prose piece, its epigrammatic lines encapsulate the spirit of Pluto, who is subsequently described as being 'fanatically interested in detail'.² Of course, Pluto's own name is only the detail of a single vowel away from another, more famous philosopher. The understated, ironic humour in the anti-Platonic joke about a crow being the 'true' Plato is characteristic of Moore, as is its deeper, more ambiguous implication that a creature as quotidian, small, or unexpected as a crow might embody notions of truth or the ideal. Additionally worth noting is the relationship between smallness (as of the crow, and the poem itself) and slowness, as embodied in the word *adagio* ('in slow time'), serving both as adjective-modifier for Pluto, and as directive to the reader not simply to hasten over these brief lines. Ideas of scale shape the relationship between the small and the big, the part and the whole; all of these inform Moore's diminutive stanza, from its subject matter to its eventual development into a longer work.

While describing the individual quirks and habits of an enigmatic and intelligent creature, the *Harper's* article also provides us with an account of its author. When Moore describes Pluto's 'eye for too much – cheese, grapes, nectarines, "party rolls," Fritos, and gadgets for the house',³ she might as well be describing her own inclination

¹Marianne Moore, 'My Crow, Pluto – A Fantasy', in *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, ed. Patricia C. Willis (New York: Viking, 1986), 556.

²Moore, 'My Crow, Pluto', 557.

³Moore, 'My Crow, Pluto', 557.

towards accumulating and assembling. A consideration of the relationship of the small and big, the part and whole, in Moore's work therefore needs to consider the poet's own eye for too much, and how her interest in galleries and her own practice of collecting objects might underpin her writing process, and illuminate certain characteristics of her poetry. In Moore's techniques of amassment and juxtaposition, larger wholes are assembled or synthesised out of minute parts, while drawing attention to these parts, often comprising the small and otherwise overlooked. She thus described her poem 'Marriage' as being 'a little anthology of statements that took my fancy – phrasings that I liked'; more generally, she also said that 'my writing is, if not a cabinet of fossils, a kind of collection of flies in amber'.⁴

Elsewhere, Moore observes that 'However expressive the content of an anthology, one notes that a yet more distinct unity is afforded in the unintentional portrait given, of the mind which brought the assembled integers together'.⁵ The aim of this chapter is to explore the mind behind her little anthologies; more specifically, I want to demonstrate and account for the tension, in Moore's oeuvre, between the part and the whole, the metaphorically anthologised and the anthology. A succinct way of framing this tension is by thinking about it in terms of the smallness of the apprehended, in both senses of the word: that which might potentially be enlarged by being understood; that, conversely, which might be subjugated or compromised in being seized or grasped.

At this point, it is worth noting, in a brief digression, that we might be tempted to group Moore with the Imagists, whose 'rules' of 'Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective', and whose instruction 'To use absolutely no word that

⁴Moore, 'Foreword to A Marianne Moore Reader', in *Complete Prose*, 551.

⁵Moore, *The Dial* 82 (May 1927), in *Complete Prose*, 183.

did not contribute to the presentation”⁶ point towards the same qualities of clarity and compactness. Certainly, Moore was aware of the work of the Imagists: she had not only encountered *Des Imagistes: An Anthology*, but had also cut out and saved in her scrapbook a review of the volume, that ‘points to precision as a watchword for Imagism’.⁷ Precision was also a quality that she valued and strove for in her own poetry: as she praised it in a lecture, ‘Precision is both impact and exactitude’.⁸ Nonetheless, she explicitly did not consider herself an Imagist, calling herself ‘an outsider so far as Imagism is concerned’,⁹ and writing in a letter to Pound that ‘The resemblance of my progress to your beginnings is an accident so far as I can see’.¹⁰ I think that it is important to distinguish between Moore and the Imagists, if only so to resist an inclination to read her work through the single and limiting lens of a contemporaneous movement. Instead of demonstrating how Moore’s interest in the small was thoroughly Modernist, I am more interested in investigating a particular framework of smallness that was Moore’s alone, and that scaffolds not only her work but also her thinking.

In the first two parts of this chapter, I think about the framework of organisation and arrangement that underpins Moore’s early work. This framework is observable across various scales, from that of the individual poem to that of the collection. Drawing upon unpublished archival material such as Moore’s family newspaper, as well as her numerous notebooks, I explore the way in which this material evidences the particular shape of her compositional process as is likewise observable in the published

⁶F. S. Flint and Ezra Pound, ‘Imagisme’ (1913), in *Imagist Poetry*, ed. Peter Jones (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 129.

⁷Linda Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), 131.

⁸Moore, *Complete Prose*, 396.

⁹Moore, quoted in Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down*, 133.

¹⁰Moore, *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, ed. Bonnie Costello, Celeste Goodridge and Cristanne Miller (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 122.

work. Across these scales, the arrangement of parts towards a whole was not only deliberately and thoughtfully considered, but was also instrumental to the way in which she worked. This is further supported by her preference for miscellaneous, list- or catalogue-like forms, such as the commonplace book and the index.

In the final part of the chapter, I consider the tensions that arise from such a framework; for example, the latent risk of appropriation or dominion within the poet's own description of 'statements that took my fancy – phrasings that I liked'. Given Moore's own interest in the animal world, such a statement needs to be considered in light of the power dynamics of conquest, the relationship of 'that which is great because something else is small'.¹¹ This leads to the question of what the poet's framework of part and whole says about her, and what larger stakes there might be in her poetry, characterisable as a collection in its amassed arrangements of minutiae. Over the course of the chapter, the contradiction within 'little anthology' as a phrase speaks to a pertinent governing tension within Moore's particular navigation of issues of size and scale. The poems that arise from and address this tension are simultaneously small in a big way, and big in a small way, making up a whole that admits possibilities far larger than the sum of its parts.

¹¹ Moore, 'When I Buy Pictures', in *New Collected Poems*, ed. Heather Cass White (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 51. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references to poems will be drawn from this volume, with page numbers cited in in-text parentheses.

2.1 The standard and the scale

In the 1910s, Moore created *The File*, a newsletter that included a subsidiary newspaper called *The Daily Scale* (see Fig. 2.1), containing various items of interest and inside jokes within the family.



Figure 2.1 *The Daily Scale*¹²

Moore and her family members went by creaturely aliases amongst themselves; as has been noted by Bonnie Costello, these nicknames stemmed from ‘a variety of sources, including Roman history, children’s books, and family outings or playful responses to daily events at home’.¹³ *The Daily Scale*, containing anecdotes from equally diverse sources, is an aptly-named, scaled-down compendium of the human world.

¹²Moore, ‘The File’, X:07:03, The Marianne Moore Papers, The Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum & Library.

¹³Costello, ‘Introduction’, *Selected Letters*, 4.

In the Moore archive, the pages of *The Daily Scale* occupy a single folder, and comprise an assemblage of typewritten text and clippings from other texts (news items, advertisements), alongside illustrations. This newspaper is largely the work of the poet and her mother Mary Warner, as is apparent from the various comments that they make to each other within the pages: for instance, in the right-hand column in Fig. 2.2, the editor's parenthetical aside – '(It depends on what you want to say, Mouse)' – in a response to an inquisitive Field-Mouse, reads like something Moore would remark to Mary, seeing as 'Mouse' was one of the latter's family nicknames. *The Daily Scale* has attracted relatively little critical attention in comparison to the rest of Moore's oeuvre; Bartholomew Brinkman devotes a section to it in *Poetic Modernism in the Culture of Mass Print*, but he includes it as an instance of a larger observation about the material interest held by newspapers for the modernists.

Yet *The Daily Scale* tellingly reveals Moore's early fascination with notions of scale, which made itself manifest in the juxtaposition of the childlike realm of domestic jokes and play, against that of the grown-up, public newspaper, delivering current affairs and news on a global level. Such a juxtaposition of playful content and serious form gives rise to the twin responses of laughter and wonder in the reader in a manner comparable to the two-pronged effect of a mock-heroic procedure. As Claude Rawson observes of what he calls 'the first mock-heroic moment', this style,

though seemingly designed to deflate, was protective of the older epics, and, by retaining and even absorbing some of the primary majesties it was travestying, actually aspired in its way to emulating them, achieving through parody the status of what Dryden called 'Heroique Poetry it self'.¹⁴

¹⁴Claude Rawson, 'Mock-heroic and English poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, ed. Catherine Bates (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 167.

Just as Rawson notes that the mock-heroic style was ‘seemingly designed to deflate’, the Moores’ juxtaposition of serious form and trivial subject matter, and playful expansion upon originally serious headlines, highlight what is funny in actual, existing headlines, deflating their self-considered seriousness. Rawson’s careful qualifier of ‘seemingly’, however, is not to be neglected either. The sheer attentiveness with which this knowingly humorous household newspaper is crafted, helps to elevate this new content: these sheets, full of the serious, grown-up news of adult humans, contain bite-sized puns that have been cut out with such care that a different, unique seriousness is conferred upon this world of joyful, childish play.

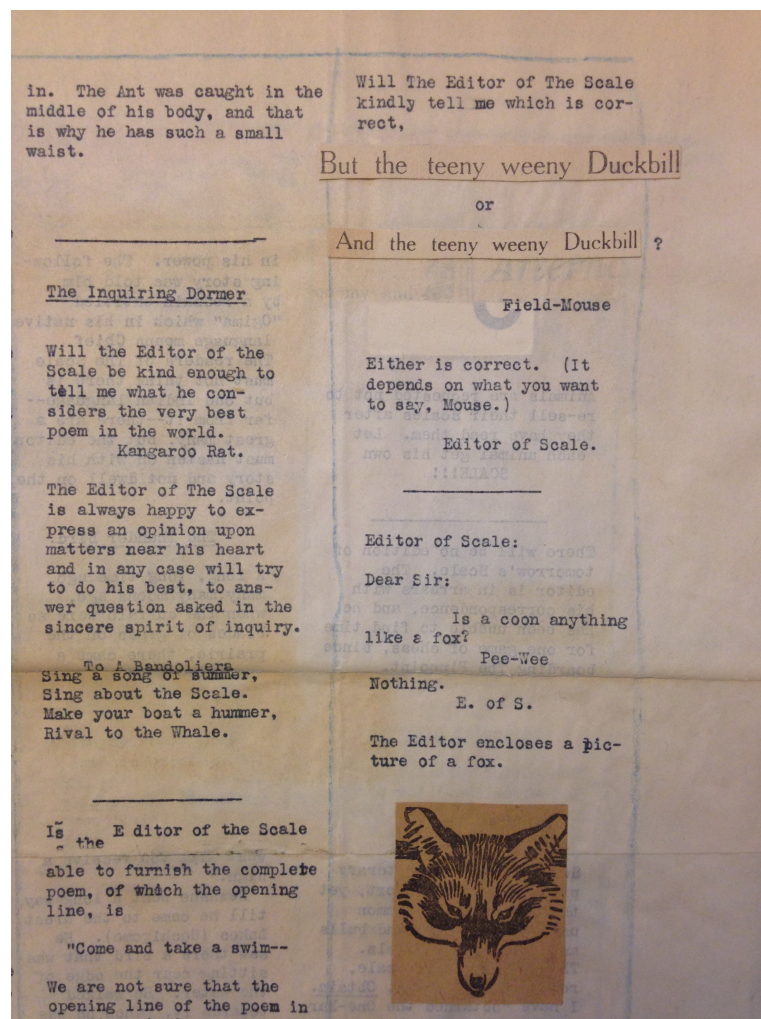


Figure 2.2 Questions to the Editor of *The Scale*

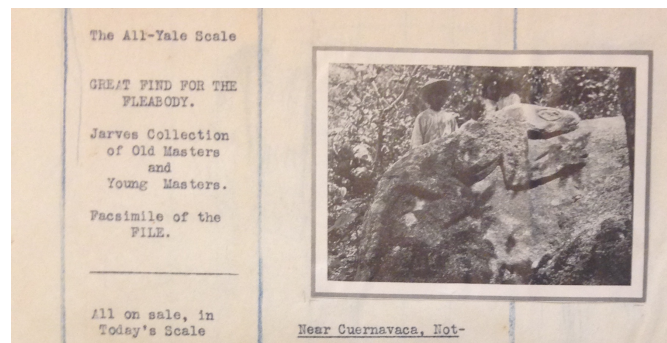


Figure 2.3 'Great find for the Fleabody'

Consequently, the reader is made to notice the comprehensiveness of this little world, for which Moore has thought of everything, from questions that a kangaroo rat or field mouse might ask (see Fig. 2.2), to the existence of the Fleabody Museum (see Fig. 2.3), an imaginatively-named, even smaller version of the existing Peabody Museum at Yale University, an archaeological and ethnological institution whose already diminutive name serves as Moore's source of playful inspiration.

As can additionally be seen in Fig. 2.2, the inquiries section of the newspaper opens with a question to the Editor regarding 'what he considers the very best poem in the world', to which the response is the following verse, almost certainly composed by Moore herself:

To A Bandoliera

Sing a song of summer,
Sing about the Scale.
Make your boat a hummer,
Rival to the Whale.

Brinkman rightly points out that 'The poem appears to be a trifle – quickly dashed off.

As the Editor considers it to be the very best poem in the world, however, far be it from

me to discount it too quickly'.¹⁵ For Brinkman, the word 'Scale' in the poem is a means of advertisement for the newspaper, while simultaneously drawing attention to the musical connotations of the word. He also identifies the pun within 'hummer', the poet not only inviting her reader to make her boat hum, but also to make it 'a thing of extraordinary excellence' (*OED*), as in its use in popular American slang of the time. Thus, 'In being a well-made thing, [...] it collapses physical scale and [...] becomes a rival to the whale'.¹⁶

Brinkman then calls the boat in the poem 'a small thing, like the poem or a hummingbird'.¹⁷ However, I would venture even further: the boat is simultaneously the poem *and* the singing hummingbird. If the poem is not what we might expect to be a contender for the superlative title of 'the very best poem in the world', this is because it 'appears to be a trifle – quickly dashed off', or because it resembles a singsong children's rhyme ('Sing a Song of Sixpence' comes to mind). And yet it opens up all manner of surprises in the form of tightly-crafted double meanings: itself a metrically regular song, it is a hummer for all ages, the use of the word *hummer* markedly tying the colloquial, 'low' register of slang with the word's own connotation of utmost excellence. While whales do not have scales, they famously have a communication system of song, involving its own unique musical scale. The titular 'bandoliera', which one assumes is a female composite of the bandolier (a shoulder-belt supporting a soldier's musket), the bandolero (a robber, a highwayman), and possibly even the gondolier, is thus aptly not only stealthily armed to get away with all sorts of crime, but also smoothly capable of steering a vessel.

¹⁵Bartholomew Brinkman, *Poetic Modernism in the Culture of Mass Print* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 131.

¹⁶Brinkman, *Poetic Modernism*, 131.

¹⁷Brinkman, *Poetic Modernism*, 131.

The ‘Editor of Scale’, having drawn our attention to this diminutive poem with her superlative praise of it, has therefore taught us to likewise edit the scales; that is, to adjust the perspective with which we view or assess something, such that various, larger connotations may be teased out of a four-line verse, a simple pun, or a slang-word. If we had been expecting a lengthier, more epic composition for the title of ‘very best poem in the world’, we ought perhaps to consider other, seemingly smaller possibilities as well. As was emphasised with three exclamation points in the editorial note (see Fig. 2.4) featured within a particular issue of *The Daily Scale*, scales are a personal, subjective matter: ‘Animals are requested not to re-sell their Scales after they have read them. Let each animal get his own SCALE!!!’.

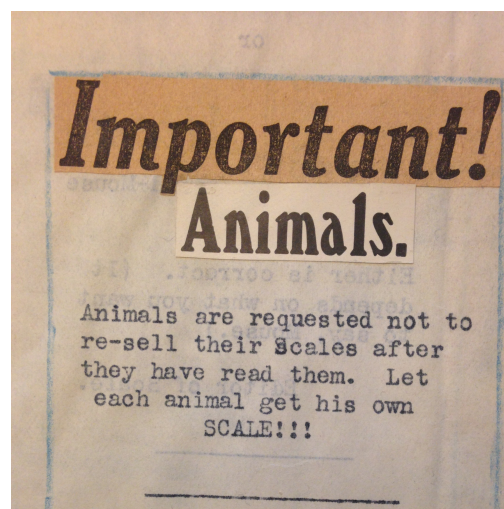


Figure 2.4 Editorial note, *The Daily Scale*

In her later writing, Moore described the world around her in a way that similarly drew upon the idea of individual scale as it relates to perspective. Precise in her observations, she detailed in letters to Bryher such sights as ‘a tree-toad about the size of a cherry-stone’,¹⁸ ‘butterflies [...] the size of bats’, and ‘mocking-bird fledgelings’ who are ‘mouse

¹⁸Moore (3 October 1932), *Selected Letters*, 279.

gray' and 'might hop up into a pussy-willow tree, about a cat's height from the ground'.¹⁹

This form of description made its way into the poetry as well: in 'The Fish', for instance, mussel shells are 'crow-blue', and 'the stars, / pink / rice grains, ink / bespattered jelly-fish, crabs like / green / lilies and submarine / toadstools, slide each on the other' (39).

Repeatedly, her means of taking measure of natural phenomena was to read one organism in the terms of another, scaling up or down accordingly.

This way of sizing up the world resists that which was recommended or even prescribed by the front matter of copies of *The Standard Diary* manufactured by The Standard Diary Co., which Moore repurposed into reading notebooks.

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES.

MEASURE OF LENGTH.

4	In. = 1 Hand.	3	Feet = 1 Yard.
7-92	In. = 1 Link.	5 1/2	Yds. = 1 Rod or Pole
18	In. = 1 Cubit.	40	Poles = 1 Furlong
12	In. = 1 Foot.	8	Fur. = 1 Mile.
6	Ft. = 1 Fathom.	62-1/2	Miles = 1 Degree.
	60 Geographical Miles = 1 Degree.		
	1760 Yards = 1 Mile.		
	5280 Feet = 1 Mile.		

MEASURE OF SURFACE.

144	Square Inches = 1 Square Foot.
9	Square Feet = 1 Square Yard.
30 1/4	Square Yards = 1 Sq. Rod, Perch or Pole
40	Square Rods = 1 Square Rod.
4	Square Rods = 1 Acre.
	Gunter's Chain = 22 Yards or 100 Links.
10	Square Chains = 1 Acre.
640	Acres = 1 Square Mile.
272 1/2	Square Feet = 1 Square Rod.
43,560	Square Feet = 1 Acre.

MEASURE OF SOLIDITY.

1728	Cubic Inches = 1 Cubic Foot.
27	Cubic Feet = 1 Cubic Yard.

AVOIRDUPOIS WEIGHT.

27 1/4	Grains = 1 Drachm (dr.) or 27 1/4 Grains
16	Drachms = 1 Ounce (oz.) or 437 1/2 "
16	Ounces = 1 Pound (lb.) or 7000 "
28	Pounds = 1 Quarter (qr.).
4	Quarters = 1 Hundred-Weight (cwt.)
20	Cwts. = 1 Ton.
2240	Pounds = 1 Ton.

TROY WEIGHT.

24	Grains = 1 Pennyweight, or 24 Grains.
20	Pennywts = 1 Ounce, or 480 "
12	Ounces = 1 Pound, or 5760 "

APOTHECARIES' WEIGHT.

20	Grains = 1 Scruple.	8	Drachms = 1 Ounce.
3	Scruples = 1 Drachm.	12	Ounces = 1 Pound.

STANDARD TIME

In this Almanac the risings and settings of the Sun and Moon are given in local mean time, as heretofore. The Tides are given in Standard Time. Light face figures indicate A. M. time, heavy face P. M. time.

To change to STANDARD TIME add or subtract the minutes as given below, according as they are marked *plus* or *minus*.

Correction for the following Cities.

Eastern Standard. 75° Longitude.	Central Standard. 90° Longitude.
Minutes.	Minutes.
Bangor, Me. - 25	Columbus, Ohio. - 28
Augusta, Me. - 21	Detroit, Mich. - 28
Portland, Me. - 19	Toledo, Ohio. - 26
Boston, Mass. - 16	Dayton, Ohio. - 23
Newport, R. I. - 15	Cincinnati, Ohio. - 22
Providence, R. I. - 14	Louisville, Ky. - 18
Concord, N. H. - 14	Indianapolis, Ind. - 16
New London, Conn. - 11	Chicago, Ill. - 10
Springfield, Mass. - 10	Milwaukee, Wis. - 8
Montpelier, Vt. - 10	Springfield, Ill. - 2
Hartford, Conn. - 6	Memphis, Tenn. 0
Montreal, P. Q. - 6	New Orleans, La. 0
Albany, N. Y. - 5	St. Louis, Mo. + 1
New York, N. Y. - 4	Rock Island, Ill. + 1
Utica, N. Y. - 4	Dubuque, Iowa. + 3
Philadelphia, Pa. - 1	Burlington, Iowa. + 5
Syracuse, N. Y. - 5	St. Paul, Minn. + 12
Baltimore, Md. - 6	Des Moines, Iowa. + 14
Washington, D. C. - 8	Kansas City, Mo. + 18
Rochester, N. Y. - 11	Galveston, Texas. + 19
Buffalo, N. Y. - 16	Omaha, Neb. + 24
Pittsburg, Pa. - 20	
Cleveland, Ohio. + 27	

Mountain Standard.

105° Longitude.	Pacific Standard. 120° Longitude.
Denver, Col. 0	Sacramento, Cal. + 6
Salt Lake City, Utah. + 25	San Francisco, Cal. + 10

Figure 2.5 Front matter of Moore's 1924 reading notebook, repurposed from a copy of *The Standard Diary* (1923)²⁰

¹⁹Moore (9 August 1934), *Selected Letters*, 252.

²⁰Moore, *Reading notebooks 1924-1930*, VII:02:01, *The Marianne Moore Papers*, The Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum & Library.

This front matter includes practical information such as antidotes for poisons, weather information, and advice for procedures following a comprehensive range of accidents. Most relevantly, the ‘Weights and Measures’ tables provide unit conversions for quantities of length, surface, solidity, and various forms of weight (see Fig. 2.5); these measurements, conforming to each standard, ‘authorized exemplar of a unit of measure’ (OED), constitute the material for a suitably Standard diary that has evidently made judgments regarding what kind of information its user might require in their daily life. Moore’s non-standard, personalised use of these diaries, however, resonates with her equally non-standard units of measurement for her own quotidian encounters. Going by a daily scale as opposed to a universal standard was another way of subjectively measuring phenomena in personally familiar terms: a pussy-willow tree the height of a cat, a cherry stone-sized tree-toad. Her play on standards of measurement has a similar effect to her juxtaposition of serious form and playful register in *The Daily Scale*; in both, what results is a renewed encounter with both parts of the comparison being made. Each part is enlarged for the perceiver in the vocabulary newly available to us in our perceiving – the size of the tree-toad, newly perceivable in terms of the cherry stone; the height of the pussy-willow tree, in those of a cat.

We might think about the enlarging effect of this attentiveness in terms of another sense of *scale*, that of ‘a succession or series of steps or degrees’ (OED). This effect is present in Moore’s observation to Bishop that ‘It may be a mistake to pore over minutiae as I do, but it makes such work as the carved capitals on the cards of the Madeleine, an active growing poem’.²¹ The perception of mussel shells as being ‘crow-blue’, requiring the perceiver to zoom in on the black of the crow in order to discern

²¹Moore, letter to Bishop (late August, 1937). From ‘Bishop correspondence’, V:04:31, The Marianne Moore Papers, The Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum & Library.

shades of blue within, similarly reveals an increasing spectrum of subtleties via magnification. If Moore was adamant that every animal get its own Scale, these descriptions suggest that it is possible to think about this principle as a declaration that every animal is its own scale. This possibility is foregrounded in 'To a Strategist':

You brilliant Jew,
You bright particular chameleon, you
Regild a shabby fence.

They understood
Your stripes and parti-colored mind, who could
Begrudge you prominence

And call you cold!
But when has prejudice been glad to hold
A lizard in its hand –

A subtle thing?
To sense fed on a fine imagining,
Sound sense is contraband.

(12)

The final sentence here, in its neat, aphoristic way, serves as a sort of strategic blueprint or legend by which we might read this poem. On the one hand, Moore sets up a distinction between 'sense fed on a fine imagining' and 'Sound sense'; or, as is perhaps implied, imagination and creative individuality as opposed to the rational soundness that is contraband, illegal, and frowned upon, aligned as it is with the undefined, collective 'them'. On the other hand, the sneakily smuggled, contraband pun within 'Sound sense' additionally gestures towards the poem's own syllabic composition, the sense of its sound, the carefully measured stanzas with their fixed 4-10-6 syllable count. The sound sense of the poem does not end with its syllable count and end-rhymes; instead, Moore's playfully equivocal choice of certain words opens up alternative, contraband ways of considering the poem: 'brilliant', 'bright', and 'prominence' are all

words suggesting the quality of shine; they sit reflectively alongside 'Regild'. On top of this, they also serve as evaluative adjectives connoting cleverness and eminence. 'To sense fed on a fine imagining / Sound sense is contraband': it is all about the fine, hidden details for this 'bright particular chameleon', the echo of 'particular' within 'parti-colored' pointing out that the more we slow down to take in the subtleties of this poem, the more things split into finer distinctions. Taking on the parti-coloured ability to notice words cleaving into their literal and metaphorical connotations, the poet's eye is nonetheless conscious of the brilliant cumulative effect of these parts. In its original appearance in *The Lantern* in spring 1915, this poem was originally titled 'To Disraeli on Conservatism', and was thus intended as political comment; however, Moore's change of title for its appearance in *Observations* opens it up to less partisan – and more particoloured – interpretations. The 'strategist' in its title may therefore now serve not only as an epithet of the poem's original subject, but also as a description of the poet's own technique.

In 'An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle In The Shape of A Fish', 'that / Spectacular and nimble animal the fish' is both scaled and a 'spectrum'; the proximity of these terms here is again indicative of Moore's interest in both the effect of the spectrum or the scale as a whole, and of its composition as a scaled series:

Here we have thirst
 And patience from the first,
 And art, as in a wave held up for us to see
 In its essential perpendicularity;

Not brittle but
 Intense – the spectrum, that
 Spectacular and nimble animal the fish,
 Whose scales turn aside the sun's sword with their polish.

Moore loved visiting museums, particularly the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where she took notes and made detailed sketches in her notebooks. Her interest in the anthropological, artistic, and ethological is evident in this poem, in which the glittering quality of the fish's scaled surface is conflated with the artisanal workmanship of an ancient civilisation, in a piece that is as carefully crafted as its subject: just as scale is layered upon scale on the iridescent body of the fish, Moore's precise syllable counts and end rhymes fit the words of the poems tightly together. Each of the two stanzas has line lengths of four, six, twelve, and twelve syllables respectively; their final, unstressed syllables rhyme with penultimate, stressed ones ('to see'/'perpendicularity'; 'fish'/'polish'); the sentences of the poem are broken across the line breaks in accordance with this syllabic grid, rather than by clause.

If its title brings to attention the craftsmanship of 'pulled glass', the poem's self-referential opening word *Here* pulls out the 'thirst / and patience from the first' required not only to manipulate glass into intricate shapes, but also to present, out of a rigid grid of fixed syllables, the object as a layered juxtaposition of its history, environment, use, and appearance. In the poet's hands, a bottle made of glass pulled into the shape of a fish is not simply an object to be taken merely on those terms; it is a drinking vessel made to contain the water in which the fish of its shape is itself contained, the material in turn echoing both this creature and the water in their iridescence. When Moore speaks of 'art, as in a wave held up for us to see / In its essential perpendicularity', she thus captures the way in which this particular artistic object has been carefully calculated in its construction to give the organic effect of its

parts; she achieves the very same thing in recreating the object in words and ideas.²² In a poem ostensibly about a glass bottle, Moore's treatment is almost cubist in its evocation of everything proximate but the object itself, and the overall effect is significantly larger than merely the sum of its parts. It is also cognitive, requiring that we wrap our heads around these connections. We get a sense that this was the way in which her mind apprehended individual objects; it was by scaling up or down, and by seeing the scale for its ever-increasingly particoloured potential, that Moore perceived, and then reproduced in her writing, the phenomena of the world around her. Subsequently, I want to think about the way in which she then organised these phenomena.

2.2 Industrious observations

If Moore was interested in 'the unintentional portrait given, of the mind which brought the assembled integers together' in an anthology, what emerges from her poems is the portrait of a mind that thinks hard about how it assembles its integers. Certainly, this is true of any writer; for her, however, the processes of assembling, organising, and arranging were practically epistemological in their importance for her apprehension. Moreover, the poet was notably and consistently insistent that she undertook the editing and arranging of her own volumes of poetry. Following on from her early editorial work on *The Daily Scale*, she spent five years as the editor of the literary magazine *The Dial*. She also worked at the Hudson Park branch of the New York Public Library for nearly six years; in her role as an assistant librarian, she would have been familiar with the Dewey Decimal Classification system invented in the late-

²²For further discussion of Moore's artistic technique of assemblage in relation to contemporary art, see Linda Leavell, *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts: Prismatic Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

nineteenth century by Melvil Dewey, at whose Lake Placid Club she had spent a summer in 1911.²³ These were jobs requiring, among other qualities, a mind for sifting through and organising large volumes of material; given that her favoured sections of Captain John Smith's *A Description of New England* were 'the parts itemizing the edible and other fishes that are to be found in the pools on the coast',²⁴ it is easy to see why Moore might have been particularly drawn towards such jobs.

Elizabeth E. Fuller, head librarian at the Rosenbach Museum and Library where Moore's archive is located, relates the poet's own distinctive system of filing away loose handwritten notes and bits of paper that were meaningful to her. In this system, material was tucked between specific pages in specific books, in order to preserve the specific circumstances in which ideas emerged from serendipitous juxtaposition. This is a nightmare for the archivist attempting to keep a faithful, accurate record of the poet's papers; for the scholar of Moore's poetry, however, this system serves as a good analogy for thinking about her work, and about her predilection for the miscellany of lists, catalogues, and similar forms.

We might think about this predilection in terms of the chameleon, previously observed in 'To a Strategist' as being 'bright' and 'particular', with 'stripes and parti-coloured mind'. In Moore's study of this particular chameleon, what is ordinary to the undiscerning eye is elevated and enlarged by the poet's attentive vision. In fact, she saw in this creature something of herself, relating to it in an interview of 1938 when she referred to herself as 'an American chameleon on an American leaf'.²⁵ This might have

²³Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down*, 167; 103.

²⁴Moore (15 October 1920), *Selected Letters*, 134.

²⁵Moore, 'Answers to an Enquiry', *Twentieth-Century Verse*, no. 12-13 (October 1938): 114.

been in identification with Keats's description of the poet's mind, or what he terms 'the poetical Character', in a letter of 1818 when he wrote that:

it is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated [...] What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one, because they both end in speculation. A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body – The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women, who are creatures of impulse, are poetical, and have about them an unchangeable attribute; the poet has none, no identity – he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's creatures.²⁶

The sheer range of materials and environments with which Keats's 'camelion Poet' deals, and in which it dwells, certainly corresponds to Moore's diverse interests, all of which found their way into her poetry. A review by Melvin Maddocks, of Moore's 1966 collection, *Tell Me, Tell Me*, describes how her work is a 'charming disarray', with 'the topical clutter of a Victorian whatnot, overcrowded by a bric-a-brac of admirations'; Maddocks nonetheless implies that there is order to this seeming chaos when he speaks of 'her special inimitable arrangements of things'.²⁷ This knack for the arrangement of all things 'foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated' is precisely what Moore perceived and admired as the chameleon-poet's expertise. She thus wrote in a review of Man Ray that 'The selective nomenclature – the chameleon's eye if we may call it so – of the connoisseur expresses a genius for differences; analogous dissimilarities [...] exemplifying variously this art of comparison and synthesis'.²⁸

²⁶John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. H. E. Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), I:386-87.

²⁷Melvin Maddocks, *Christian Science Monitor* (17 November 1966). Accessed as a clipping in Moore, 'Scrapbook (1966-1968)', X:11:01, The Marianne Moore Papers, The Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum & Library.

²⁸Moore in *The Dial*, 82 (May 1927), in *Complete Prose*, 449-50.

Keats notes that the chameleon-poet ‘does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one, because they both end in speculation’; for the chameleon-poet, as for Moore, this speculation specifically and significantly emerges from the synthesis of the disparate and various. In other words, variety and difference are necessary for the particular creative, imaginative, and intellectual workings of the chameleon-poet. It is worth labouring this point, I think, because it accounts for, and draws attention to, the clutter of Moore’s system of filing and her method of filling notebooks as an important part of her process of apprehending and writing.

In the notebook in which she recorded conversations between 1914 and 1921, for instance, quotations from seemingly different areas of her life sit side by side. An entry dated ‘Oct. 10’ reads, without any further context: ‘You are so inattentive to anything that doesn’t stir you that it’s always a surprise to me when you notice that the rugs are clean or the windows washed?’. The entry just beneath this one, seemingly anachronistically dated to ‘Oct. 4’, then opens with the report that ‘Mr. [McAlmon?] said he had told the Dial I had said they might care for his work – and enclosed two poems I had not seen.’²⁹ In her reading notebooks, a drawing of some ancient Egyptian art as seen in Leyden Museum sits alongside a book title (*Children’s Toys of Bygone Days*); two pages later, notes on metrical feet are followed by mention of ‘The Insect Motif in Art’, as detailed in *The Scientific Monthly*, as well as a few doodles (see Figs. 2.6 and 2.7).

²⁹Moore, Conversation notebook 1914-1921, VII:10:07, The Marianne Moore Papers, The Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum & Library.

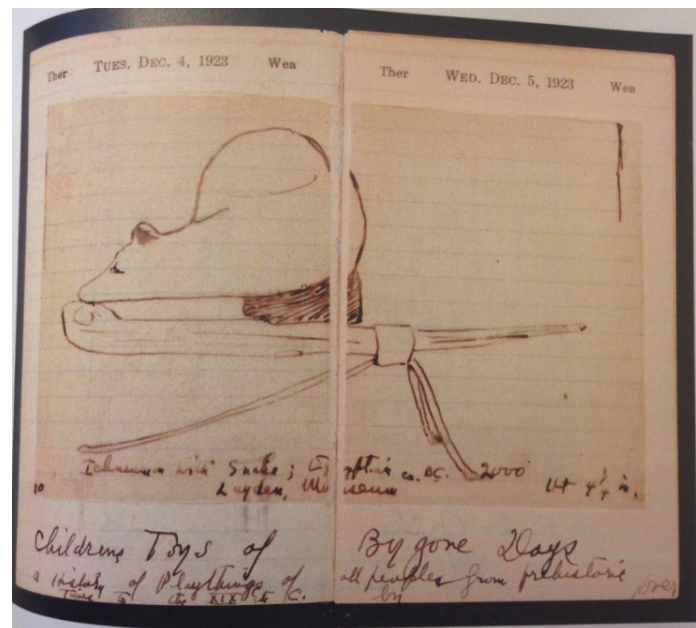


Figure 2.6 Reading notebook 1930-43³⁰

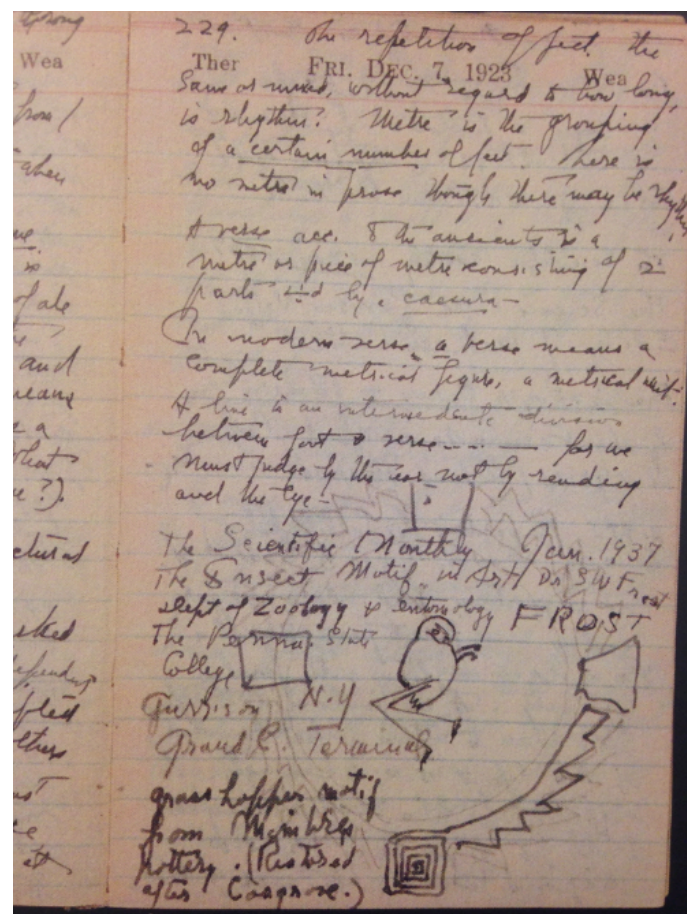


Figure 2.7 Reading notebook 1930-43, continued

³⁰Moore, Reading notebook 1930-1943, VII:02:02, The Marianne Moore Papers, The Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum & Library.

The Moore notebook fits into the definition of a commonplace book. Reading Francis Bacon's precepts for a new science in light of the natural philosopher's own practice of keeping a commonplace book, Ann Blair posits that 'what Bacon offers in a place of traditional natural philosophy is a method of commonplaces applied in principle at least to the world itself rather than to books'.³² Moore was familiar with Bacon's work, having studied his prose alongside that of other seventeenth-century writers during her senior year at Bryn Mawr; when she was later asked about literary influences, she would bring up his name.³³ A few lines in her poem 'Marriage' suggest that she might not only have been influenced by Bacon's prose style, but also that of his method of interpreting the world.

I wonder what Adam and Eve
think of it by this time,
this firegilt steel
alive with goldenness;
how bright it shows –
“of circular traditions and impostures,
committing many spoils,”
requiring all one's criminal ingenuity
to avoid!

(63)

Moore attributes the quotation to Bacon in her endnotes to the poem, but she has misquoted him. In the original context of this phrase, he had written to the Lord Treasurer Burghley about the ambition of his 'vast contemplative ends':

[...] I have taken all knowledge to be my providence; and if I could purge it of two sorts of rovers, whereof the one with frivolous disputations, confutations, and verbosities: the other with blind experiments and auricular traditions and impostures, hath committed so many spoils; I hope I should bring in industrious

³²Ann Blair, 'Humanist Methods in Natural Philosophy: The Commonplace Book', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1992): 550.

³³Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down*, 88.

observations, grounded conclusions, and profitable inventions and discoveries; the best state of that providence.³⁴

Modifying 'auricular traditions' to 'circular traditions', Moore shaped this phrase to the similarly circular wedding band ('this firegilt steel / alive with goldenness') representing marriage; she might also have transposed the contents of this letter upon those of a declaration made elsewhere by Bacon, that 'We must begin anew from the very foundations, unless we would revolve forever in a circle with mean and contemptible progress'.³⁵ In contrast to this circular, enclosed model, Bacon followed a pattern of development: 'a method of natural commonplaces derived from direct observation', to be followed by the 'thematic sorting and confrontation of material gathered topically'.³⁶ What finally occurs are 'profitable inventions and discoveries', as open-ended in their possibility as the generative 'speculation' that Keats's chameleon-poet finds in both the light and dark side of things.

Emerging out of the seeming minutiae of the passages and exchanges encountered in the daily scale of Moore's reading and conversations is a synthesis by similar confrontation and arrangement of material. Modifying and incorporating Bacon's phrase into the first sentence of a poem about marriage, Moore layers the natural philosopher's scepticism towards a certain tradition of scientific knowledge upon her own complex exploration of an institution that, 'requiring public promises / of one's intention / to fulfill a private obligation' (63), might feel comparably disingenuous. The Baconian context reverberates throughout the rest of the poem, in three references to

³⁴Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. 8, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Denon Heath (New York: Garrett, 1968), 109.

³⁵Francis Bacon, 'Aphorisms', in *The New Organon or True Directions concerning the interpretation of Nature* (1620), ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Denon Heath (Boston: Taggard and Thompson, 1863), XXXI.

³⁶Blair, 'Humanist Methods in Natural Philosophy', 550.

marriage as an experiment, as well as in a quotation drawn from La Fontaine:

“Everything to do with love is mystery; / it is more than a day’s work / to investigate this science”.³⁷ Undertaking ‘to investigate this science’ in a Baconian manner, Moore’s poem actively resists the ‘blind experiments and auricular traditions and impostures’ to which her subject, the modern institution of marriage, might fall prey. Common to both Bacon and Moore is a commonplace method that ‘easily accommodates material from non-bookish sources [...] treat[ing] each entry independently of its source, as potentially useful knowledge equivalent to every other entry’.³⁸ The quotations marshalled by Moore in her discussion in the poem therefore consist not only of the ‘intellectual found objects’ that Patricia Willis describes,³⁹ but also the mundane, such as advertisements, or a vernacular comment made by a friend in conversation (“I am such a cow”) (69). As ‘a tool for composition which opens many possibilities but requires none in particular’,⁴⁰ the exploratory freedom enabled by this method of inquiry also sums up her attempt to occupy the position of impartial, non-implicated investigator, in contrast to the predicament of ‘that experiment of Adam’s / with ways out but no way in’ (66).

If Moore had likened ‘Marriage’, a single poem, to ‘an anthology of statements’, however, what are we to make of *Observations* as a collection that has also been arranged and orchestrated by the poet? It is significant that, just as she arranged her notebooks with the use of an index, she similarly fashioned one for *Observations*, whose title similarly recalls the direct observations repeatedly championed by Bacon. *Observations*

³⁷Moore, ‘Marriage’, in *New Collected Poems*, 69; 305, Moore’s endnotes: ‘F. C. Tilney, ‘Love and Folly’, in Book XII, No. 14, *The Original Fables of La Fontaine* (Dutton)’.

³⁸Blair, ‘Humanist Methods in Natural Philosophy’, 547.

³⁹Patricia C. Willis, ‘A Modernist Epithalamium: Marianne Moore’s “Marriage”’, *Paideuma* 32, 1/3 (2003): 265-99.

⁴⁰Blair, ‘Humanist Methods in Natural Philosophy’, 547.

might therefore be seen as a commonplace book writ large; and yet, in Moore's index for the collection, there is nonetheless the sense of a resistance against, or unease about, such a large-scale reading of the collection.

James Longenbach has described how the index 'feels like the long poem in which *Observations* logically culminates – a catalogue of catalogues'.⁴¹ However, among Moore scholars, it has not generated as much discussion as it warrants. This index is remarkable, not least because it replicates the poet's organisation of her own compositional process with indexes in her reading notebooks, giving us something of a glimpse of the building blocks of the collection – its DNA. Additionally, Moore's index, as a part of the collection as a whole, serves as a small-scale representation of this whole, although – and this, for me, makes it particularly noteworthy – not in the way that a traditional index does. It therefore bears more attention.

To begin with, here is the list of entries for the letter 'A':

A.
 "accessibility to experience," 55, 301
 acetylene, 73
 acquaintances, 36
 Adam, exonerated, 64; power of, 76
 Adam and Eve, 63; in the days of, 44
 Adam's experiment, 66; grave, 51, 299
Adventures in Bolivia, 308
 AGE OF HARD TRYING, IN THIS, 24
 Ahasuerus banquet, 67, 304
 albino deer, 55, 299-300
 Allegheny, 55
 alligator, 41; eyes, 45
 alpine buckwheat, 74
 Alps, crossing the, 48; shadows of, 59
 amalgamation, 64
 American menagerie, 75; royal families, 72
 anchorites, 23
 Andrews, John, 298
 ant with stick, 32; to headquarters, 60

⁴¹James Longenbach, *How Poems Get Made* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), 128.

antelope, 73
 antlet, 79, 308
 Antarctica, 78
 ape, curing with an, 22
 APISH COUSINS, MY, 36, 298
 Apollo, 44
 art, arcanic, 36; early civilization, 44
 artichoke, 51
 artist and money, 61
 artists, fools, 68
 Asiatics, 305
 aspiration, 21, 296
 astrologer, 11
 astrology, 301
 attack and concord, 33, 298
 authors, 61, 302
 average moments, 51

(81)

As an indexer, Moore is idiosyncratic. For Edward Cook, in 'The Art of Indexing', an index 'should enable a reader, first, to find readily the place where the author has said a particular thing, and secondly, it should enable him to find all that the book has said on a particular subject'.⁴² She evidently deemed it to be important, then, that the reader be able to easily locate the specific point in the sprawling poem 'An Octopus' where she mentions 'acetylene' as an analogy for the sun's effect upon an antelope. Or, that 'alpine buckwheat' be similarly locatable within the same poem, never mind that the source of the quotation in which it features ("in winter solid white, / feeding on heather bells and alpine buckwheat"), is not itself cited in the endnotes for the poem. Other entries are perplexing in their inclusion over others. The presence of 'average moments', for instance, directs the reader towards the line 'I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average moments' in the poem 'When I Buy Pictures'. This leads us to wonder what, about 'average moments', makes it a better candidate for inclusion in

⁴²Edward T. Cook, 'The Art of Indexing', in *Literary Recreations* (London: Macmillan, 1918), 63.

the index over 'pleasure', which also appears in 'An Octopus' in the quoted, but again unattributed, line, "alive to the advantage of invigorating pleasures" (76).

In this regard, the index in *Observations* does not really serve the practical function of a traditional index that is, according to Cook, 'meant to be a pointer and to serve as a time-saving machine'.⁴³

Where, then, a book contains many mentions of a person or a subject, the indexer must analyse them and tell you not only on what page each mention will be found, but also what is the subject of the mention on each page. This is the most difficult and least mechanical part of an indexer's work. [...] It needs much time, thought, and judgment to seize the true sense of a passage, to decide what description will best facilitate reference, and then to make the entry with the concision required in an index.⁴⁴

Moore's index stands out partly because it is uncommon to encounter a book of poetry with an index beyond that of an alphabetical arrangement of first lines, serving as an alternative table of contents. Reading Cook's guidelines, it becomes apparent that this relative dearth of indexes in poetry collections might have something to do with implicit assumptions about the purpose of poetry, and how it is read. In comparison to poetry, a work of non-fiction prose, for instance, more directly serves as a point of reference regarding a specific subject, and it is this use of reference that is suggested above as being facilitated by an index. For Cook, 'the concision required in an index' will ideally encapsulate 'the true sense of a passage' that has been 'seize[d]' by the indexer who, in taking 'much time' in analysing, is consequently able to save the user from spending a similar amount of time. As a more compact part of the whole of the book, the index is thus supposed to serve as a small-scale summary of the contents of the latter.

⁴³Cook, 'The Art of Indexing', 63.

⁴⁴Cook, 'The Art of Indexing', 68.

In comparison to the time-saving concision of the index, concision in poetry, particularly in Moore's, demands that we take time. This kind of concision is both addressed and embodied in 'To A Snail':

If "compression is the first grace of style,"
 you have it. Contractility is a virtue
 as modesty is a virtue.
 It is not the acquisition of any one thing
 that is able to adorn,
 or the incidental quality that occurs
 as a concomitant of something well said,
 that we value in style,
 but the principle that is hid:
 in the absence of feet, "a method of conclusions";
 "a knowledge of principles,"
 in the curious phenomenon of your occipital horn.

(19)

Making use of short, aphoristic sayings by other people, as well as creating her own ('Contractility is a virtue / as modesty is a virtue'), Moore keeps her syntax fairly straightforward, anchoring most, if not all, of her clauses to an opening, governing noun: 'compression is the first grace of style'; 'Contractility is a virtue'; 'modesty is a virtue'; 'the acquisition of any one thing'; 'the incidental quality that occurs'; 'a concomitant of something well said'; 'the principle that is hid'; 'the absence of feet'; 'a method of conclusions'; 'a knowledge of principles'; 'the curious phenomena of your occipital horn'. A number of critics have compared Moore's syntactical compression to film editing techniques;⁴⁵ additionally, I think that it productively embodies what Moore found intriguing about the index as a form, and subsequently gives us a way of reading her own index. It is therefore worth lingering over this poem in greater detail.

⁴⁵See, for instance, Carolyn Burke, 'Getting Spliced: Modernism and Sexual Difference', *American Quarterly* 39.1 (Spring 1987): 98-121; Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Willis, 'Introduction', *Complete Prose*.

‘[T]he curious phenomena of your occipital horn’ captures something of Moore’s method in arranging these syntactically straightforward clauses in lines that are irregularly alternately short and long, retracting and extending as the creature does its horn(s) in inquiry of its surroundings. If Moore has addressed her work to a snail, her reader, on encountering these lines, begins to feel much like the curious snail herself as she tries to follow the poet’s line of reasoning. True to principle, Moore repeatedly exemplifies the virtue of contractility, leaving out the connective logical tissue between statements, and reducing the very hinge of the poem to the conditional ‘If’ of its first line; she thus simultaneously contracts the poem in the process, *and* extends a contract to the reader to forge our own connections.

It is no accident that the snail is a slow-moving creature. Demanding instead that the reader slow down and take more time, Moore’s is a breed of contractility that is aware of the expansive, eloquent power of setting down words, phrases, stanzas, and semantic units, that send the reader in search of missing contexts. In this way, it troubles the relationship between part and whole, or, at least, makes impossible any overly straightforward journey from part to whole. If we might wonder why she had included an index in *Observations*, given that it does not serve an entirely traditional purpose, its juxtaposition against a poem like ‘To A Snail’ (another part within the same collection) offers a possible answer: appearing at the end of the collection, the index invites us to approach it just as we had approached the similarly list-like poems; it thus serves as a small-scale representation of Moore’s style and process, rather than a summary of the contents of her collection.

Given her habit of depicting an organism in the terms of another, and consequently refreshing and enlarging our sense of both, this way of viewing the index enlarges our

understanding of its part in the collection, while also illuminating the poems in a new way. Just as 'To A Snail' praises the hidden scientific workings and principles that nonetheless underpin the style of its subject, then, the poem, like the index, exemplifies Moore's own 'method of conclusions' and 'knowledge of principles'. Just as the process of indexing involves 'much time, thought, and judgment to seize the true sense of a passage, to decide what description will best facilitate reference, and then to make the entry with the concision required in an index', the simple style of her straightforward, noun-driven clauses belies the amount of reading and complex theoretical material that has been synthesised in the poem.

By equating poems and index with the use of a neutral, third term, Longenbach's description of 'a catalogue of catalogues' is not only apt in describing how the poems themselves resemble the index; it evocatively suggests, additionally, that the index itself could be a poem. As a result of this juxtaposition, the index is able to display a potential of the form that is usually overlooked in its traditional employment as simply a tool, a part as a means towards a larger whole. In its juxtaposition of unexpected or incongruous items, the index facilitates connections that might not have existed otherwise. As Longenbach puts it, for instance: 'It's enticing to imagine what an antlet might have to do with Antarctica, merely because of abecedarian contiguity';⁴⁶ the alphabetically pre-determined positions of items thus creates imaginative connections. The result of topical arrangement can also yield both entertaining and thought-provoking results. 'American menagerie, 75; royal families, 72', grouping together two phrases that have been transplanted without their originally separate contexts, is therefore not only suggestive of the exotic animals historically bestowed upon royalty,

⁴⁶Longenbach, *How Poems Get Made*, 129.

and of the necessary contrivance of the idea of royal families in a country that prides itself on being a republic; it also subtly pokes fun at the spectacle of royal families. In another example, at the end of the list of entries under 'T', the lengthier entry for 'trousers, 74, 306', immediately preceding 'truths, 44', might make us re-evaluate what we had thought to be the priorities of poetry – and, by implication as readers, what we might have intended to get out of it.

These arrangements exemplify what Francis Spufford describes as the multiple interpretations encouraged by catalogues, in which 'Ironies, telling absences and delicate presences are all possible; and objects colour each other', such that 'Something expressive and strangely articulated can be discovered';⁴⁷ this is, in Moore's words, 'the principle that is hid'. And yet, if Spufford considers this to be 'an accidental concrete parody of imaginative writing',⁴⁸ there is something characteristic about Moore's particular index. It encapsulates the encyclopedic quality of her own poems, in which she arranges together phenomena such as 'The bat, upside down; the elephant pushing, / a tireless wolf under a tree, / the base-ball fan, the statistician – / "business documents and schoolbooks"', framing them as the stuff of the titular subject of 'Poetry [1925]' (363). Replicating the way in which parts are made to conjure simultaneous views, from multiple perspectives, of the titular object in 'An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish', the index entries that take us to this poem aptly do not include one for what the object actually is ('bottle'). Instead, we are to find our way to it via, variously, 'Egyptian', 'fish', 'glass', 'pulled', 'spectrum', and 'wave' (83; 84; 87; 88), underpinning the poem's own style of collage-like assemblage.

⁴⁷Francis Spufford (ed.), 'Introduction', in *The Chatto Book of Cabbages and Kings* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), 4.

⁴⁸Spufford, 'Introduction', *Cabbages and Kings*, 4.

That ‘toads, real, 27’ is literally locatable in the index is sufficiently indicative, I think, that Moore’s index yields poetry, or that which ‘can present / for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them’ (27). After all, just as the poet frequently found her poetic subjects from museums, she drew from similarly catalogue-like textual sources for poems. ‘Astrology, 301’ in the index, for instance, points us to the citation of Raphael’s *Horary Astrology* in the endnotes to ‘People’s Surroundings’. Consultation of Raphael’s text reveals that, for the poem’s final fifteen lines, Moore combined and assembled, found-poem-style, some of Raphael’s descriptions of persons, natures and places produced by the planets in the twelve signs.⁴⁹

Transplanting them into a poem explicitly about people’s surroundings, she plays with context by defamiliarising these phrases in order to make us consider them anew, while nonetheless retaining the form of Raphael’s original lists. Umberto Eco has pointed out that ‘The voraciousness of the list often prompts us to interpret practical lists as if they were poetic lists – and in effect what often distinguishes a poetic list from a practical one is only the intention with which we contemplate it’.⁵⁰ Moore’s transplanting of Raphael’s lists encourages us to contemplate them thus in the realm of poetry, and in doing so, to observe the vertiginous effect of the simultaneous presentation of the small- and large-scale, as encapsulated by the juxtaposition of contained space and wide expanse within ‘dens, deserts’, or that of the minute specificity of ‘places where engines are made’ or ‘dyers of black cloth’, against the generic sprawl of ‘castles, palaces, dining-halls, theaters and imperial audience-chambers’ (57-58).

⁴⁹See *Raphael’s Horary Astrology: By Which Every Question Relating to the Future May Be Answered*, 11th ed. (London: W. Foulsham, 1920).

⁵⁰Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists: From Homer to Joyce*, trans. Alastair McEwen (London: MacLehose Press, 2009), 374.

If 'Lists congregate in [...] works organised by a compulsion to invent boldly and in works organised by a compulsion to note minutely,'⁵¹ Moore's interest in them makes immediate sense, given her eye for sprawling minutiae; we might think of her use of the form as being bold, too, because her work makes a larger point. For Eco, a 'poetics of the list' presents 'a way of reshuffling the world' in order 'to bring out new relationships between distant things, and in any case to cast doubt on those accepted by common sense'.⁵² As memory aids and time-saving devices, the common-sense function of indexes, lists, commonplace books, and similarly miscellaneous forms is to serve a greater function, or to otherwise service their reader in some way. Moore works against these expectations, expanding the potential of these otherwise deferential forms. Her witty, idiosyncratic index, with its unexpected inclusions and exclusions, troubles the traditional part-to-whole relationship between index and main text. It also resists a particular variety of overly straightforward, complacent, and potentially lazy reading that is concerned with seizing larger absolutes such as 'the true sense of a passage', at the expense of minutiae and other precise details or nuances that might be rendered unimportant by comparison.

When Bryher suggested that she put together a book of poems in 1920, Moore's response was to decline, and then to suggest that if she were ever to compile a book of her essays and reviews, she could publish her poems as an appendix to the prose.⁵³ This suggests that, for the poet, there was something about poetry, specifically, that was related to, or that might bear some affinity with, the indexed-off. After all, this is a poet of whom it was said that 'People who knew her later in life said that in a museum she

⁵¹Spufford, 'Introduction', *Cabbages and Kings*, 5.

⁵²Eco, *The Infinity of Lists*, 251; 327.

⁵³Moore, *Selected Letters*, 133.

often showed less interest in the main exhibit than in something incidental', and whose 'enthusiasm for the peripheral' was noted.⁵⁴ There was also an apprehension in Moore about presenting her work as poetry, or at least as poetry as defined in a certain self-aggrandising way; her index entry of 'artists, fools, 68', for instance, is telling. In a letter of 1922, she mentions how:

It encourages me very much that Mary Butts, Anna Wickham and the Sitwells should admire my work. There is something to be said for their reluctance to call it poetry for sometimes I deliberately insert a prose phrase with a view to its standing as prose and I myself should not have called the collection in my book "poems", but "observations" ...⁵⁵

This apprehension or reluctance might account for the way in which she took a ruthless hand to editing and modifying her poems; most tellingly, the one titled 'Poetry' and serving as an *ars poetica*, was repeatedly revised, going from 29 lines in 1924 to just three in 1967. Heather Cass White, editor of the *New Collected Poems*, has pointed out that there are as many as four notable versions of this poem.⁵⁶ What was consistently present throughout all four versions is Moore's opening declaration that 'I, too, dislike it'; nonetheless, she repeatedly returned to it, a fact clearly attested by the presence of these multiple versions.

In the following section I will take up the question of what else might have been at stake in it for her, but one reason that emerges from these two sections is that it offered her a space for what she thought to be her 'hybrid method of composition', in which a substantial role is played by subjects and textual forms that are minor, peripheral, or otherwise overlooked.⁵⁷ We must read this method as encompassing not simply her

⁵⁴Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down*, 93.

⁵⁵Moore, *Selected Letters*, 188.

⁵⁶White, *New Collected Poems*, 363.

⁵⁷Moore, 'A Note on the Notes' (1967), in *New Collected Poems*, 295.

tendency to incorporate quotations from various sources, but, more generally, her continuous consideration of the relationship between parts and their whole, across a range of different scales: syllable count; the constituents of a metaphor; transplanted phrases; perspectives regarding a subject; components of a collection. At every scale, the effect of the poet's juxtaposition of these parts is that the whole is made greater for it; in turn, every part of this compositional process is integral for its cumulative effect of being meticulously miscellaneous. It is an extension of her working method of the commonplace book: in both, the world is apprehended through the most sundry of its parts, its 'major minutiae'.⁵⁸

2.3 Apprehension and unease

Part of what Moore disliked about poetry, or that which gave her cause for most unease, was the latent risk, tellingly described in the earliest version of 'Poetry', that 'the genuine' might 'become so derivative as to become unintelligible' (27). In the second, 1925 edition, she elaborates: 'these phenomena are pleasing, / but when they have been fashioned / into that which is unknowable, / we are not entertained' (363). As it is inherent in the contradiction within her description of 'Marriage' as a 'little anthology', the use of a framework of parts and wholes across her work also registers a constant tension within the iterations of this very framework, between the small and large, the specific and the general, the inclination to branch out (by seeking likenesses and comparisons in unlikely objects), and that to rein in so as not to lose sight of the subject in question. Just as Keats's poet-chameleon is 'every thing and nothing', Moore's identification with the chameleon acknowledges this tension, manifested in the way in

⁵⁸Moore, *Selected Letters*, 311.

which she is able to lose *and* assert herself amongst the most diverse and disparate of creatures and objects.

When Moore compares a tree-toad to a cherry stone, the result is two-fold: on the one hand, as previously discussed, our perception of the tree-toad (and the cherry stone) is enlarged by the availability of new terms by which to consider it. On the other hand, however, there is a risk of the tree-toad being subsumed within the terms of the cherry stone, its individual identity compromised in its relation to the latter. There is thus a balancing act involved in the poet's enlarging attention, which must draw our eye to its subject, without fashioning it into that which is unknowable as itself.⁵⁹ When this enlarging attentiveness involves the juxtaposition of parts in sprawling poems, moreover, they risk being drowned in a sea of detail, made small and, consequently, overlooked within this new and larger context. This risk was not lost on Moore, who was aware of the way in which shifts in perspective not only facilitated a change in scale of the subject(s) perceived, but also of the perceiver:

I often think I have such a terrific grasp of things that everything looks small – a great part of the time in fact; then accompanied by thunder and lightning I find myself such an idiot with such a worm-like point of view...⁶⁰

Just as she was cautious about universal standards that professed to account for all, she checked herself upon the realisation that her own apprehension of phenomena might similarly entail their subjugation – the process of apprehending something, after all, etymologically connotes some kind of grasping or laying hold of it, an assertion over something thus assumed to be relatively smaller.

⁵⁹Stephanie Burt has explored, in greater detail, the threat posed to the identity, by the simile-making word *like*. See Burt, 'Like', *The American Poetry Review* 43.1 (Jan/Feb 2014): 17-21.

⁶⁰Moore (9 February 1908), *Selected Letters*, 35-36.

If the menagerie of animals and exotic artefacts portrayed in Moore's poetry is considered in light of the interpretation of an inclination towards the proprietary within 'statements that took my fancy – phrasings that I liked', one might be tempted to conceive Moore's creatures as held captive by the poems, and to wonder if they have themselves been invariably limited or diminished under the gaze of the poet-observer. The conscious navigation of the power dynamics of possession and ownership in a poem like 'When I Buy Pictures', however, reinforces the notion that Moore was keenly aware of this danger; and, moreover, that this awareness might in fact account for, and reinforce, her repeated interrogation and exploration of the relation between part and whole. 'When I Buy Pictures', the poet declares,

or what is closer to the truth,
 when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the imaginary possessor,
 I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average moments:
 the satire upon curiosity in which no more is discernable than the intensity of
 the mood;
 or quite the opposite – the old thing, the medieval decorated hat-box,
 in which there are hounds with waists diminishing like the waist of the hourglass
 and deer and birds and seated people;
 it may be no more than a square of parquetry; the literal biography perhaps,
 in letters standing well apart upon a parchment-like expanse;
 an artichoke in six varieties of blue; the snipe-legged hieroglyphic in three parts;
 the silver fence protecting Adam's grave, or Michael taking Adam by the wrist.
 Too stern an intellectual emphasis upon this quality or that, detracts from one's
 enjoyment;
 it must not wish to disarm anything; nor may the approved triumph easily be
 honored –
 that which is great because something else is small.
 It comes to this: of whatever sort it is,
 it must be "lit with piercing glances into the life of things";
 it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it.

(51)

As has been discussed, in the gallery space of Moore's work, items are illuminated and enriched through their juxtaposition against other items, the minutest of subtleties ('an artichoke in six varieties of blue') magnified to present themselves as fully as possible.

This poem demonstrates her acute awareness of the dynamic between object and perceiver, the dangers of overly keen forms of apprehension ('Too stern an intellectual emphasis upon this quality or that, / detracts from one's enjoyment'), and of the relative scales involved ('that which is great because something else is small'). She is aware, too, of her own responsibility as an 'imaginary possessor' of what might easily serve only to 'give me pleasure in my average moments'. This is the ever-present danger of becoming great at the expense of someone else, a danger illuminated in the proximity of the synecdochic description of 'Michael taking Adam by the wrist', to the imperative to 'not wish to disarm anything'.

This scepticism about the use of size as a license to usurp or exploit is extended to its use as any meaningful measure of worth. Art, in terms of the gallery, as well as that of poetry, is a sizeable responsibility, and one that is inextricable from her writing; the poet acknowledges this through her use of the first-person pronoun, and the imperative reminders that close her poem. On a scrap of paper which she kept in her poetry notebook of 1922-1930, Moore scribbled: 'I wonder when people will stop capturing / wild things / because they are little / and the biggest wild things because they are big'.⁶¹ This tension pervades her lengthy poems that focus on and magnify the smallest of creatures, such as the jerboa, a two- to six-inch jumping desert rodent. Divided into two sections, titled 'Too Much' and 'Abundance', and respectively concerned with the people and the creatures of ancient civilisations, certain passages in 'The Jerboa' resemble an inventory of artefacts and minute details, the catalogue form resurfacing to chronicle man's age-old fascination with material possessions:

⁶¹Moore, 'Poetry notebook, 1922-1930', VII:04:04, The Marianne Moore Papers, The Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum & Library.

Besides

yarns dyed with indigo, and red cotton,
they had a flax which they spun

into fine linen

cordage for yachtsmen.

These people liked small things;
they gave to boys little paired playthings such as
 nests of eggs, ichneumon and snake, paddle
 and raft, badger and camel;

and made toys for them-

selves: the royal totem;

 and toilet boxes marked
 with the contents. Lords and ladies put goose-grease
 paint in round bone boxes – the pivoting
 lid incised with a duck-wing

or reverted duck-

head; kept in a buck

 or rhinoceros horn,

 the ground horn; and locust oil in stone locusts.

(100-101)

If their boys are given ‘playthings’, the people themselves have their ‘toys’, adult and child conflated in their common, entitled fascination with the ‘small things’ of nature: nests of eggs (the young of other creatures), bones for boxes, the fat of geese, the ground horn of the rhinoceros. These little luxuries, plundered by humans from the natural world for pleasure and play and ornamentation, are *Too Much*, and ‘These people liked small things’ precisely because small things made them feel big in comparison.

For Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, ‘The possession and control of wonders represented (and, in part, constituted) the wealth and power of those who owned them; on a more abstract level, their rarity or uniqueness reflected the rarity and uniqueness

of their proprietors'.⁶² In this imperialistic version of the metonymic relationship between small and large, part and whole, the ownership of numerous small treasures culled from the most marginal of locations comes to correspondingly stand for the cumulative possession of the world by way of its farthest reaches. If Moore's oeuvre may be likened to a collection in its detailing of exotic animals and artefacts, what kind of collection is it, and what does it reflect about her?

In 'The Jerboa', the titular creature, detailed at length in the 'Abundance' section, stands in stark contrast to the inhabitants of 'Too Much':

[...] No bust
 of it was made, but there
 was pleasure for the rat. Its restlessness was
 its excellence; it was praised for its wit;
 and the jerboa, like it,

 a small desert rat,
 and not famous, that
 lives without water, has
 happiness. Abroad seeking food, or at home
 in its burrow, the Sahara fieldmouse
 has a shining silver house

 of sand. O rest and
 joy, the boundless sand,
 the stupendous sandspout,
 no water, no palm trees, no ivory bed,
 tiny cactus; but one would not be he
 who has nothing but plenty.

(102)

Instead of lamenting the inadequacies of the tiny jerboa, Moore's lines are rhapsodic, enraptured, and rapturous: 'O rest and / joy, the boundless sand, / the stupendous sandspout'! Moore elevates the humble creature while simultaneously celebrating precisely its quality of humility. What is listed here, instead of the humans' numerous

⁶²Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 68.

possessions, is what the jerboa notably does not have: ‘no water, no palm trees, no ivory bed, / tiny cactus’ – the desert surely is one of the scarcest, most meager places to live. And yet ‘the Sahara fieldmouse / has a shining silver house / of sand’, ‘has nothing but plenty’ – given Moore’s admiration of Blake, we can be sure that a shining silver house of sand is everything but meager. Both ‘too much’ and ‘abundance’ are terms concerned with large quantities, and, as such, depict two kinds of collections: whereas the former connotes excess, extravagance, and an imprudent intemperance that oversteps the line, the latter is to do with prosperity, plenitude, and a generosity seemingly limitless, or that at least does not have anything to do with limits; in other words, glut versus blessing.

Compared to the artist who ‘passed / for art’ ‘a cone [...] with holes for a fountain’, or the men ‘combining planes, dates, / limes, and pomegranates, / in avenues’ (100), the jerboa does not have to contrive, or to shore up numerous treasures to metonymically build a reputable stature. Instead, with leaps ‘like the uneven notes / of the Bedouin flute’ (104), it is self-sufficient with music of its own making. Instead of the men who ‘use slaves’, ‘kept crocodiles’, and ‘tie hippopotami’ (100), imposing their authority upon others, the ‘free-born’ (102) jerboa relates to the other natural inhabitants of the ‘Part terrestrial, / and part celestial’ (103) spheres, doing this on their terms: the fur on its back is thus ‘buffy-brown like the breast of the fawn-breasted / bower-bird’, and it is not only ‘fish-shaped’, but also has ‘chipmunk contours’, a ‘bird head’, and ‘kangaroo speed’ (103-104).

In celebrating a creature of which ‘No bust / [...] was made’, and who is otherwise ‘untouched’ and ‘ignored by one’s ignorance’ (102), the poet’s work is simultaneously that of colorist, metalworker, composer, mechanical engineer, architect, and carpenter, combining art and functionality to depict an animal who is organically engineered to

endure the harshest of terrains: 'Looked at by daylight, / the underside's white', 'strange detail of the simplified creature, / fish-shaped and silvered to steel'.

By fifths and sevenths,
in leaps of two lengths,
like the uneven notes
of the Bedouin flute, it stops its gleaning
on little wheel castors, and makes fern-seed
footprints with kangaroo speed.

Its leaps should be set
to the flageolet;
pillar body erect
on a three-cornered smooth-working Chippendale
claw – propped on hind legs, and tail as third toe,
between leaps to its burrow.

(104)

Moore's own careful, musical attention to syllabic precision is closely tied to her subject's movement 'By fifths and sevenths'; each stanza is thus correspondingly book-ended by five-syllable and seven-syllable lines. In this poem, a minute and earthbound creature is endowed with emotional, intellectual, and historical significance. In following the hopping jerboa across the zigzagging lines, it is easy enough for the reader to overlook the counted-out syllables, or the end-rhymes of the first and last couplets of each stanza. Attentiveness in a sprawling poem devoted to a tiny creature, however, reveals the increasingly detailed artistry of even the smallest of creations.

It must be said that despite the poet's apprehension towards those who impose their authority upon others, her depiction of the jerboa is comparably imposing. After all, this work, of ambitiously opening up the figure of a diminutive rodent who lives in a hot, dry, dusty place, in order to encompass the earth, the heavens, and all manner of other beasts – this is the work of the poet, who both identifies and aligns herself with the jerboa in the expansive connections made by her own imaginative eye. I think that

this was an inevitability that was not lost on Moore: in building a substantial poem upon the humble creature, she strove to embody its virtue of economy; thus crafting this poem on her subject's own terms, she not only economised even further, but attempted to reduce her own relative stature. The jerboa's smallness, perceived in its natural environment, is connectively large in a way that an imperialistic treasury will never be because of the way in which the latter diminishes its contents by artificially seizing and containing; by contrast, Moore's imaginative possessing of the jerboa strove to elevate the creature.

Moore researched comprehensively for this poem, spending a full day each at the Museum of Natural History and the library, respectively. After this, 'For almost two months Mary reported that Marianne and her jerboa were "very very deep in the sand" and that Marianne worked twelve hours a day on the poem, "breathless, barely stopping for food"'.⁶³ The extent of this investment in 'The Jerboa' suggests a sense of necessity for the work and, more significantly, for what it represented for the poet. If we consider that the jerboa is a variety of field mouse, therefore sharing an affinity with Moore (who was known as 'Rat' at home), the motivation behind the poet's extensive investment in a poem featuring a surrogate animal for herself is apparent. Here, in another iteration of the relationship between parts and a whole, subject and poet are mutually productive. The poet derives not only her subject matter, but also her work ethic, from the creature to which she aspires. The resulting work registers the tension of the apprehending inherent to the human depiction of an animal, and the human awareness of and attempt to negotiate these terms.

⁶³Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down*, 264.

Paying attention to creatures and details that might have otherwise gone overlooked, such as the resonance of a four-line verse, and the ways in which a pea's body may reveal the sprawling, artefact-laden galleries of a museum, Moore's collection is one that is primarily interested in minor or apparently lesser entities, characters, and species, as suggested by certain early poems with such titles as the 'Parade of the Un-enfranchised Animals'. In the same vein, she would later go on to undertake the work of translating the *Fables* of Jean La Fontaine. One might therefore trace an affinity between her and another rodent, the mouse in the fable who saves a lion from hunters by gnawing through a netted trap. These are the minor creatures to which Randall Jarrell likens Moore's poems themselves when he writes:

Other people have objected, 'They are so small.' Yes, they are as small as those animals which save the foolish heroes of fairy tales – which can save only the heroes, because they are too small not to have been disregarded by everyone else.⁶⁴

But Moore, too, saw herself as a minor creature, and her espousal for a mode of collecting which pays attention to the smallest of creatures belies a personal desire to be needed. In January 1914, as she sent early poems to various magazines for consideration and was repeatedly faced with rejection, she described how 'I cling to [Floyd Dell, editor of *The Masses*] as a young kitten to a frail sapling'.⁶⁵ This feeling of smallness, the vulnerability of wanting to be needed, valued, or sought after, is ultimately translated in Moore's work as a smallness that relates to the quality of being elusive, even evasive, and constantly deferred.

This might explain – or equally, be explained by – Moore's interest in the fables of La Fontaine. 'Never have axioms seemed to me to have a more ever-current life than the

⁶⁴Randall Jarrell, 'The Humble Animal', in *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 166.

⁶⁵Moore, quoted in Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down*, 122.

morals of La Fontaine,' she wrote, going on to identify that 'of all the lessons taught, the most valuable for me has been this one with wide application – from *The Rabbits*: When fables allure / Rest assured that they are short.'⁶⁶ Such immortality, driven primarily by their value in application, i.e., their desirability and necessity, is facilitated by the formal compactness of the fable, and the ease with which it may be passed on. Yet, as Moore recognises, the interest and 'allure' of fables also has something less functionally, and more ineffably, to do with their brevity. Perhaps the translation of any self-perceived smallness and needing into a mysterious poetic smallness would transfer the desire to its reader. Tellingly, in 'An Ardent Platonist', a poem of 1909 that was published in *The Lantern* in the spring of 1918, Moore declares that 'to be no longer mysterious; it is to be no / Longer privileged'.⁶⁷

This poem, with its admission of a principle that lies at the heart of her oeuvre, is not included in any of her subsequent volumes. This is an omission that could be seen as another 'principle that is hid', a means of hiding the tracks. It has the same effect as that produced by the arrangement of poems in non-chronological order in Moore's *Selected Poems*, as published by Eliot at Faber in 1935: 'By obscuring her early development,' Leavell observes, 'the arrangement of the poems had the desired effect of making her seem difficult',⁶⁸ significantly couching this process again in terms of desire. It appears to be the case that Moore knew all too well that readers might share Robert McAlmon's sentiments when he described how 'I think I'd be bored with [her], if it weren't that I can't get her angle'.⁶⁹ Being alluringly small thus had its advantages of

⁶⁶ Moore, 'Poetry and Criticism', in *Complete Prose*, 590.

⁶⁷ Moore, in *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907-1924*, ed. Robin G. Schulze (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 375.

⁶⁸ Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down*, 288.

⁶⁹ Robert McAlmon, *Post-Adolescence: A Selection of Short Fiction*, ed. Edward N. S. Lorusso (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 70.

unsettling the reader, and keeping us on our toes in our own, larger, attempts to apprehend the poet and her diminutive lines.

Mary Norcross, a close family friend, once remarked to Mary Warner during Moore's time in Lake Placid after her college years, that '[Moore] ... has almost a genius' for 'making little poems', and that she 'ought to cultivate [her] talent'.⁷⁰ Norcross clearly recognised, early on, that there were larger stakes to little poems such as 'To An Intra-Mural Rat', with which *Observations* opens:

You make me think of many men
Once met to be forgot again
Or merely resurrected
In a parenthesis of wit
That found them hastening through it
Too brisk to be inspected.

(5)

Underlying the natural speech pattern, which makes this poem appear indeed to be a casual observation, are Moore's rhymes, and the measured syllable count of the lines (8-8-7-8-8-7), with the third and sixth paired in their shortness, but also in their indentation and end-rhymes. More subtly, the combination of consonance and sequential echoing short vowel rhymes in 'make me think of many men / Once met to be forgot again' enacts the process of briefly meeting, forgetting, and even more briefly resurrecting; the use of indentation makes the reader's eye zigzag, brisk and hastening, down across the lines.

Notably, the first version of this poem, written in a letter from Moore to Warner a decade before its inclusion in *Observations*, contained a semicolon after 'again', and a comma after 'wit'; by removing the punctuation, and thus the natural pauses that it encouraged, Moore had clearly intended, with these edits, for the poem to be read even

⁷⁰Mary Norcross, as quoted in Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down*, 109.

more quickly. And yet while it would be all too easy to take these lines at face value and be off on one's way, there is something about the poem that resists such a mode of reading. This is partly the result of the lack of context provided by Moore, particularly considering that this poem opens the collection: who is the speaker, and who is the 'intra-mural rat' being addressed? Just what is an intra-mural rat? If the poem's sparseness and lack of further explanatory details result in its cryptic, enigmatic effect, its last three lines teasingly acknowledge this. This is a poem that is precisely 'Too brisk to be inspected', if to be inspected is to be examined, and interrogated, and to ultimately be entirely understood. To be 'Too brisk to be inspected' thus consciously turns the smallness of brevity, and its risk of being overlooked, into a strength; this is the power to be elusive and evasive, and too slippery and quick to be caught. After all, to be 'brisk' is not only to be brief, but also to be so 'quick and active' as to be 'sharp or smart'; so 'sharp-witted, pert; curt', as to be brusque (*OED*).

This is not to say that the careful reader does not try, all the same, to pin the poem down, especially given the way in which the characterisation of the subject as being 'Too brisk to be inspected' reads like a direct challenge to the reader: *catch me if you can*. In a poem ostensibly about a creature as small and marginal as an intra-mural rat, the poet herself lurks suggestively, at large behind her small surrogate, yet simultaneously suggests to her reader that following this line of interpretation too intently might in fact be another way of letting the poem briskly elude us. Perhaps the reason why this intra-mural rat, identified only in the title, is too brisk to be inspected and identified, is that its inspection is repeatedly conducted via the imprecise, approximating terms of what it is not. The generalising, non-specific 'You make me think of many men' thus allows the original subject to slip away, and 'be forgot again'. Encompassing this movement from

small, specific subject to large, metaphorical comparison and back again, we might conceive Moore's poem as a 'parenthesis of wit' on a larger scale, a room whose walls are not fixed in place, but are parenthetical brackets that expand and contract to encompass the intra-mural dweller.

As a collection, Moore's oeuvre endeavours to apprehend the tiniest of organisms and phenomena in a way that does not lose sight of what they are. In turn, the poet herself sought to be apprehended, but not too easily or straightforwardly; she thus evades us by building upon these same tensions, inherent to the framework of part and whole, as they play out in the relationship between the subject and its transplanted, surrogate context. In a speech upon her acceptance of the National Book Award in 1952, she made use of a suitably small anecdote in order to make a larger point:

Someone at a poetry conference at which I was present, complained of modern poetry and said he could not read it. He could only read Dante, and R. P. Blackmur said, "But we don't come in that big size." A pleasing statement; yet perspective occasionally does come in large sizes and Wallace Stevens in his book, *The Necessary Angel*, puts his finger on this thing poetry, it seems to me, where he refers to "a violence within that protects us from a violence without." We have it in Chaucer's heady epitome: "I think I thirst the more the more I drink" – an intensity which finds a way of surpassing intensity – in which "I think" means I know and understatement is emphasis. In poetry, metaphor substitutes compactness for confusion and says the fish moves "on winglike foot." It also says – and for "it" I had better say Confucius – "If there be a knife of resentment in the heart, the mind will not attain precision." That is to say, poetry watches life with affection. In poetry the light touch is the strong touch...⁷¹

There is a great deal to be made of this; however, what particularly catches my eye is Moore's carefully considered and nonetheless nuanced rapport with Blackmur. If the modern poet's diminutive form and production finds her identification with the tiny

⁷¹Moore, 'A Felicitous Response', *The Christian Science Monitor* (7 February 1952): 7.

jerboa, she goes on to acknowledge how, just as 'The Jerboa' turns out to span six pages, the relationship between big and small, and that between size and scale and intensity, is never straightforward; her choice of word in *perspective* sums this up. When she describes the difficulty of managing compactness and confusion, she demonstrates this in her qualification of 'It also says – and for "it" I had better say Confucius', a qualifying aside itself compactly punning on Confucius and confusion, and setting up one of the former's compact aphorisms.

Of course, this moment of humour hinges upon an awareness of the difficulty or danger of taking part for whole, 'it' for 'Confucius'. The same awareness is consistently present throughout her poems, preoccupied as they are with blurring the line between small and big, part and whole: there is the ever-present danger that an elusive intramural rat might get lost in overly generalising metaphor, that one might lose sight of the enormously rich world encompassed within a single elaborate detail in one of her sprawling poems, and that her own practice of poem-making might constrict or contain its often already diminutive subjects. The same difficulty makes itself present in Chaucer's 'heady epitome': to be an epitome is to be a brief abstract, a *précis* of a larger whole – and yet, just as what is heady draws you in, leaves you wanting *more*, the epitome likewise hints at what it belies. Its etymology derives from the Greek 'to make an incision into' (*OED*), connoting as much potential risk as Stevens's observation of 'a violence within that protects us from a violence without'. When Moore quotes both, using the language of the index in her agreement with Stevens (who 'puts his finger on this thing poetry'), she is acutely aware of the stakes involved in the balancing act of part and whole.

Her work self-reflexively understands the fact that language, and metaphor, frequently runs ahead of its user and its beholder, simultaneously promising and threatening meanings far bigger and more sprawling than might have been intended. And yet if language, specifically that of poetry, can make the fish move on winglike foot, thus combining fin and wing and foot in a kingdom of animal relations, compactness can come in larger sizes, too. These possibilities provide a safeguard to the dangers of losing or stifling the small, and Moore embraced and celebrated them. If she frequently appeared reluctant to be overly effusive about her own work, sometimes even underplaying her poems, this was one way of evocatively granting them, and their subjects, the space and freedom to speak for themselves; and of encouraging her reader, too, to get stuck in and run ahead along with them, instead. While the little anthologies of her poetry gather and juxtapose the large and diverse within the little, they simultaneously open the little infinitely outwards to include its perceived omissions, or that which one might otherwise have thought it was not. What results is a tension that is both an anxiety and a potentiality; it holds together small and large, part and whole, in a tautly precise, deliberate equilibrium.

3 Elizabeth Bishop's Rooms with Views

To her contemporaries, Elizabeth Bishop was a poet of smallness, not simply in terms of output (she published only three fairly slim volumes of poetry in her lifetime), but also in her detailed depiction of minutiae. Robert Lowell anticipated that 'Her admirers are not likely to hail her as a giant among the moderns [...]. Nevertheless, the splendor and minuteness of her descriptions soon seem wonderful'.¹ Randall Jarrell, too, admired the 'modest, minutely observant' nature of her poems,² while William Meredith described how 'The oeuvre is small', and yet 'the artist is as careful to bring the small insight to perfection as the large'.³

I take as my particular focus for this chapter the smallness of Bishop's private, enclosed interiors, the contained space as relative to the larger exterior space of the world. In 1951, Bishop helped Lota de Macedo Soares to design the Petrópolis house in which they were to live; later, she would restore an eighteenth-century house of her own in Ouro Preto. Spending her formative years being shuttled around the various households of different relatives, feeling like 'I was always a sort of a guest',⁴ and never quite at home, her interest in building a home for herself in her later life is evident in her writing, which itself embodies certain architectural features. If her house in Petrópolis was described by Ashley Brown as 'open much of the time',⁵ and celebrated by the poet herself as 'House, open house / to the white dew / and the milk-white

¹Robert Lowell, 'Thomas, Bishop, and Williams', *The Sewanee Review*, 55.3 (July-Sept 1947): 497.

²Randall Jarrell, 'From "Fifty Years of American Poetry"' (1969), as reproduced in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 198.

³William Meredith, 'Invitation to Miss Elizabeth Bishop' (1977), as reproduced in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, 217.

⁴As quoted in *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 126.

⁵Ashley Brown, 'Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil' (1977), as reproduced in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, 224.

sunrise' ('Song for the Rainy Season'),⁶ the poems are themselves comparable spaces that are simultaneously architecturally contained and open-ended. As David Bromwich has observed, 'To her, art is a kind of home'.⁷ The work is full of structures wherein the reader may find the poet, sometimes more easily locatable than others.

Writing on 'the impulse to domestication', Helen Vendler suggests that 'Though the human effort is bent to the elimination of the wild, nothing is more restorative than to know that earth's being is larger than our human enclosures'.⁸ This is true for the homeless children in 'Squatter's Children', for instance, whose makeshift shelter is a 'little, soluble, / unwarrantable ark'; nonetheless, the children are able to 'stand among / the mansions you may choose / out of a bigger house than yours, / whose lawfulness endures' (76). Yet just as these children are nonetheless still standing in 'rooms of falling rain' (76), Bishop's human enclosures do not necessarily eliminate their larger exterior surroundings: sometimes, because they do not intend to do so; other times, because they simply cannot.

Instead, in her work, rooms frequently complicate the notion of the apparently small, contained, or closed up. They thus invite the exploration of space and perspective. For, as Michael Hofmann's careful choice of verb indicates, 'She can seem small scale and unurgent'.⁹ Marianne Moore, too, described *North & South* as being a 'small-large book'.¹⁰ The effect of Bishop's work, that of collapsing, conflating, or blurring the walls between the small and contained, and the large and infinite, is

⁶Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems, Prose, and Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz (New York: Library of America, 2008), 82. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references to primary material will be drawn from this volume, with page numbers cited in in-text parentheses.

⁷David Bromwich, 'Elizabeth Bishop's Dream-Houses', in *Skeptical Music: Essays on Modern Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 117.

⁸Helen Vendler, 'Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly', in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, 47.

⁹Michael Hofmann, 'Elizabeth Bishop', in *Where Have You Been?: Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 67.

¹⁰Marianne Moore, 'A Modest Expert: *North & South*' (1946), as reproduced in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, 179.

therefore as much related to our ways of looking at her work, as it is to her own acts of looking. Such a two-way gaze resonates with Bonnie Costello's comments on Bishop in *Planets on Tables*. Costello notes that 'Bishop stands on both sides of the window', and that 'The window [...] becomes a constant in Bishop's work, framing a threshold between inside and outside, offering at once containment and extension'.¹¹

After all, what is connoted by containment and extension is not at all straightforward and, as Subha Mukherji has succinctly put it, 'the threshold is Janus-faced'.¹² Bishop's *Crusoe* feels 'a deep affection for / the smallest of my island industries', then goes on to say that 'the smallest was / a miserable philosophy' ('*Crusoe in England*', 153-54). In Bishop's work, the small and contained provide the affectionate snugness and security conjured up by the notion of 'just sitting quietly in one's room', with its offer of imaginative 'room / for one more folded sunset, still quite warm' ('*Questions of Travel*', 74-75); however, they also carry the sense of restriction hinted at by that adverb 'just', and Bishop's own personal need for an 'open house', 'kind [...] to membership / of silver fish, mouse, / bookworms, / big moths' ('*Song for the Rainy Season*', 82). Conversely, the open and unbounded simultaneously entertains liberating possibilities, and reminders of one's relative perishability. This tension pervades her rooms.

This chapter explores Bishop's small-large rooms through the motifs of the window, the bubble, and the camera. It examines the ways in which these motifs/objects relate to the room as a container or an ambiguously contained space, and therefore how they negotiate the relationship between a small interior and a larger exterior. In doing this, I

¹¹Bonnie Costello, *Planets on Tables: Poetry, Still Life, and the Turning World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 82-83.

¹²Subha Mukherji (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Thinking on Thresholds* (London: Anthem, 2011), xxii.

will be thinking through the same motifs as they feature in the work of the visual artist Joseph Cornell. Cornell was a contemporary of Bishop's, whose work she found fascinating; a comparison of the two is illuminating.¹³ Lorrie Goldensohn has rightly pointed out that Bishop's translation of Octavio Paz's dedicatory poem to Cornell, 'Objects & Apparitions', demonstrates 'Bishop's own lifelong fascination with miniature and its radical transformations of meaning through scale and disrupted context'.¹⁴ This statement resonantly summarises Cornell's art, itself a 'world [that] was compressed',¹⁵ and highlights why Bishop would have been drawn to undertake a work of translation about this artist, and to include it in *Geography III*.

Although there is no definitive evidence to suggest that Bishop and Cornell had ever met or conversed, they had numerous mutual acquaintances, and she was clearly interested in his work from early on. Speaking to Elizabeth Spires in June 1978, she describes how 'Cornell is superb. I first saw the *Medici Slot Machine* when I was in college. Oh, I loved it'.¹⁶ Bishop could not in fact have seen *Medici Slot Machine* then, as she claims, since she graduated from Vassar in 1934, and the artwork was not created until 1943. Nonetheless, it is likely that she would have seen other work by Cornell at the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), given that she was in New York during the latter half of 1936, when the show was on. Inspired by Cornell, who was described as 'a mogul of minutiae',¹⁷ Bishop herself

¹³To my knowledge, there is only one other extended comparison of Bishop and Cornell; this is Ernesto Suárez-Toste's exploration of Surrealist influence in the work of both. See Suárez-Toste, "Telling It Slant": The "Healthier" Surrealism of Elizabeth Bishop and Joseph Cornell', *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 42 (2001): 279-88.

¹⁴Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 265.

¹⁵Diane Waldman, *Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams* (New York: Abrams, 2006), 6.

¹⁶Quoted in Elizabeth Spires, 'The Art of Poetry, XXVII: Elizabeth Bishop', in *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, 120.

¹⁷Joanna Roche, 'Joseph Cornell's Garden Center 44: The Poetics of Memory', in *Joseph Cornell: Opening the Box*, ed. Jason Edwards and Stephanie L. Taylor (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 190.

created shadow boxes resembling his, art objects that embody transformations of meaning through scale. In a chapter about Bishop's contained spaces and ways of looking, I draw from Cornell's work as visual analogues for envisioning the contained spaces that occur as motifs and metaphors in the poet's work, making use of this comparison to develop alternative ways of looking at the poems.¹⁸

3.1 Windows

Inhabitable, contained spaces akin to human enclosures abound in Bishop's work. These spaces frequently promise protection, and are often self-reflectively linked to the space of writing or creative work. In 'The End of March', for instance, an ideal space for the writer is described:

I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box
set up on pilings, shingled green,
a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),
protected from spring tides by a palisade
of – are they railroad ties?
(Many things about this place are dubious.)
I'd like to retire there and do *nothing*,
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.

(168)

Bishop's presentation of this 'crooked box' encapsulates a number of associations and significations held by the notion of interior space. With its green shingles, the house both prompts and holds together a collapsing or conflating of physical scales, the

¹⁸Similarly thinking about Bishop's work in relation to visual art, Peggy Samuels has comprehensively explored the way in which Bishop was interested in contemporary discourse about, and experimentation with, the surface of painting, ultimately translating these ideas into her own lyric composition. See Samuels, *Deep Skin: Elizabeth Bishop and Visual Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

clandestine quality of a ‘crypto-dream-house’ lending comparison to ‘a sort of artichoke’ with its increasingly private inner leaves. And yet the poet’s process of building a poetic image for her reader is not unbroken, but punctuated again by parenthetical windows in the form of asides enclosing self-reflective, even self-policing, commentary (‘Many things about this place are dubious’) that intrudes upon the dreamy scene being constructed in the poem’s main narrative. Might ‘this place’ refer to the poem itself, the stanza a ‘crooked box’ on the page, and after all etymologically rooted in rooms and dwelling places?¹⁹ And is the voice expressing doubts about ‘this place’ still situated outside of the house, with its artichoke-green exterior, looking in; or are these doubts now being voiced from an imagined position inside the house, looking out?

In order to address these questions, it is necessary to investigate more fully the particular kind of looking that is described here. If the poem’s own mention of looking through binoculars, presumably to the world outside this house, encompasses one means or medium of looking, the final image in the passage additionally demonstrates that occasionally, e.g. on a foggy day, a medium such as a windowpane may be altered to encourage another way of looking. Not merely a transparent lens through which to look into the distance, the windowpane is itself a surface upon which droplets may be observed, up close. Moreover, out of the adjacent clauses in ‘look through binoculars, read boring books’ comes the witty, suggested image of the speaker looking through binoculars *at* boring books; perhaps this is the poet’s self-policing voice again, now nervously poking fun at herself. As the practically interchangeable use of the two expressions ‘proto-dream-house’ and ‘crypto-dream-house’ suggests, this is a structure

¹⁹Indeed, as Bachelard has put it: ‘the isolated image, the phrase that carries it forward, the verse, or occasionally the stanza in which the poetic image radiates, form *language areas* that should be studied’. See Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin, 1964), 12.

that is simultaneously a prototype (a larger ideal), and a cryptic, private dwelling. It therefore admits these dual ways of looking.

This sort of dwelling recurs throughout Bishop's writing. Here is her response to a 1960 letter from Lowell, in which he had 'wonder[ed] if you ever found reading and writing curiously self-sufficient':²⁰

I've always had a day dream of being a light-house keeper, absolutely alone, with no one to interrupt my reading or just sitting, and although such dreams are sternly dismissed at 16 or so they always haunt one a bit, I suppose. I now see a wonderful cold rocky shore in the Falklands, or a house in Nova Scotia on the bay, *exactly* like my grandmother's – idiotic as it is, and unbearable as the reality would be. But I think everyone should go, or should have gone, through a stretch of it [...] and perhaps it is a recurrent need.²¹

Comparably, in 'The End of March', the poet's house is eventually discovered to be 'impossible. / And that day the wind was much too cold / even to get that far, and of course the house was boarded up' (200). Lloyd Schwartz has read those lines as demonstrating that 'The poet [...] has too much self-irony to be taken in by her dream'; 'Romantic isolation, however desirable, is possible only in the imagination. People are needed, the world must be contended with, illusions cannot be maintained'.²² I find this reading too conclusive, setting up an overly strict opposition between what Schwartz considers the illusory quality of the imagined or dreamed, and the concrete world. Certainly, such a perceived opposition may be encouraged by Bishop's own apparent excoriation of her lighthouse dream as being 'idiotic', and to be 'sternly

²⁰Robert Lowell, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, ed. Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 332.

²¹Bishop, *Words in Air*, 335.

²²Lloyd Schwartz, 'One Art: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, 1971-1976' (1977), as reproduced in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, 152-53.

dismissed'. I would like to read more into her admission, though, that such dreams 'always haunt one a bit', and that 'it is a recurrent need'.

Granted, as Schwartz follows the poem to its conclusion, he goes on to consider that she 'is too much a realist to give herself completely to the fantasy; she also has too much imagination to ignore its presence'.²³ While this suggests something more of a blending of the two in Bishop's work, the implication is nonetheless still that of Bishop as in a predicament of being torn between the two. For me, the merging in her work of the dreamy, sometimes surreal, and the firmly empirical or realistic, is not a matter of either/or, but of both halves complementarily transformative and transformed for their merging. Instead of Schwartz's suggestion that Bishop has had to turn away from the house because of the circumstances, Bishop has taken stock of the facts (the cold, the house being boarded up), impossible as they make it for her to physically enter, and nonetheless persisted in inhabiting the imaginative space made possible by the house, and the dual perspective that it enables.

After all, in the poet's description of how she would 'like to retire there and do *nothing*', is the tacit acknowledgment that it is only possible to inhabit the *there* of the proto-crypto-dream-house while situated in the *here* of the moment of writing, the poetic present. Even in her dream of complete isolation there is the presence of not just one, but 'two bare rooms', each for when she tires of the other – or, more precisely, for when she tires of the self that inhabits the other. The dream that she recounts to Lowell, of inhabiting a house '*exactly like my grandmother's*', is also strangely specific in its emphasis; it is markedly not her grandmother's actual house. Bishop's dream for an isolated house is a dream for something that resembles, but is not entirely and

²³Schwartz, 'One Art', 153.

perfectly, a homecoming; instead, it is a dream for homecoming with the recognition, at the same time, that the home to which one most longs to return, may just as quickly prove to be unsatisfactory, and consequently yet another point for departure.

The abiding presence of windows exemplifies this desire to be simultaneously within and without, *here* and *there*. After all, a lighthouse keeper does not in fact live in complete isolation, and Bishop's recurrent daydream of living in a lighthouse is really that of inhabiting a structure with windows or a gallery space specifically in place for its dweller to keep watch over the sea:

As I stood recently on [Bishop's] balcony looking at the water-life on Boston Harbor, I thought back easily to the first time I met her in an apartment high above Guanabara Bay at Rio de Janeiro, and then I thought: She always has the most spectacular views!²⁴

Likewise, even the ideal prison cell as described in Bishop's prose piece 'In Prison' has a window with a specific view. In fact, while the description of the cell itself only takes up a half-page paragraph detailing its furniture, layout and colours, that of its single window occupies two full pages. For me, the crux of this description, for concision, is this:

What I should like best of all, I might as well confess, would be a view of a court-yard paved with stone [...] The rest of my scenery would be the responsibility of the weather alone, although I should rather face the east than the west since I much prefer sunrises to sunsets.

(586-87)

Writing about 'In Prison', David Lehman does not devote much attention to this window; he does, however, make two piquant observations: that 'the imagination varies

²⁴Brown, 'Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil', 223.

directly with deprivation and isolation, that imaginative need mothers invention';²⁵ and, secondly, that 'The confinement, then, is not meant to eliminate dealings with the external world but to circumscribe the relations and, by doing so, to put them on an aesthetic plane'.²⁶ I am interested in what Lehman seems to be suggesting as a combined consequence of deprivation-borne imaginative invention, and circumscribed dealings with the external world: for me, this is precisely encapsulated and enabled by the presence of a window.

For, if Bishop always had spectacular views from both her real-life dwellings and her dream lighthouses, the gaze in her work just as frequently turns inwards in a manner that locates sprawling vistas within the internal. J.-B. Pontalis announces that 'My subjective topography is at the same time that of open windows and a room of one's own',²⁷ and such a formula likewise applies to Bishop. Leaving the fate of the scenery in large part to the weather, particularly that of the entry of daylight at sunrise, the window in 'In Prison' serves as a reminder that it is an architectural feature that has historically not only enabled one to look out, but that has also served to let light in, and thus to illuminate the interiors of buildings. As Pontalis's choice of word in *topography* ('The features of a region or locality collectively', *OED*; emphasis mine) likewise suggests, an open window and a room of one's own, taken together and with the effects of one on the other, is more than the sum of its parts.

Bishop has herself spoken of the value of circumscription for the mind's eye:

But it is my chief complaint against the opposite sex, anyway – with the exception of poets and painters – they don't *see* things. They're always having ideas and theories, and not noticing the detail at hand. ... I have a small theory of my own about this – that women

²⁵Lehman, "In Prison": A Paradox Regained', in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, 64.

²⁶Lehman, "In Prison", 70.

²⁷J.-B. Pontalis, *Windows*, trans. Anne Quinney (Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 2003), 2.

have been *confined*, mostly – and in confinement details count. –
They have to see the baby's ear; sewing makes you look closely.²⁸

Her language here is loaded with gendered implications of size. Compared to the men who are 'always having ideas and theories', hers is only a 'small theory of my own', one that does not claim to be all-encompassing, and that is perhaps confined, instead. On the one hand, Bishop was never fully confined. Yet if the memory of her mother (the first woman in her life, who *was* confined in various medical institutions) lingers within this passage, Bishop's use of the dissociative pronoun in 'They have to see the baby's ear', while acknowledging the reality of these women, simultaneously distances herself from them. In their sewing, in textile work, 'details count'; so too in writing, in textual work, where these smallest of details undertake the effect of the window within the described confinement, enabling the poet to occupy the positions of self *and* other, freely able to look away with the employment of a pronoun whenever one position begins to feel too close to home.

Cornell's works offer us a further means of thinking about the relationship between room and window – a window through which to look at it, perhaps. A mix between collage and still-life arrangement, his distinctive shadow boxes are miniature rooms, featuring objects and images arranged in glass-fronted boxes designed and often constructed by the artist himself. If these boxes have been variously described to '[echo] the facades of Federal-style houses in New England and lower Manhattan', to 'suggest the utilitarian design of mills and warehouses', and to 'have the claustrophobic feel of Victorian drawing rooms',²⁹ these analogies encourage the conception of his works

²⁸Bishop to Kit and Ilse Barker, as quoted in Eleanor Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 6-7.

²⁹Carter Ratcliff, 'Joseph Cornell: Mechanic of the Ineffable', in *Joseph Cornell*, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 44.

within an architectural framework, alongside the ‘crooked box[es]’ of Bishop’s poetry; with their distinctive glass panels, Cornell’s boxes are, moreover, also rooms with windowed views.

Art historian Diane Waldman and art curator Kynaston McShine have separately commented on the influence of Vermeer on Cornell, and it is via Vermeer that a particular resonance of the Bishop/Cornell connection emerges. Waldman picks up on Cornell’s frequently Vermeer-inspired colour palettes, as well as his emulation of the way in which ‘Vermeer created domestic interiors in which the everyday and the commonplace take on the aura of the transcendental and the sublime’.³⁰ McShine expands upon this effect of the transcendental commonplace in Vermeer’s work, in which ‘light floods the room through almost unseen windows, creating a marvellous illusion of space and depth within a small painting’.³¹ Bishop herself was compared to Vermeer by Jarrell who, in 1955, remarked that ‘her best poems [...] remind one of Vuillard or even, sometimes, of Vermeer’.³² This comparison was immensely pleasing to Bishop, for whom ‘it has been one of my dreams that someday someone would think of Vermeer, without my saying it first’.³³

Eleanor Cook has made use of this comparison of Bishop and Vermeer to urge readers to linger over the details in the former’s work, linking Bishop’s poetic sensibility with the ‘specifically Dutch visual tradition that Svetlana Alpers has called “the art of describing” – the impulse to observe, record and define individuals, objects and places’.³⁴ While this is certainly all true, I am interested in the particular variety of detail-oriented description that is the genre of the interior (Vuillard, too, was largely a

³⁰Waldman, *Master of Dreams*, 74.

³¹Kynaston McShine, ‘Introducing Mr. Cornell’, in *Joseph Cornell*, 11.

³²Randall Jarrell, ‘From “Fifty Years of American Poetry”’, 198.

³³Bishop, in *One Art: The Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 312.

³⁴Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*, 7.

painter of interiors), and the way in which it is only with the ‘marvellous illusion of space and depth’ enabled by the necessary and appropriate illumination from ‘unseen windows’, that the minute details of the interior come to take on the enlarged quality of the transcendental or sublime.

In Bishop’s autobiographical prose piece ‘Primer Class’, for instance, the light of the writer’s imagination brilliantly enters the contained space of the geography classroom, as mediated through window-like maps:

Only the third and fourth grades studied geography. On their side of the room, over the blackboard, were two rolled-up maps, one of Canada and one of the whole world. When they had a geography lesson, Miss Morash pulled down one or both of these maps, like window shades. They were on cloth, very limp, with a shiny surface, and in pale colours – tan, pink, yellow, and green – surrounded by the blue that was the ocean. [...] I was so taken with the pull-down maps that I wanted to snap them up, and pull them down again, and touch all the countries and provinces with my own hands.

(407-08)

This early moment crystallises the subjective topography of having open windows and a room of one’s own, the combined result of which appears to be that of having a world of one’s own, as illuminated by the imagination. As with the image, in ‘Song for the Rainy Season’, of Bishop’s ‘open house’ ‘with a wall / for the mildew’s ignorant map’ (82), the contained space of the classroom, far from being small, turns out to encompass a vast interior world with a map of its own.

Snapping these window-shade maps up and pulling them down alternately enables a view out into the real world, as well that of turning inwards, and into the world of the interior. Significantly, the two are not the same; the latter is transformed and even enlarged by its transaction with exterior light. Looking at these maps, Bishop is thus able to accommodate ‘the general impression that Canada was the same size as the

world, which somehow or other fitted into it', while simultaneously '[knowing] perfectly well that this was not true' (408). In the hands of as detail-oriented a writer as Bishop, the small comparison of these pull-down maps to window shades carries its own bright resonance: with their shiny colours, admitting a certain amount of light in the same way that a window shade does, these maps produce the effect of stained glass, with its transfiguration of ordinary sunlight in a manner befitting of divine motifs. Explaining the fascination held by glass and windows in literature, Mukherji describes the way in which they are a 'combination of porosity and resistance that creates pressures between which the imagination thrives'.³⁵

Despite the transfigurative, 'over-all', expansive quality of light as mediated through the various windows of these poems, sometimes the window in Bishop's work provides a view out to that which is elusive or to which one may not have full access, or to that which serves as a reminder of the smallness or vulnerability of the contained space presently inhabited. Defending her choice of the word 'apartments' in the poem 'Paris, 7 A.M.', Bishop's justification to Moore was that 'the word suggests so strongly the structure of the houses, later referred to, and suggests a "cut-off" mode of existence so well'.³⁶ If the apartment in 'Paris, 7 A.M.', with its opening image of a clock face unfurling into a larger-scale map of central Paris, nonetheless observes Bishop's characteristic effect of an interior space blurring into exterior space, this is a movement that conversely maps, upon the space of the city, the sense of isolation and stifling apartness that Bishop wished to encapsulate with the word *apartments*. Indeed, Cook has pointed out the socio-political conditions in the background of Bishop's stay in Paris and the composition of this poem; this was a Europe facing increasing

³⁵Mukherji, 'Introduction', *Thinking on Thresholds*, xxi.

³⁶Bishop, *One Art*, 46.

nationalism, with Hitler at his most powerful.³⁷ Here, then, the larger space of the nation, through its capital, has taken on the atmosphere of separate containment as embodied by the apartment. In fact, images of captivity and imprisoning structures pervade the poem: 'Winter lives under a pigeon's wing, a dead wing with damp feathers'; the 'mighty snow-forts' conjured by the speaker's imagination reach their height as 'houses' 'four, five, stories high', that 'could not dissolve and die'; and the 'ornamental urns / set on the mansard roof-top' 'have caught [the carrier-warrior-pigeon's] ashes or his feathers' (20-21).

While there are no windows mentioned in these Parisian apartments, one gets the impression that if there were, they would resemble those in 'The Burglar of Babylon', in which 'Rich people in apartments / Watched through binoculars' (93); these are windows which offer their viewers a glimpse of the other, but which keep them securely installed where they are. This separation leaves them safely free from any responsibility towards, or real interaction with, the lower social classes, who serve as mere spectacle. On the other hand, titular figure of 'The Man-Moth' 'does not dare look out the window' (11) for the threat that lies without. In 'Insomnia', too, the speaker's advice to 'wrap up care in a cobweb / and drop it down the well / into that world inverted' turns the looking-glass into a window that looks out into an alternate universe. In this universe, the contrary ('where left is always right') but desired ('and you love me') is true (53-54). In these poems, both full of a sense of longing, the view from the window is dizzyingly vast, and no longer that of our immediate surroundings. They invite comparison with the boxes in Cornell's *Hotel* and *Observatory* series, whose windows present equally vast, distant perspectives (see Figs. 3.1-3.3).

³⁷Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*, 72-73.



Figure 3.1 Joseph Cornell, *Observatory: Corona Borealis Casement* (1950)
 Photographed by Michael Tropea
 The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation

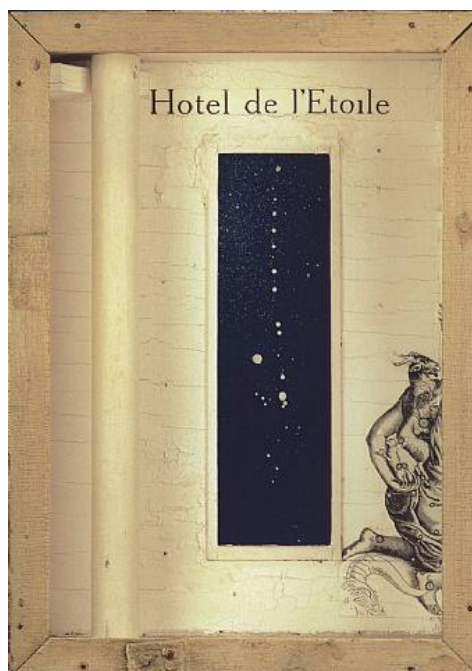


Figure 3.2 Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Hôtel de L'Etoile)* (1954)
 The Art Institute of Chicago



Figure 3.3 Joseph Cornell, *Hotel du Nord (Grand Hotel de l'Univers, Hotel de la Poste)* (1950)
Christie's

In these boxes, the viewer is no longer merely looking into the traditional *assemblage* room of Cornell's box through its frontal glass window, but additionally into a space that is just glimpsed beyond its farthest wall, and that is set upon another scale entirely – 'where the heavens are shallow as the sea / is now deep' ('Insomnia' 54).

Cornell was deeply interested in cosmology and astronomy, incorporating motifs of sky charts and constellations in numerous other works. He also approved of an article in *Art and Literature* by Fairfield Porter in 1966, in which Porter writes about the *Hotel* boxes:

The reminiscence of a ship cabin brings the suggestion that the room is on a journey. The view out of the window is the stars, the constellations, which, as abstractions of the stars, are constructions of the human spirit...³⁸

³⁸Fairfield Porter, as quoted in Ratcliff, 'Joseph Cornell: Mechanic of the Ineffable', 57.

As if describing Cornell's portable box-rooms themselves, this remark highlights the possibility of the room itself as being on a journey. This seafaring association is a natural one, given Cornell's inclination to combine nautical and astronomical components in works such as *Observatory: Corona Borealis Casement* (see Fig. 3.1), its mesh wall resembling a net to cast out to sea; additionally, ships themselves have observatories, historically enabling sailors to chart their voyages by the constellations. The circular opening in *Hotel du Nord* (see Fig. 3.3), another common motif in Cornell's works that has been interchangeably described as a 'porthole' or a 'peephole' by Cornell scholars, likewise calls to mind both a ship's porthole window and, as James Housefield and Diana Davis have noted, the view 'as if glimpsed through a telescope'.³⁹

Bishop's poems, too, present us with such porthole-telescope windows: if the Man-Moth 'does not dare look out the window', this is a fear perhaps related to his earlier thought that 'the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky, / proving the sky quite useless for protection' (11). There is a sense in this poem that all inhabitable spaces, from the smallest train compartment to the space under the flimsy sky, might prove to be insufficient, or incapable of holding themselves up against whatever lies outside. In 'In the Waiting Room', too, the child speaker attempts to anchor herself with concrete biographical facts, in order 'to stop / the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world / into cold, blue-black space' (150), despite being safely ensconced in the waiting room. Nonetheless, significantly, the Man-Moth 'trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb', 'thinking that this time he will manage / to push his small head through that round clean opening' (11).

³⁹James Housefield and Diana K. Davis, 'Joseph Cornell, Geographer of Utopia Parkway', in *Joseph Cornell: Opening the Box*, 52.

Porter's mention of the way in which constellations are 'constructions of the human spirit' enlarges the view; this process of enlargement and elevation is nonetheless only possible with the initial realisation of the smallness of the human in the face of the stars, as emphasised by the tiny image of a figure in the porthole of *Hotel du Nord*. Just as the Man-Moth 'climbs fearfully', the rooms of Bishop's work, like Cornell's *Hotel* boxes, are on a journey; they are situated in the midst of the round, turning world and its cold, blue-black space, and are very much exposed to its vast possibilities, both terrifying and exhilarating. In Bishop's translation of Paz's poem for Cornell, each of the latter's works is a 'hotel of crickets and constellations' ('Objects & Apparitions', 169), a phrase that encompasses the shifts in size and scale engendered by the spaces of both the poet's and the artist's work.

In fact, hotels are a vital space for her: they are never really homes; instead, they are simultaneously major and minor transitional spaces. When asked by an interviewer in her room in Petrópolis if 'you find that a dazzling landscape like this is an incentive to write, or [...] prefer to shut yourself off from visual distractions when you are working', Bishop replied: 'Ideally, I suppose any writer prefers a hotel room completely shut away from distractions'.⁴⁰ Significantly, a hotel room is a space that, while enabling isolation, nonetheless insists on its inhabitant's ability to travel. Certainly, this ideal could be seen to be imaginatively explored by the speaker in 'In Prison', themselves a writer figure addressing 'The reader' from 'The hotel-existence I now lead' (582). In reality, the sort of hotel-existence most frequently experienced by the reader in Bishop's poems is probably most similar to that in Cornell's boxes: that of being in a ship's cabin

⁴⁰Ashley Brown, 'An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop' (1966), as reproduced in *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, 18.

which, as a form of hotel room, is after all also an ‘establishment where travellers or tourists are provided with overnight accommodation’ (OED).

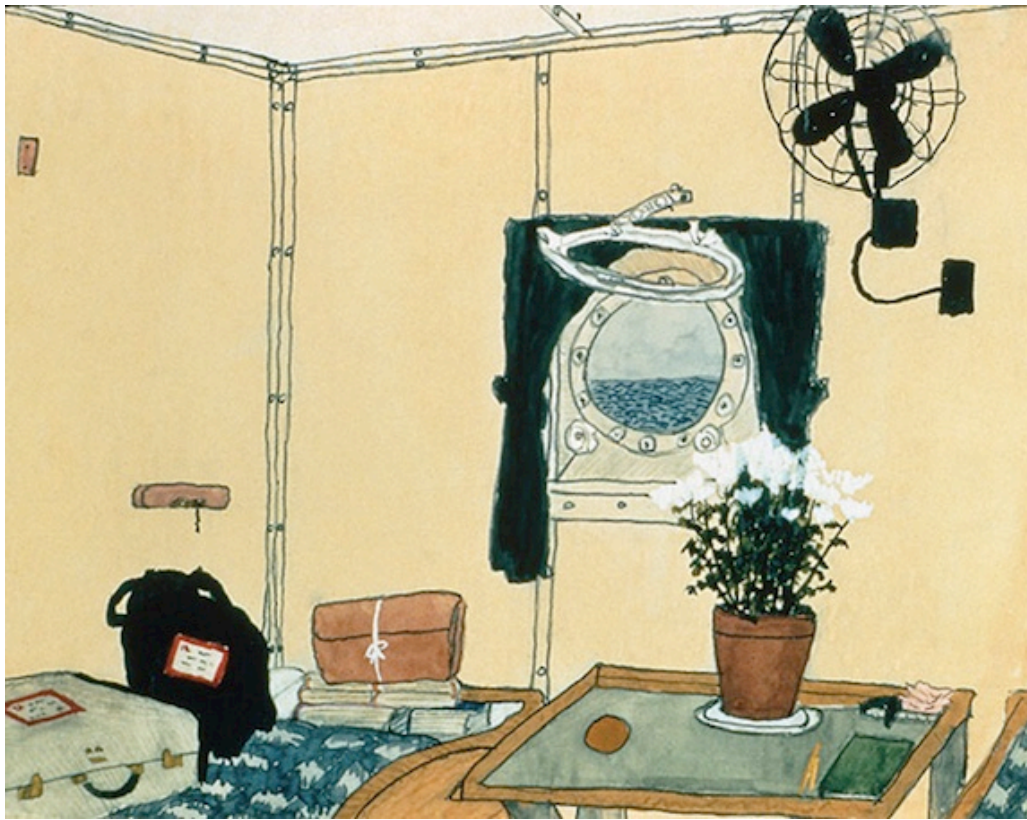


Figure 3.4 Elizabeth Bishop, *Cabin with Porthole* (undated)⁴¹

In his accompanying note for the painting by Bishop in Fig. 3.4, William Benton writes: ‘Books, bags, manuscripts loaded on board, this has the *mise-en-scène* of a single frame in *The Adventures of Elizabeth Bishop*’.⁴²

Benton himself leaves much to unpack in this succinct vision; he does not mention the homely effect of the curtains and the pot of flowers; the window, opened to the possibilities of fresh air, sea spray, a stray, misguided bird; the notebook in the corner of the table, perhaps a travel diary. As accommodation for however long this journey will last, the cabin is only a temporary dwelling place, the view outside of its open window promising vaster possibilities; nonetheless, it is a dwelling place that has been

⁴¹As reproduced in William Benton, *Exchanging Hats* (London: Carcanet, 1997), 45.

⁴²Benton, *Exchanging Hats*, 44.

furnished and domesticised, and in which its inhabitant thus intends to dwell. And yet Bishop's painted interior is also evocative of the additional possibility that there is a vastness within that reflects that without, just as the waiting room is capable of encompassing terrifyingly cold, blue-black space. With its proliferation of circular objects in various orientations and dimensions (the porthole and its cover; the cylindrical flowerpot; the coaster on the table; the mounted electric fan, ready to whirr into rotation), the view into this room is inversely suggestive of that which is seen through the end of a telescope: the planets in journeying orbit.

In December 1959, Cornell noted down, in his own diary, a statement from Wallace Fowlie, on Rimbaud's prose poem 'Promontoire': 'a promontory suggests a hotel, which appears as a microcosm of the world'.⁴³ As both an acquaintance of Fowlie's, and a reader (and occasional translator) of Rimbaud's work, it is probable that Bishop would have been familiar with this poem, as well as with Fowlie's notes on it. In any case, she shared Rimbaud and Cornell's interest in the promontory. If the poem-monument is described within 'The Monument' as being set upon 'An ancient promontory' (18), the liminal space implied by the promontory suggests to me that the poem, occupying this very space, is additionally perceivable as a window itself, a portal or aperture through which the reader is encouraged to look in and look out, seeing a microcosm of the world, and the world as a microcosm, in the ship's cabin. We are thus encouraged to take our cue for looking from the poem-window which, with its myriad means of viewing, provides us with myriad views of itself.

⁴³As quoted in Dawn Ades, 'The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell', in *Joseph Cornell*, 35.

3.2 Bubbles

Having looked at how the windows and promontories (i.e., the threshold spaces) in the work of both Bishop and Cornell mediate spatial and geographical interiors and exteriors, it is now time to introduce a temporal dimension by way of the bubble. Like his Dutch forebears, Cornell interrogated the relationship of the human to the universe through the bubble, which was a common motif in the *vanitas* genre of still-life painting, most notably in seventeenth-century Dutch art, where it served as ‘a metaphor for the transitory nature of life and the vanity of all earthly things’.⁴⁴ This motif provides us with a productive way of considering Bishop’s work, in which the themes and resonances of time and mortality are explored in compact poems whose small, precariously brief spaces are comparable to those of bubbles; as well as in poems whose own surface texture and use of imagery demonstrate an interest in the physical and aesthetic characteristics of bubbles. As such, the bubble could therefore be provisionally seen as a room that is ‘all window’.

At the New York World’s Fair in Flushing in the summer of 1939, Cornell had the chance to view Jean Siméon Chardin’s *Soap Bubbles* (1733-34) (see Fig. 3.5),⁴⁵ a painting that has influenced several others in the genre, including Edouard Manet’s *The Soap Bubble* (1867-69).

⁴⁴Waldman, *Master of Dreams*, 28.

⁴⁵Waldman, *Master of Dreams*, 28.



Figure 3.5 Jean Siméon Chardin, *Soap Bubbles* (c.1733-34)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

At the same fair, Cornell purchased a large supply of the Dutch clay pipes that would feature in his own *Soap Bubble* sets and their variants. It is likely that Bishop had seen the first of these, *(Untitled) Soap Bubble Set* (see Fig. 3.6), when it was exhibited at the MoMA in 1936; she was in New York during the summer, and her close friend Louise Crane (whose mother was the co-founder of the MoMA) was actively involved in organising and promoting events at the museum.



Figure 3.6 Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)* (1936)
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

Bishop was certainly aware of Cornell's soap bubble sets, as well as of a text from which he drew inspiration for these pieces: in her *Paris Review* interview with Spires, she recounts how 'When I looked at his show in New York two years ago I nearly fainted, because one of my favourite books is a book he liked and used. It's a little book by an

English scientist who wrote for children about soap bubbles [*Soap-Bubbles: Their Colours and the Forces which Mold Them*, by Sir C. V. Boys, 1889]'.⁴⁶

Untitled (Soap Bubble Set) was the first of several similar works. It is constructed out of various items, including an old map of the moon, a clay pipe, flat glass discs, a doll's head, an egg in a glass, and a filmstrip of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. All contained within a cabinet fronted by a glass panel, the work itself opens up a space of free association on thoughts of size and scale. The horizontal, serial arrangement of glass discs in the foreground of the work, along with the filmstrips towards its ceiling, evoke a sense of linear, sequentially structured time (that, also, of lunar phases) against the stationary, expansive moment of the viewer's contemplation. An egg contained within a glass (itself contained within the cabinet) contains the unhatched possibilities of life, these multiple levels of containment gesturing towards the increasingly small and infinitesimal. Against this, the giant titular soap bubble of the moon appears to be emerging from the carefully positioned clay pipe; it gestures in the opposite direction, towards the increasingly vast.

Cornell's soap-bubble moon straddles the realms of the modest, mortal pastime of blowing bubbles (in which a single human breath is blown through a pipe), and that of the eternal and astronomical; in doing so, it has something to say about its own status as a constructed artwork, as well as of the possibility of art to undertake imaginative voyages that are far larger than life. In Bishop's last poem, 'Sonnet', written in the year of the poet's death, a bubble is comparably perched between containment and freedom:

Caught – the bubble
in the spirit-level,

⁴⁶Quoted in Spires, 'Elizabeth Bishop', 120-21.

a creature divided;
 and the compass needle
 wobbling and wavering,
 undecided.
 Freed – the broken
 thermometer’s mercury
 running away;
 and the rainbow-bird
 from the narrow bevel
 of the empty mirror,
 flying wherever
 it feels like, gay!

(180)

The motif of the bubble is carried from the spirit-level to the thermometer, both objects whose functioning is dependent on a series of factors involving the movement and pressure of their ethanol/alcohol contents. Dealing with these instruments of measure, Bishop’s use of the measured form of the sonnet is itself an escape measure, inverting the octet-sestet pattern of the traditional Petrarchan sonnet, and creating rhymes in unexpected places: ‘divided’/‘undecided’ in lines three and six of the opening sestet might provide the impression of regularity, but ‘spirit-level’/‘bevel’ and ‘away’/‘gay’ quickly demonstrate that, like the rainbow-bird of the poem, Bishop is stretching the bounds of the form, ‘flying wherever’. Indeed, the other aural echoes we pick up within the poem, whether the four internal rhymes of ‘thermometer’s mercury’ or the progression from ‘bubble’ through ‘level’ to ‘bevel’, provide a sonic counterpart to the free-associative visual play of size and scale as performed by Cornell in the contained space of *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)*. In its imagining of freedom, the themes of containment and escape in ‘Sonnet’ are encapsulated by the poem’s own expansive negotiation of the restriction of received form.

Presenting the dichotomy between the captive and free, the full and empty, Bishop’s bubble resonates with Cornell’s soap-bubble moon, with its own sequential full and

empty lunar phases. If the stationary image of a soap bubble, paused on the brim of a pipe, is a starting point for reverie in *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)*, the soap bubble caught at the opening of 'Sonnet' likewise sets in motion movement from stasis. Syntactically echoing the poem's first line, 'the broken' perched at the end of 'Freed – the broken' is momentarily a noun, like the subject of 'Caught – the bubble', before the enjambment rolls it ahead into an adjective. The bubble in a spirit-level is caught because its existence is necessary to the work of the instrument, and occupies (even exists as) the space that has been intentionally left for it by the incomplete filling of the spirit-level with alcohol. On the other hand, a broken thermometer is brought about by unwanted bubbles, as caused by the overheating of and pressure upon its liquid contents. C. V. Boys, whose work was read by both Bishop and Cornell, describes how 'If now you have a cylinder of liquid of great length suddenly formed and left to itself, it clearly cannot retain that form. It must break up into a series of drops. [...] If the jet is larger, the water must pass more quickly, or under a greater pressure, for this to be the case'.⁴⁷

For Bishop, this image of a high-pressure jet of water clearly had positive connotations in its liberating potential. This is not only evident in her association of freedom with an overheated, bubbled-over, and broken thermometer, but also in a metaphor that she employed in her memoir of Moore:

To change the image from air to water: somehow, under all the subaqueous pressure at 260 Cumberland Street – admonitions, reserves, principles, simple stoicism – Marianne rose triumphant, or rather her voice did, in a lively, unceasing jet of shining bubbles. I had "taken" chemistry at preparatory school; I also could imagine that in this water, or heavy water glass, I saw forming the elaborate, logical structures that became her poems.

('Efforts of Affection', 484)

⁴⁷C. V. Boys, *Soap-Bubbles: Their Colours and the Forces which Mold Them* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920); 62, 79.

Just as Moore is able to rise, in Bishop's account, as a forceful jet of bubbles from a pressured environment, the broken thermometer in 'Sonnet' witnesses a similar transformation of water to air – indeed, to music, as in the lyric itself. Elsewhere, in 'Mr. Pope's Garden', a short story from 1933, a description of how in the garden 'a cool spring bubbles up' (545) encapsulates this process with a verb that succinctly consolidates the link between bubbles and jets of water, the former being a component of particularly forceful instances of the latter.

This description also lends a new nuance to the supplementary title given by Bishop to the 1955 reissue of an earlier collection with additional new material, *North and South – a Cold Spring*.⁴⁸ A few lines from the titular opening poem to *A Cold Spring* recall the rising, lively jet of bubbles to which Bishop likened Moore's voice:

Now, from the thick grass, the fireflies
begin to rise:
up, then down, then up again:
lit on the ascending flight,
drifting simultaneously to the same height,
– exactly like the bubbles in champagne.
– Later on they rise much higher.

(44)

The poet's observational aside is arresting, particularly her use of the word *exactly*. If bubbles in champagne exemplify the phenomenon of upwards drifting flight, or the sense of movement or propulsion that has been described in the last few paragraphs, they additionally remind us about another characteristic of bubbles: their individual precariousness and fragility. Indeed, as in 'Sonnet', the bubble shares the quality of

⁴⁸Significantly, Bishop had also dedicated this collection to Dr. Anny Baumann, the doctor and confidant who had, over the years, been privy to the former's own spring of various indiscretions.

utter breakability with ‘the broken’. Steeped in Renaissance literature as she was,⁴⁹ Bishop would have been familiar with a Renaissance trope instigated by Erasmus, who conceived of the notion of the *homo bulla*: ‘Man is but a bubble. The lesson of this proverb is that there is nothing so fragile, so fleeting and so empty as the life of man’.⁵⁰ The prevalence of this idea is apparent not only in the numerous allegorical uses of bubbles in *vanitas* paintings of the time, but also in its literature; Francis Bacon’s poem ‘The world’s a bubble’, for instance, opens with the line ‘The world’s a bubble, and the life of man / less than a span’.⁵¹ In Bishop’s work, the *homo bulla* manifests itself in a different, subtler guise; size and scale is reimagined temporarily with the evanescence of the bubble.

Certainly, an awareness of the fleeting nature of life pervades her oeuvre. If Bishop’s work characteristically contains parenthetical asides that establish a dynamic of varying sizes, scales, and forms of containment in the poems’ own syntactic structure, it also directly makes use of images that negotiate this dynamic in terms of life, living, and mortality:

We lived in a pocket of Time.
It was close, it was warm.
Along the dark seam of the river
the houses, the barns, the two churches,
hid like white crumbs
in a fluff of gray willows and elms,
till Time made one of his gestures;
his nails scratched the shingled roof.
Roughly his hand reached in,
and tumbled us out.

⁴⁹Bishop was an avid reader and diligent student of Renaissance literature; she spent a month in New York in 1937 with a self-developed syllabus of literature from the period. See Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 121.

⁵⁰Desiderius Erasmus, *The Adages of Erasmus*, ed. William Barker, trans. R. A. B. Mynors (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 171.

⁵¹Francis Bacon, ‘The world’s a bubble’, in *Francis Bacon: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 332.

('A Short, Slow Life', 235)

In this small poem, unpublished during Bishop's lifetime, the 'pocket of Time' in which the speaker and their companion(s) live appears to be not merely an idiomatic pocket of time, but one with the tailoring detail ('dark seam') and lint ('white crumbs', 'fluff') of an actual pocket. Yet the seam is also a river, and the white crumbs and fluff are buildings and trees, Bishop's poem collapsing notions of scale in a way that demonstrates the fragility of human lives in the face of time's potential to roughly reach in and tumble us out. Elsewhere, in 'Love Lies Sleeping', the 'immense city, carefully revealed, / made delicate by over-workmanship, / detail upon detail', is parenthetically a 'little chemical "garden" in a jar' (12-13), an artificial image that nonetheless shares the anxiety in 'A Short, Slow Life' about time and the preservation of the moment of life and the living.

This is an anxiety that is similarly encompassed by the complicated relationship between the feeling of security enabled by containment, despite all its restrictions, as well as the invariable connotations of expulsion, loss, and exposure, in freedom. As a room made entirely out of window, the bubble promises the largest view; however, it also promises the utmost exposure, raising the stakes as well. Cornell's soap-bubble moon opens up a space for expansively imaginative reverie; positioned in a tradition of the soap-bubble *vanitas* genre, it simultaneously gestures, alongside the egg and the doll's head, at mortality. It also opens up the possibility of conceiving Bishop's poems, particularly her more physically compact ones, as bubbles, themselves 'pocket[s] of Time' in the way in which they similarly negotiate the dialectic of containment/escape in terms of life and death.

This metaphoric connection is not as much of a stretch as it might initially seem when we consider the fact that Bishop was herself very interested in bubbles, and in blowing bubbles. If she was able to write to a young father Lowell in August 1960 with a ‘Child Care Note’ that ‘straight liquid shampoo makes marvellous soap bubbles – the very biggest and toughest –’,⁵² this verdict was the result of her own practice in the pastime, most notably pursued during the summer she spent at Yaddo in 1949. Two letters from this period see her describing to Loren MacIver how ‘I bought myself a huge bottle of soap-bubble stuff and now I can sit on my balcony & blow bubbles, at least, when I get too bored’;⁵³ and again, several weeks later to Lowell, that ‘I haven’t been able to “work” at all so spend most of my time very pleasantly sitting on my balcony blowing bubbles’.⁵⁴

Part of the artistic accomplishment of Chardin’s painting – and that of other soap bubble paintings – lies in the masterfully realistic rendering of a transparent soap bubble. Here, it is composed of the lightest outline of a sphere against the dark background, relying on several smudges of blue and white paint to give it sheen, dimensionality, and corporeality. Against the solid, practically sculptural shadows and highlights that make up the bubble-blowing figure, and the thin, rigid pipe, the bubble is barely there – yet it quite literally contains the life force, the breath, of the painting, as the work’s title likewise presents it as the focal point. Perhaps Boys’s book appealed so much to Bishop, then, because, like Moore’s insistence that art ‘must acknowledge the forces which have made it’, its very title (*‘Their Colours and the Forces which Mold Them’*) echoes this desire to illuminate the effort invested into the making of a beautiful

⁵²Bishop, *Words in Air*, 337.

⁵³Bishop, *One Art*, 190.

⁵⁴Bishop, *One Art*, 193.

object, however fleeting or small. The speaker in 'Poem' thus takes similar care to linger over a painting 'About the size of an old-style dollar bill', belonging to 'owners / who looked at it sometimes, or didn't bother to' (164-65).

The book informs us, for instance, 'that a soap-bubble is perfectly round [...] because the elastic film, trying to become as small as it can, must take the form which has the smallest surface for its content, and that form is the sphere'.⁵⁵ Boys understood, as did Chardin, the careful, balanced tension of a dynamic in which one factor is diminished, shrunken down, or understated, in order to make way for greater impact. In precisely its brevity and fragility, its slightness, the bubble serves as a symbol for our mortality, the sheer precariousness of something as vast as life. Addressing a painting that has been done 'in one breath' (165), 'Poem' devotes two entire pages to this 'sketch done in an hour', ultimately demonstrating how 'Not much' can in fact prove to be a great deal – 'Life and the memory of it' (166).

Far from being a pastime for when 'I haven't been able to "work" at all', Bishop's bubble-blowing was in fact highly productive, especially if we consider the way in which the reed-like pipe in Chardin's painting also evocatively resembles a pen. Her use of inverted commas in that statement is itself telling. If the act of blowing bubbles was a pastime, a means of passing the time, her acts of writing resulted in poems that are worth exploring with bubbles in mind, not simply in terms of their thematic preoccupation with mortality (i.e., with time passing), but also in the way in which their association with mortality is both coloured and complicated by their constitution.

Boys points out the particular dilemma surrounding 'out-of-door bubbles', which are composed of 'great sheets of brilliant and varying colour': 'While out-of-door bubbles

⁵⁵Boys, *Soap-Bubbles*, 49.

are so attractive it is best not to blow them out of doors', since 'It is seldom that there is so little wind that bubbles of any size can be managed'.⁵⁶ He then goes on to explain that 'the colour [of soap bubbles] depends upon the thickness primarily', and that 'when they are adequately protected they may even be almost perfectly black'.⁵⁷ In other words: the thinness of the transparent bubble, when positioned outdoors in the sun, leads to the light being reflected 'partly from its front surface and partly from its back surface',⁵⁸ a factor contributing to the iridescent appearance that we behold. And yet cruelly, while it is the thinness and translucency – and accompanying fragility – of the outdoor bubble that enables its particularly brilliant and varying colours ('Beautiful as the soap-bubble is as an object indoors it is still more so out of doors'),⁵⁹ its exposure to the same outdoor elements that enable its spectacular appearance is also what leads to its fleetingness and brevity. Perhaps this double-edged nature of their appearance is why, in the poem 'Pleasure Seas', Bishop describes 'the colours that swarm around the sides / Of soap-bubbles' as being simultaneously 'poisonous and fabulous' (223).

This temporal manifestation of the particular size and proportional scale of a bubble was clearly a concept that she grasped and repeatedly pondered, as the beautiful yet inescapable fragility of bubbles recurs in her work: in 'A Flight of Fancy', the narrator is paid a visit from a 'literary' gentleman who takes her on a balloon ride; as they discuss *The Venetian Glass Nephew*, by Elinor Wylie, the gentleman describes how the characters in the book 'can be admired only like the soap bubbles children blow – at a distance. But up here the distance is covered – we are with that which we admire and we can breathe fantasy as easily as reality. There is no roof over our heads to hold our fancies

⁵⁶Boys, *Soap-Bubbles*, 129-30.

⁵⁷Boys, *Soap-Bubbles*, 136.

⁵⁸Boys, *Soap-Bubbles*, 142.

⁵⁹Boys, *Soap-Bubbles*, 127.

down, and no floor beneath our feet for thought to rest on' (509). The narrator immediately responds that 'it seems to me that poetry would make the ideal reading matter for this particular environment', and the gentleman agrees: '[Coleridge's work] has just the right amounts of air and music and colour mixed in the finest proportions for ballooning' (510).

The term 'poetry' appears to have been used loosely in Bishop's story, as with the narrator and her friend's agreement that it is the 'essence', the 'half fairy-tale and half poetry' (509) nature of Wylie's story that resonates with the experience of ballooning; it, too, has the 'right amounts of air and music and colour mixed in the finest proportions'. In fact, Bishop's story, an account of a balloon ride, is its own subject, 'the gleaming blue bubble that held us so softly suspended' (508). Its title, 'A Flight of Fancy', is descriptive of the story itself, which opens with the line 'I know you'll like him – he's literary' (507) and an invitation to go ballooning, and closes with the poet ending the story just as the gentleman ends their blue bubble ride:

I nervously watched him poise on one toe and reach upward with the pin towards the beautiful blue balloon. He could just reach it. There was a long, soft, hissing sound, almost like a faint and goblin laughter, and we sank slowly downwards.

(512)

The poet's craftsmanship in matching form to narrative is akin to the skill and conditions required to shape the perfect soap-bubble: 'the elastic film, trying to become as small as it can, must take the form which has the small surface for its content, and that form is the sphere', a 'remarkable property within small limits of adjusting its tension to the load'.⁶⁰ Yet creating the perfectly-formed bubble comes with the

⁶⁰Boys, *Soap-Bubbles*, 105.

awareness that the most beautiful bubble is also the most fragile, as is highlighted by the placement of ‘nervously’ in such close proximity to ‘the pin’. For Richard Holmes, ballooning for the Romantic imagination was ‘both uplifting and terrifying’.⁶¹ As it is with children who most delight in blowing bubbles and running to pop them, Bishop appears to have concluded that a bubble, short-lived as it is, is nonetheless not a rare thing; there are bubbles everywhere.

Most subtly, they appear in her work in the guise of their characteristic surface quality of iridescence. The word is employed twice in the same line to describe the wheelbarrows lined with fish scales in ‘At The Fishhouses’: ‘creamy iridescent coats of mail, / with small iridescent flies crawling on them’ (51). In fact, given that iridescence is the consequence of light having being reflected in parts, Bishop’s repetition of the word enacts the optical phenomenon. In this specific image, the visual quality of the bubble’s iridescent translucency is merged with the urge for defensive protection in the armoured connotations of ‘mail’, which might suggest an uncomplicated desire for security and containment. This same tension between captivity and freedom is navigated in the quality of iridescence elsewhere in the poems, consistently suggesting its association in the poet’s mind with the idea of freedom, as in the ‘rainbow-bird [...] flying wherever / it feels like’, or at least with something akin to freedom: the notion of expansiveness, and the quality of being extensive and all-encompassing – even if, or especially when, this freedom is not straightforward, and is hard-won. Certainly, there would be no freedom without captivity; it is out of the dynamic between the two that Bishop’s rainbow-bird emerges.

⁶¹Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder* (London: Harper Press, 2008), 161.

Boys compares the thin films of bubbles to the ‘wet large areas of highly coloured oil-film’ that are a result of the way in which ‘The motor-car has brought oil on to the roads in all our towns’,⁶² and this particular variety of iridescence is also found in Bishop’s work. ‘Filling Station’, for instance, opens with a description of its setting:

Oh, but it is dirty!
 – this little filling station,
 oil-soaked, oil-permeated
 to a disturbing, over-all
 black translucency.
 Be careful with that match!

(123)

Little as it may be, the general effect of the interior of the filling station is arresting, ‘disturbing’ and ‘over-all’. The quality of iridescence is not overtly described to us here, but in the image of the filling station’s ‘over-all’ ‘black translucency’ we can picture the same slick, shimmering colours on a ‘rainbow-bird’ such as a raven or blackbird, whose plumage is so black that it is variously blue and green and purple, when perceived from different angles. As the poem goes on to mention, ‘Some comic books provide / the only note of color – / of certain color’ (123), and this qualification is telling.

‘Disturbing’ might not be the first adjective that springs to mind when we consider the idea of freedom. But there is nonetheless another kind of colour in the black translucency of the oil-soaked filling station, in the potent, liberating possibility embedded within the warning to ‘Be careful with that match!’, when juxtaposed against the suffocatingly palpable weight of the ‘crushed and greased- / impregnated wickerwork’, the doily ‘heavy with gray crochet’ (123). This injunction provides a similar levity to the combination of ‘nervously’ and ‘the pin’. It is a form of relief that is uplifting and terrifying, akin to that of the liquid contents bubbling over and breaking

⁶²Boys, *Soap-Bubbles*, 157.

out of a high-pressure, over-heated thermometer, an image that is particularly comparable when we consider that liquid mercury is highly hazardous and can cause explosions.

This quality of relief is more overt in the ending of 'The Fish', where 'oil had spread a rainbow / around the rusted engine' 'until everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!' (34). In this poem, the relationship between captivity and freedom (the fish is caught and released) is made manifest in the effect of light on the surface of the translucent oil puddle, simultaneously refracted throughout the space of the entire poem; the poem's final words, jubilantly buoyant, are themselves refracted in miniature by their repetition, entirely transforming the reader's experience of the poem. If Cornell sometimes placed mirror fragments strategically around his small boxes in order to create the sense of expanded, expansive space, and the effect of reflected, repeated images, the tiny reflective surfaces in Bishop's poems similarly open up the potential for the 'everything', the 'over-all', and the 'everywhere'.

Notably, however, these surfaces are refractive rather than reflective, and they never provide complete, untroubled clarity. The quality of iridescence is what troubles the otherwise straightforward transparency of a soap-bubble, its capacity to be directly seen through, and it is this quality that Bishop chooses to explore in reflective surfaces (oil, for instance), that share one of the most distinctive qualities of a soap-bubble, but that are even less straightforwardly transparent. Bishop's preference for translucence over transparency embodies and emphasises Isobel Armstrong's observation about 'Glass's pellucid transitivity': 'Transparency enables a perceiver to make a *seemingly* unbroken transit from subject to object [...] its visible invisibility is what is important about

transparency. It must be both barrier and medium'.⁶³ While Bishop's reflective surfaces are markedly not transparent, they fully foreground their pellucid transitivity, their ability to be simultaneously barrier and medium, and therefore to push the emphasis away from any easy transit between subject and object, instead focusing upon the surface texture itself, in its visible, near- but not-quite-invisibility.

This is a way of looking that encapsulates the experience of reading a poem like 'Sonnet', in which there is no narrative that may be clearly conveyed through the words, or that may be quickly gleaned from our reading of the text. Instead, Bishop's small poem is a presentation of images that makes us linger on the associations that emerge from the poem's own construction material. The 'broken / thermometer's mercury / running away', for instance, conjures up connotations larger than itself. Typically depicted as a winged messenger, the Roman god Mercury was the god of poetry (Bishop's mercury is equally fleet-footed), as well as that of travellers. Running away, in its connection with being broken, is an evasive form of dissipation, and Bishop's poem secures as much as it exposes.

Despite their shared interest in the theme of voyages, Cornell, unlike Bishop, did not actually travel very much at all in his lifetime; the furthest he ever wandered from his home of New York was to Massachusetts, where he spent a few years at college. Critics such as Dawn Ades, for instance, have read Cornell's boxes as an attempt to achieve the same possibilities as those that might be achieved from travelling: 'working on the boxes themselves in his cellar, like a substitute for a real voyage, often induced the [...] sensations of escape and freedom'.⁶⁴ I agree with Ades, and maintain that in the

⁶³Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 32; 37-38, emphasis mine.

⁶⁴Ades, 'Transcendental Surrealism', 37.

soap-bubble boxes, the sensation of escape from a tiny, cramped cellar is achieved by the movement from the domestic soap bubble to the solar system, through the theme of celestial navigation that pervades all of the soap-bubble pieces. Confined to New York, Cornell undertook voyages that took him from one of the briefest and most fragile symbols of our mortality, to expanses across time and space. Bishop's poem, too, takes us from a bubble trapped in a spirit-level, to a Roman god who gave his name to a planet. It is thus possible for us to conceive the once-contained bubble in the spirit level as also the iridescent rainbow-bird set free in the poem's second half, the imaginative, associative freedom of the poem, as with the other poems examined in this section, swelling and expanding far beyond the physically and temporally small bounds that have been set by their poet.

3.3 Cameras

Having variously considered Bishop's rooms with windows, and her bubbles as rooms that are all window, I would now like to navigate the space of her work in terms of the optical and photographic. Across Bishop studies, the poet's 'eye' is a common motif: Jarrell famously described, for instance, how 'All her poems have written underneath, *I have seen it*'.⁶⁵ Carole Doreski, too, perceives Bishop's work as 'clearly distinguishing between the gaze of plain sight and the interiority of vision (while respecting the power of each)'.⁶⁶ In this section, I am interested in Bishop's eye as it looks through various surfaces and devices; I would therefore like to explore the ways in which the poems might reveal *themselves* to be *camera obscuras*, rooms with views, that are larger and more capacious than they initially appear to be.

⁶⁵Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 235.

⁶⁶C. K. Doreski, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5.

For Bishop had a personal interest in optics. She worked at an optical shop in Key West in 1943, largely ‘taking binoculars apart & putting them together again’, but also delighting in being able to ‘spend a lot of time – had to – watching everything through magnificent optical instruments of every kind, including periscopes [...] Eventually I would have worked on sextants & periscopes & all kinds of wonderful-looking things I don’t know the names of’ (756-57). Her stint at the shop was short-lived because of the strain on her eyes and cleaning acid-induced eczema that she suffered from the work.

However, her description of her experience is worth noting:

I was infinitely impressed with the patience of those men *fiddling* day after day with those delicate, maddening little instruments. I don’t think I could do it, even if it hadn’t made me sick. And their lack of imagination would get more & more depressing – not one of them had any idea of the *theory* of the thing, *why* the prisms go this way or that way, or what “collimate” & “optical center” really mean, etc. – & of course I kept fussing & fuming because I was so sure certain things could be done better in some other way, or that some very simple change would make it all easier. The foreman, who was perfectly happy spending 5 days adjusting one lens, or 4 hours on one screw the size of a pin, would look at me very mildly & say “Don’t let it get you, kiddo.”

(757)

It clearly did get to her, though, and aside from suggesting that Bishop herself did know about ‘the *theory* of the thing’, this passage is significant in revealing her investment in ‘those delicate, maddening little instruments’, instruments whose littleness toed the subtle line between the delicately finessed and the maddeningly finicky. Bishop’s colleagues’ lack of imagination and knowledge about their work maddened and impressed her, as did their willingness to spend large amounts of time fixing the smallest of components.

The capacity to achieve forms of heightened or enhanced vision is sustained by the role of the camera in Bishop’s oeuvre. Her own interest in photography is apparent in

her use of inexpensive mass-market cameras during her travels. In a letter to Moore located in Moore's archive at the Rosenbach Library in Philadelphia, she writes, in September 1936:

If you can endure such a display, I am sending you ANOTHER picture of the cat – this one I consider my best, and I am particularly proud of it because I took it with a 39c camera. (I tried to get one of these 39c cameras the other day to give to a little girl, and the young woman in the drugstore said that they are now 45c – “You must have got yours when we were having our Special – a camera and a tooth-brush for 39c.”)⁶⁷

The poet is concerned with what is involved in the process of looking, and how the tiniest details are amplified or illuminated by the possibilities enabled by photography; this is the angle through which we must examine Bishop's use of the camera. Certainly, these visual possibilities are, in fact, partly what make the photograph such an effective documentary tool; in 'Gregorio Valdes, 1879-1939', her personal memoir for the artist, Bishop recounts how she had given Valdes photographs from which to begin the paintings she had commissioned him to undertake; his works 'are almost all copies of photographs' (332). Part of the convenience of utilising photographs as a basis for painting is their distillation of a fleeting moment into a stable, permanent point of reference to which the artist can repeatedly return. Yet another effect of the photograph is that it may be seen as providing greater, utmost clarity, as suggested by Bishop's narrator in 'In Prison', when she describes how 'I can still see as clearly as in a photograph the beautiful completeness of the view from that window' (586). This effect is perhaps partly a result of its static stability, and partly that of its framing of a

⁶⁷Bishop, 'Bishop correspondence', V:04:30, The Marianne Moore Papers, The Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum & Library.

particular portion of a scene (in contrast to the overwhelming of the naked eye by the world in its innumerable detail).

Fig. 3.7 depicts what Bishop considers to be her 'best snapshots, so far, of Key West'.⁶⁸

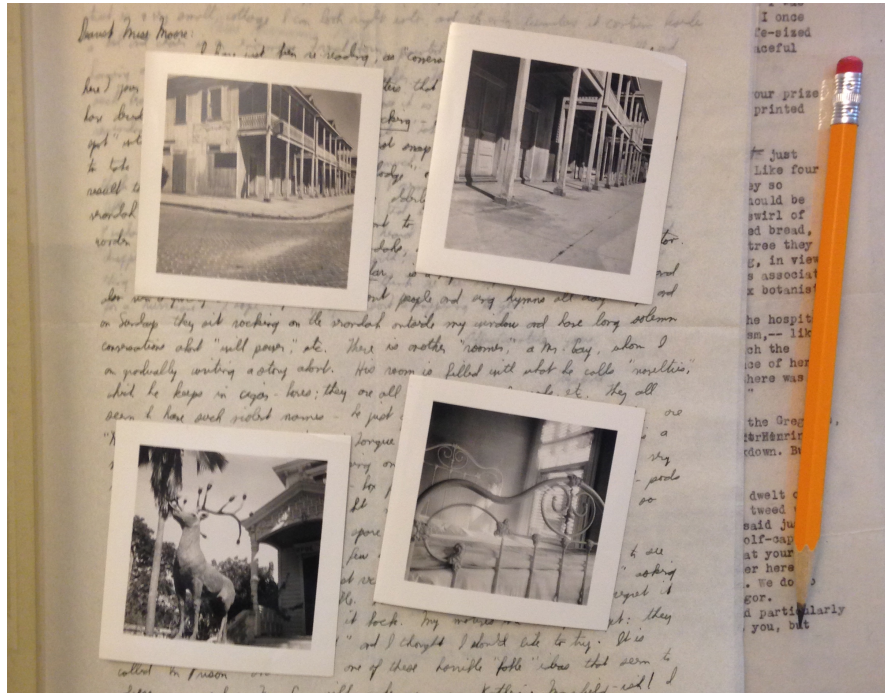


Figure 3.7 Four photographs, accompanying letter of 31 January 1938⁶⁹

⁶⁸Bishop, *One Art*, 67.

⁶⁹'Bishop correspondence' folder, V:05:01, The Marianne Moore Papers, The Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum & Library.



Figure 3.8 Close-up of first two photographs

In these first two photographs of what appears to be the same building (see Fig. 3.8), Bishop is playing with angle and framing in order to produce a sense of perspective, via a vanishing point.

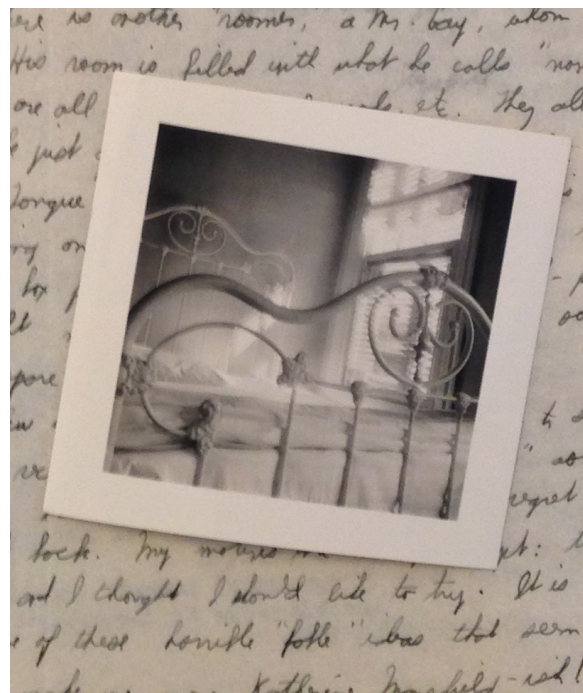


Figure 3.9 Close-up of fourth photograph

In Fig. 3.9, a close-up shot of the foot-post of a bed renders its intricate design in focus, so that we are looking at swirling metalwork instead of an entire piece of furniture.

Her elaboration on the third photograph makes particularly clear the amount of thought and technical consideration that went into the finished snapshot:

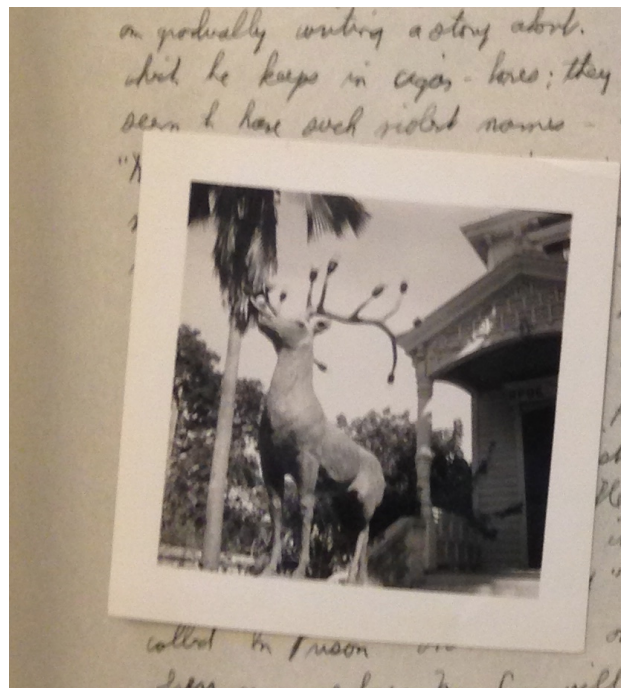


Figure 3.10 Close-up of third photograph

‘I tried to take [a photograph of] the Elk so that the front of the “lodge” or “temple” would show too, with the result that I tipped the camera’.⁷⁰ All the elements of this particular photograph are fairly level in terms of their distance to the camera/viewer, so the main technical consideration here appears to be that of including all the desired components into the final frame, in order to present some semblance of a cohesive scene (i.e., that of the lodge with the Elk by its entrance, with the latter framed by both the palm tree and the building). In the other three photographs in Fig. 3.7, Bishop appears to be less interested in providing a similarly balanced scene, and more interested in capturing detail via the close-up (as in the two photographs on the right), as well as depth via the angled and recessional perspective (as in the two upper photographs). If she describes to Brown that ‘switching tenses always gives effects of

⁷⁰Bishop, *One Art*, 67.

depth, space, foreground, background, and so on',⁷¹ these techniques are conveyed in the spatial terms more immediately evident in her composition of photographs. Behind the small final image, then, is a complex, capacious working of depth and space.

Susan Sontag has observed that 'Photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out',⁷² and Bishop was not only interested in how to capture the world within the scale of a 35mm photograph, but also in the different ways of viewing the resulting photograph.

Did I tell you that I have been taking photographic slides? - I always thought it was too bourgeois for words but they really are lovely and I have a small Amazon lecture and a small Cabo Frio lecture, etc - Lota does the machine part and so far we have to look at everything twice, I don't know why, but I'm hoping to solve this problem.

(From a letter to Lowell, 833)

Bishop's use of the word 'small' in relation to the particularly enormous subjects of the Amazon and Cabo Frio (i.e., an entire Brazilian municipality) is comical, but it also emphasises the way in which photography entails playing around with the size and scale of the world. In turn, the slide projector would have enabled Bishop's photographs to be projected as enlarged images on a viewing screen; viewing them as location-themed lectures (that is, as series of slides) would have additionally produced an effect akin to that of viewing montage sequences in documentary footage. In this hobby Bishop shares another affinity with Cornell, whose own interest in filmmaking saw him 'splic[ing] together a wild assortment of inspiring and mundane images to create a strand of non-narrative, non-literal, and non-linear associative linkages',⁷³ in film scenarios such as his 1933 *Monsieur Phot*. Describing the visual impact of these

⁷¹Brown, 'An Interview', 298.

⁷²Susan Sontag, 'In Plato's Cave', in *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 2008), 4.

⁷³David Saunders, 'Joseph Cornell's Stereopticon', *Turtle Point Press Magazine* (Spring 2013). <http://www.turtlepointpress.com/travel tainted/joseph-cornells-stereopticon/>.

scenarios, his friend David Saunders describes how ‘The experience of watching his movies is a lot like flipping through a random stack of stereoscopic views’.⁷⁴



Figure 3.11 Joseph Cornell's stereopticon
[David Saunders]

Cornell owned a stereopticon (see Fig. 3.11), a variety of slide projector whose juxtaposition of two-dimensional images, each taken at slightly different angles, creates the optical illusion of three-dimensional space, thus giving the impression of depth.

Given both Bishop's interest in photography and the fact that she was in New York in 1937, she likely visited the *Photography 1839-1937* exhibition at the MoMA during the year. There, she would have encountered at least three stereoscopes, among the apparatus displayed. One of these, from Paris in the 1850s, would have displayed daguerrotypes, images formed on silver sheets in the first fully successful photographic experiments. Bishop would also have read a first-hand account from 1839 about an early demonstration of the daguerrotypic process by Louis Daguerre, its inventor:

He fixed it then, at an angle of 45°, in a box at the bottom of which was an earthen pan holding two pounds of mercury. Under the pan was a lamp which heated the mercury to 62° Centigrade or 117° Fahrenheit, and as the mercury grew hot its globules arising,

⁷⁴Saunders, 'Joseph Cornell's Stereopticon'.

combining with the prepared surface of the metal, *brought out the picture*.⁷⁵

This account is particularly suggestive for the poet who would eventually write about ‘mercury / running away’ in ‘Sonnet’. However, this would not have been Bishop’s first encounter with the stereoscopic process, considering that in an earlier poem, she writes about how ‘Love’s eye alone is stereoscopic, / Seeing in vistas many more dimensions’ (‘II’, ‘Three Poems’, 18). She was clearly familiar with the workings of the instrument, and interested in the cumulative effect of viewing single images sequentially – in her personal memoir for Auden, for instance, she singles out this image, from his poem ‘A Bride in the ’30s’, as being amongst the latter’s most memorable lines:

Easily my dear, you move, easily your head,
And easily as through the leaves of a photograph album I’m led
Through the night’s delights and the day’s impressions,
Past the tall tenements and the trees in the wood,
Through sombre the sixteen skies of Europe
And the Danube flood.

(‘A Brief Reminiscence and a Brief Tribute’, 729-30)

If Cornell’s stereoscopic film scenarios offered ‘a strand of non-narrative, non-literal, and non-linear associative linkages’, the various slideshow montages created by Bishop on her slide projector would have similarly given the effect, as elsewhere described in ‘Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance’, of ‘Everything only connected by “and” and “and”’ (46).

Certainly, a poem like ‘Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance’ is exemplary of the way in which Bishop shares with her titular ‘Sandpiper’ the principle of ‘(no detail too small)’ (125), this description in fact highlighted and emphasised by its parenthetical containment. In this poem, the way in which ‘The world is a mist. And

⁷⁵As quoted in Beaumont Newhall, ‘Introduction’, *Photography, 1839-1937* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1937), 25.

then the world is / minute and vast and clear', too, is comparable to the process, as viewed through a viewfinder, of a lens settling upon a focal range, shifting between blur and clarity. And yet, just as the poem cannot merely be seen as a list-like collation of sights simply 'connected by "and" and "and"', I am less interested in the way in which the poet's eye is akin to a camera's viewfinder, and more in what happens subsequently, between the finding of the view and the manufacturing of the image; in other words, what happens with the click of the shutter, and how a larger vision is processed within the small, contained poem as in a camera. For, I have thus far looked at how Bishop was interested in both framing and setting up her photographs, and in viewing them, but what is there to say about the larger internal working of 'this agile camera' itself, with its 'Infinite angles of shooting' ('I', 'Three Poems', 18)?

In 'Objects & Apparitions', each of Cornell's works is a 'Slot machine of visions, / condensation flask for conversations, / hotel of crickets and constellations' (169). These are all transformative inner spaces which share some semblance of physiological affinity with the camera, with its etymological origins in 'any room or chamber', 'a (small) chamber or cavity in a mechanism, a part of the body, a shell, etc' (*OED*). David Kalstone alights briefly on this idea of the camera obscura in relation to Bishop's 'retired chambers each with only one window to the world'.⁷⁶ I would like to extend this analogy of an eye, by thinking about how the chambers of Bishop's work both enable, and encompass, the particular internal processes of a camera. Another work by Cornell provides a convenient path into this study:

⁷⁶David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*, ed. Robert Hemenway (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 59.



Figure 3.12 Joseph Cornell, *Monsieur Claude* (c.1933)
ArtNet

A collage composed out of tinted glass and printed paper, *Monsieur Claude* is a compendium of optical devices used by artists in the eighteenth century. The contraption depicted in the middle of the piece demonstrates the working of a camera obscura, a small, darkened chamber which, through the use of a light-permitting pinhole, projects the inverted image of a scene. The title of the collage and its use of tinted glass is a nod to the Claude glass, a portable miniature device that makes use of a tinted convex mirror to produce a tonally adjusted and shrunken-down image of a reflected scene. Cornell's piece is primarily about acts of looking, particularly as performed by artists, and the way in which these acts are mediated.

For Kalstone, the camera is 'a classic illustration for the operation of the eye, the reception of images on the retina. It also represents a mode of description – one that emphasises receptivity, the image conceived and recorded as part of a prior creation

rather than being deliberately framed by the intervening and active artist'.⁷⁷ And yet the camera obscura and the Claude glass, precursors to the modern-day camera, serve as reminders that the process of looking, and then reproducing what is seen, is never straightforward, is always mediated. A snapshot might appear in a simple snap; however, within the small chamber of the camera, larger and more complex processes are required. Bishop acknowledges the complexity of this process and its technicalities of scale in 'The Monument', a poem about the act of looking, in which the titular monument is described as being:

...one-third set against
a sea; two-thirds against a sky.
The view is geared
(that is, the view's perspective)
so low there is no "far away,"
and we are far away within the view.

(18)

If this is a complicated set-up around which to wrap our heads, it is because the process of looking is complicated, as is that of orientating ourselves within the view. If this poem is about looking, instructing us to do so in both its opening and closing lines, it is also an *ars poetica* of sorts, rereading the way in which an inchoate work of art is processed, and then developed, into being: 'It is the beginning of a painting, / a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument, / and all of wood. Watch it closely' (20). In a poem that is busy with technical detail about the monument in question, we are encouraged to situate ourselves within the immense space described by the poem, and to feel our way around it; we are simultaneously made aware of our position without, and of the fact that perhaps it opens up far more questions than we are able to answer.

⁷⁷Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, 60.

This sense that the space of the poem itself is indeterminate in its bounds, frequently emerges with the appearance of divided creatures and mirrored worlds in Bishop's work. Take, for instance, the final two stanzas of 'Love Lies Sleeping':

for always to one, or several, morning comes
whose head has fallen over the edge of his bed,
whose face is turned
so that the image of

the city grows down into his open eyes
inverted and distorted. No. I mean
distorted and revealed,
if he sees it at all.

(14)

In response to Anne Stevenson's question about whether this poem is 'also a play on the theory of optics',⁷⁸ Bishop acknowledges that 'I was reading, or had just read Newton's "Optics" about then. (Although again I wasn't aware of this until you pointed it out to me!)' (863). If Bishop had lamented to Moore that her colleagues' 'lack of imagination would get more & more depressing', this inverted figure in 'Love Lies Sleeping' demonstrates her own imaginative navigation of the natural optical phenomena upon which a camera is based. As is demonstrated in Cornell's *Monsieur Claude*, the projection of a scene through a small hole in a screen produces its reversed and inverted image on the opposite internal surface. As such, the modern-day camera is therefore a small, dark chamber with 'open eyes', which receives and processes the 'inverted and distorted' image.

This motif of the inverted and/or distorted image as it occurs, pre-processed within a camera, appears elsewhere in Bishop's oeuvre, particularly in *North & South*. In 'Sleeping on the Ceiling', for instance, the space of the poem has not only inverted the

⁷⁸As quoted in Victoria Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 61.

room along its horizontal plane, such that the speaker is positioned on the ceiling and presumably looking down, but it has also collapsed interior and exterior spaces, such that the reader's initial situating of the speaker as being in a room (with a ceiling) is confused when we are subsequently told that 'It is the Place de la Concorde', an outdoor square in Paris (22). With this confusion in mind, the subsequent statement that 'Those photographs are animals' is even more ambiguous, with not only its direct conflation of object and image ("these photographs [of] animals *are* animals"), but also its reversal of the expected syntactic positions of subject and object ("animals have become their images in those photographs").

The titular figure in 'The Man-Moth', too:

[...] emerges
 from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks
 and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.
 He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,
 proving the sky quite useless for protection.
 He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb.

Up the façades,
 his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him,
 he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage
 to push his small head through that round clean opening
 and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.
 (Man, standing below him, has no such illusions.)

(11)

The Man-Moth's own poetic identity, larger than life, emerges from a tiny but consequential distortion of scales, i.e., a single-letter misspelling of the word *mammoth*. Tellingly attired like a photographer, he belongs to a world that is askew, where he 'always seats himself facing the wrong way' (11). There is a sense that if, indeed, 'the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky, / proving the sky quite useless for protection', it might also serve as the entrance into another world, 'through that round

clean opening', where the Man-Moth, as if subject to the inner workings of a camera obscura, could finally be right-side-up.

The wishfulness that characterises these stanzas is similar to that of the moon in 'Insomnia', also an outsider figure considering 'that world inverted, / where left is always right', accessible through a mirror-like portal. Here, 'the heavens are shallow as the sea / is now deep, and you love me' (53-54). Towards the end of the first section of this chapter, I had considered the admission of vast, planetary spaces within interiors such as that of the waiting room and ship's cabin. Here, the upside-down, inverted motifs again suggest alternate universes, but are also evocative of not only the interior mechanisms of the camera, but also of the restorative possibilities therein. In accommodating both object and image, this space of the imagination is larger than either. In the first piece of Bishop's unpublished 'Three Poems', 'We do not move, / In this agile camera' (18): this is because we do not have to. Instead, the agile camera, with its 'Infinite angles of shooting', undertakes the work of transporting us. Writing on *Monsieur Claude*, Julia Kelly observes how Cornell's collage demonstrates the way in which 'The traveller's use of photographic and optical devices [...] [creates] a distance between him or her and what is being seen'.⁷⁹ So, too, Bishop's poems expand the interstitial spaces – like those between the photographs viewed in a slide projector – and, mediating as cameras themselves, they open up worlds between what is seen and then reproduced in images.

In the blurb that she contributed for Lowell's *Life Studies*, Bishop opens with an anecdote:

⁷⁹Julia Kelly, 'Sights Unseen: Raymond Roussel, Michel Leiris, Joseph Cornell and the Art of Travel', in *Opening the Box*, 75.

As a child, I used to look at my grandfather's Bible under a powerful reading-glass. The letters assembled beneath the lens were suddenly like a Lowell poem, as big as life and as alive, and rainbow-edged. It seemed to illuminate as it magnified; it could also be used as a burning-glass.

(707)

This experience is equally true of her own rainbow-edged, bubble-like, work, which comes to us with its own built-in reading-glass, with its own endless fascination with processes of looking, and with what we look through: windows, reflective and iridescent surfaces, cameras. These mediums provide the security of distance, open up a safety net between the looker and what is being looked at. Sometimes this distance is undesired, reinforcing itself, a reminder that *you can look but you cannot have*. More often, it is particularly significant that this distance is created by these mediums themselves, which frequently cannot be simply or straightforwardly seen through. Instead, they open up rainbow worlds, and collapse long- and short-distance views, so that what is looked at has been distorted and transformed for the looking. They thus complicate – or, more accurately, demonstrate the complications inherent within – our acts of looking.

In the final lines of 'Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance', the speaker invites us to recalibrate our perspective:

Open the heavy book. Why couldn't we have seen
this old Nativity while we were at it?
– the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
and, lulled within, a family with pets,
– and looked and looked our infant sight away.

(46)

Barely fitting into the syntactic structure of the preceding lines, its final sentence is more of a statement than a question, unlike the lines before this parenthetical, conjured

image. Susan McCabe has read these final lines of the poem as tinged with ‘longing and thwarted epiphany’;⁸⁰ however, who is to say that these feelings are not addressed or assuaged through the act of writing, itself?

Perhaps we are to read the end of this poem as a *précis* of what poetry can do: conjure up these images, and in looking and looking, transform them in ways in which our naked infant sight, our mortal eyes, cannot; show us life writ large, and potent as a burning-glass. Re-reading this poem in 1977, John Ashbery described these final lines as ‘a perfect summation of the poet’s act – the looking so intense that it becomes something like death or ecstasy, both at once perhaps’.⁸¹ Ashbery, too, had said that Cornell’s ‘boxes embody the substance of dreams so powerfully that it seems [they] must vanish the next moment, as when the atmosphere of a dream becomes so intensely realistic that you know you are about to wake up’.⁸² This quality of, simultaneously, transformative intensity and immense, bubble-like, fragility was common to the work of both Bishop and Cornell.

In a letter to Stevenson from January 1964, Bishop describes her own occasionally ineffable acts of looking: ‘glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important’ (861). She follows this up with a mental image of Darwin: ‘the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown’ (861). If Bishop was able to write that Cornell ‘constructed / boxes where things hurry away from their names’ (‘Objects & Apparitions’, 169), this was because her own poetic acts

⁸⁰Susan McCabe, ‘Elizabeth Bishop’, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Poets*, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 306.

⁸¹John Ashbery, ‘Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop’, *World Literature Today*, 51.1 (Winter 1977): 11.

⁸²Ashbery, ‘Joseph Cornell’, in *Reported Sightings* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 16-17.

of looking expanded and transformed; her own images, too, slide away from their objects, rainbow-birds in full, visionary flight from the narrow bevels of their stanza-rooms.

4 Lorine Niedecker's Rocky Relations

Lorine Niedecker spent most of her life on Blackhawk Island in Wisconsin, where she occupied a small green cabin that she once had to evacuate because of flooding. Much has been made about the 'life by water' of this carp-seiner's daughter, who honed her trade at the intersection of Rock River and Lake Koshkonong. In 'Poet's Work', she writes:

Grandfather
advised me:
 Learn a trade

I learned
 to sit at desk
 and condense

No layoff
 from this
 condensery¹

In this chapter, I would like to think about Niedecker's work in terms of condensery, which we initially understand in terms of our most commonly encountered sense of it, that of the scientific process of condensation, where a gas is converted into a liquid. In a letter to Cid Corman from February 1962, a description by Niedecker of her writing process retains this association with water. 'For me the sentence lies in wait – all those prepositions and connectives – like an early spring flood. A good thing my follow-up feeling has always been condense, condense'.² In the poet's description that there would be 'No layoff / from this / condensery', is simultaneously a lament about the

¹Lorine Niedecker, *Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (London: University of California Press, 2004), 194. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references to primary texts will be drawn from this volume, with page numbers cited in in-text parentheses.

²Niedecker, "Between Your House and Mine": *The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, 1960-1970*, ed. Lisa Peter Faranda (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 33.

unrelenting nature of the work, and a sense of pride at the driving principle, the work ethic that governs it.

As it most straightforwardly relates to words and the act of writing, to condense is 'To compress (thought or meaning) into few words; to reduce (a speech or writing) within smaller compass by conciseness of expression' (*OED*). As 'condensery', the result of the speaker's learning 'to sit at desk / and condense', the poem's 'meaning' has certainly been reduced to a few words; so few, in fact, that the verb 'condense' is repeated as the noun 'condensery'. This transformation from verb to noun, in turn, brings out another resonance of the work of condensing, i.e., 'To concentrate, intensify' (*OED*).

It is useful to recall that Niedecker was writing in the shadow of Ezra Pound, who had dictated in 1934 that 'Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. *Dichten* = *condensare*'.³ She would compare her own work directly to Pound's, while considering the latter's influence, in a letter to Corman from 1970:

I always feel kind of faded out – my way of writing – compared to some parts of the Cantos. I'm the piece of wash that has hung too long in the sun! [...] I'm a little bunch of marshland violets offered to the crooked lawyer – O no ... how could I refer to Pound in that way??? – I owe so much to him as most present-day poets do – and so much of the Cantos and the other poems of his is so beautiful.⁴

As this suggests, Pound's influence was present in Niedecker's work, but only to a certain degree. Compared to his work, she noted, there is 'No money-mumbo in my

³Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 36.

⁴Niedecker, *Between Your House and Mine*, 230-31.

Jefferson'.⁵ Where Pound's 'Adams Cantos' is more concerned with overtly expounding political views, Niedecker's poetic treatment of the founding father in her 1970 sequence 'Thomas Jefferson' presents the figure in more small-scale, quotidian ways.⁶ This difference may be conceived in terms of each poet's projected relationship with the reader, as will be made apparent at various points in my ensuing discussion.

Over the course of this chapter, I will examine the ways in which Niedecker's work repeatedly undertakes the work of condensery, while counter-intuitively challenging any notion of a diminution of meaning implicit in the description of the 'reduc[ing of] (a speech or writing) within a smaller compass'. In other words, I will explore the prolificacy of implication resulting from Niedecker's 'conciseness of expression'. As Thom Gunn has described her work, 'it seems slight at first but responds to attention, taking on bulk with each rereading. Phrases start to grow on you'.⁷ If the *con-* prefix in *condense* serves to intensify the meaning of *dense*, its other connotation ('with') must therefore also be considered in thinking through the implications of the word as it encapsulates Niedecker's work, whose condensery belies a larger network of relationships, and gestures outwards towards more connections, both intertextual, and in terms of its reception by the reader. Smallness, for her, is interrelational.

My discussion will be anchored in Niedecker's interest in rocks; I am specifically interested in the lodestone property of a rock, at once a static object, as well as a compact, concentrated locus of wider, more diffusive relations. In this, it is simultaneously small in its discrete stillness, and increasingly expansive in the sense of

⁵Niedecker, *Between Your House*, 230.

⁶This is not to say that Niedecker's work was not political in its own way: with its economic undertones, the phrase 'No layoff / from this / condensery' opens up questions about the kind of labour involved in poetry. For a further discussion of Niedecker's poetics of labour, see Kristin Grogan, 'Niedecker's Gift: The Poetics of Work in *For Paul and Other Poems*', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 28.3 (2017): 255-74.

⁷Thom Gunn, 'Weedy Speech and Tangled Bank: Lorine Niedecker', in *Shelf Life: Essays, Memoirs, and an Interview* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 75-76.

process or continuity suggested by the fact that there is ‘No layoff / from this / condensery’.⁸ Niedecker’s is a microcosmic smallness that gestures outwards, and it is both manifested in, and figured by, the ways in which it challenges or troubles the compact density of rocks. Despite their reputation of immutability and impenetrability, rocks are revealed, in her work, to be loci of circulating relationships: precarious or dependent in their solidity; sounding boards for reverberations; and opaque surfaces that could turn out to be otherwise. I will address each of these three aspects in turn.

4.1 Solidity, liquidly

If she described herself as a ‘little bunch of marshland violets’, Niedecker elsewhere likened herself to ‘just a sandpiper in a marshy region’,⁹ and ‘the solitary plover / a pencil / for a wing-bone’ (‘Paeon to Place’, 265), repeatedly identifying with wading birds. She lived in the swampy, flood-prone area where Rock River meets Lake Koshkonong and, just like this habitat and the evocatively named river, thrived between states and in liminal spaces. During the flood that hit Black Hawk Island in April 1959, she had to decide, in a split second, what to do with her furniture and floor coverings before being ‘evacuated!’ by boat. She would return after the flood to find her cabin full of fish and worms, and her carpet ‘soaked and gooey and weighing a ton’.¹⁰ The experience of living in this precarious terrain informs lines such as ‘Do not save love / for things / Throw *things* / to the flood’ (‘Paeon to Place’, 268), and ‘Holed damp /

⁸John Wilkinson has recently also theorised about the stone or the rock in a similar way, when he describes how ‘Proverbially stone and rock epitomize obdurate objecthood, but erosion makes even such kickable objects exemplary of slow events’. See Wilkinson, *Lyric In Its Times: Temporalities in Verse, Breath, and Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 3.

⁹Niedecker, unpublished letter to Edward Dahlberg in November 1955, as quoted in *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931-1971*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 4. Incidentally, the sandpiper serves similarly as a surrogate for the poet in Bishop’s poem ‘Sandpiper’, which appeared in *The New Yorker* seven years later, in July 1962.

¹⁰Margot Peters, *Lorine Niedecker: A Poet’s Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 130.

cellar-black beyond / the main atrocities / my sense of property's / adrift' ('Shelter', 246).

More positively, it also inspired some of her most rhapsodic and lyrical lines, particularly evident in 'Paeon to Place' and 'My Life by Water', her two most autobiographical poems.

My life
by water –
Hear

spring's
first frog
or board

out on the cold
ground
giving

Muskrats
gnawing
doors

to wild green
arts and letters
Rabbits

raided
my lettuce
One boat

two –
pointed toward
my shore

thru birdstart
wingdrip
weed-drift

of the soft
and serious –
Water

('My Life by Water', 237-38)

In the ambiguity of its use of the preposition *by*, the poem's title suggests that we are about to read about the poet's experience of living by water, but also that we might be reading an autobiography written *by* water itself; this latter interpretation is reinforced by the word *Water* left hanging alone at the end, as if signing off the poem. The slipperiness of the title corresponds to the slipperiness of the poem, composed of lines that are visually sliding away within each stanza; its run-on lines and lack of punctuation (with the exception of slippery, open-ended dashes) generate a further sense of flow. The vowels, too, are constantly gliding, the effect of which is similarly captured by the musical technique named in the 'Pewee-glissando / sublime / slime- / song' as invoked in 'Paean to Place' (265). Diphthongs abound from the poem's very opening, the repeated vowel in its first three words ('My life / by') performing a monosyllabic glissando. If the word *water* that follows provides a brief grip with its two firm vowels, the second of these quickly dissolves into its close aural relative, the diphthong within *Hear*. The rest of the poem proceeds in a similar manner, clusters of repeated monophthongs ('frog / or board'; 'gnawing / doors'; 'two' [...] 'toward / my shore'); 'wingdrip / weed-drift'; 'of', 'soft', 'Water') giving way to glissando diphthongs ('out on the cold / ground'; 'Rabbits / raided'; 'pointed'; 'serious').

We might be tempted to characterise Niedecker as an uncomplicatedly 'liquid' poet, given these watery lines. And yet hers was specifically a 'sublime / slime- / song', one that was interested in a particular sort of liquid: slime, as the swampy, marshy terrain that rendered the poet's carpet 'goeey', is viscous. The adjective 'sublime', too, invokes the phenomenon of sublimation, in which a solid is able to pass into the gaseous state. The poet's own geological analogy for writing, in 1967, is also telling: 'The only time

the lava really flows is those moments while the poem is being written'.¹¹ Just as the slimy, wetland terrain of swamps and marshes is composed of solids (minerals and organic matter) that are permanently saturated with liquid, lava is a form of molten rock; that is, a solid in liquid form. The poet's choice of word of *condensery* is thus appropriate in its simultaneously liquid (condense) and solid (dense) connotations: Niedecker is a poet of the solidly liquid, and the liquidly solid.

Her interest in geological processes and states of matter was part of a larger fascination with natural science, as evident from the books by Loren Eiseley and Charles Darwin in her library.¹² Early on in the first section of 'Darwin', the poem that she wrote about the latter, comes his admission, in a letter from 1844, that 'Species are not / (it is like confessing / a murder) / immutable' (295). As Eiseley puts it in *Darwin's Century*, a book consulted by Niedecker during her composition of *Lake Superior*,¹³

The key change in the intellectual climate of the nineteenth century came with the recognition of adaptation of the fact that creatures fit themselves to the environment [...] animals are forever slipping from one environment to another and changing their forms and features as they go. [...] Our world, in short, is a marred world, an imperfect world, a never totally adjusted world, for the simple reason that it is not static.¹⁴

This mutability is a concept that pervades Niedecker's work. Eiseley notes a formulation scribbled down by Darwin in 1837, 'View of generation being condensation, test of highest organisation', an early observation suggesting that the scientist had had an inkling, then, of the idea of natural selection that he would

¹¹As quoted in Jenny Penberthy, 'Writing Lake Superior', in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, ed. Elizabeth Willis (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 72.

¹²Faranda, *Between Your House*, 139n.

¹³Penberthy, 'Writing Lake Superior', 77.

¹⁴Loren Eiseley, *Darwin's Century: Evolution and the Men Who Discovered It* (New York: Anchor, 1961), 196-97.

subsequently propound.¹⁵ It is worth noting the significance of the word *condensation* in a text with which Niedecker was familiar. If, in Darwin's model of the world, all creatures are situated within an immutable flow, the use of the word *condensation* in this cryptic phrase, as with Niedecker's own 'sublime', invokes the changing of states of matter. It also suggests that this specific change is one whose result is more concentrated and substantial.

The poet's various figurations of the sentence as 'an early spring flood', and of poetry as lava flow, are therefore significant in the types of natural process that are being used for comparison. An early spring flood is what occurs as the result of heavy rainfall, which not only rapidly melts snowpacks (hardened masses of snow), but also runs off into nearby rivers due to the difficulty of its absorption by frozen soil. Lava flow, while occurring at the other end of the thermometer's scale, is nonetheless similarly the result of processes involving pressure and temperature change: as magma is pushed to the earth's surface, its eruption as flowing lava from a volcano subsequently leads to its formation, upon cooling down, as igneous rocks. Both processes encompass the dynamic transformation from one fixed state of matter to another (solid to liquid or vice versa), and are therefore impermanent, in-between states. In turn, Niedecker's condensery of these dynamic processes into shorthand phrases that describe her own writing enacts the way in which her work frequently encapsulates these moments of transformation in a concentrated, graspable manner.

This is observable in an early poem, from her first collection *New Goose*, which contains a small, literally graspable, item:

Remember my little granite pail?

¹⁵As quoted in Eiseley, *Darwin's Century*, 181.

The handle of it was blue.
 Think what's got away in my life –
 Was enough to carry me thru.

(96)

Made of granite, Niedecker's pail might recall Pound's invocation of the material in relation to poetry in his 1917 pronouncement:

...the poetry which I expected to see written during the next decade or so [...] will be harder and saner, it will be what Mr Hewlett calls "nearer the bone." It will be as much like granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth, its interpretive power [...]. We will have fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it. At least for myself, I want it so, austere, direct, free from emotional slither.¹⁶

Yet while Pound's 'harder and saner' poetry positions the 'shock and stroke' of granite against a fluidity that might be implied by the specifically indeterminate 'emotional slither', Niedecker works to disrupt such strict dichotomies. With its ornamental blue handle, her specifically 'little' granite pail also goes in defiance of Pound's aversion to 'painted adjectives' in its tendency towards the precious.

From the outset, the pail might be seen as setting up a specific relationship between solid and liquid, namely, that of a solid container and its usually liquid contents, with its consequent associations of the solid with the static, closed, and contained, and the liquid with the flowing, open, to-be-contained. The poem, with its compact ('little') single stanza and second- and fourth-line end-rhymes, initially also appears to be as solid as the object it recalls: the first two sentences, securely contained within its first two lines, present the reader with concrete details about this pail.

¹⁶Pound, 'A Retrospect', in *Pavannes and Divisions* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918), 107.

After this, however, the relationship between solid and liquid, fixed and flowing, grows more ambiguous. If the referent of 'it' in 'The handle of it was blue' had been clear from the positioning of this line after 'Remember my little granite pail?', neither the subject nor the specific object of 'Think what's got away in my life' is evident: is the pail 'what's got away', as might be suggested by the way in which the poem is framed as an act of recalling a possession now absent? Or does 'what's got away' refer to what was never containable within the pail? The dash separating these lines supplies further semantic and tonal ambiguity: is the unnamed referent in 'what's got away in my life' that which 'Was enough to carry me thru', or simply the act of being made to 'Think what's got away in my life'? Is the pause represented by the dash one of fond recollection (in which no words are necessary), or one of resignation (in which no words are possible)? How, then, are we to read the last line?¹⁷

At the start of the poem, the speaker is (or was) the owner of a pail, i.e., a carrying vessel; by the end of the poem, however, she has become that which has to be carried. For the reader, the poem itself serves as a vessel containing all of the above questions; it simultaneously carries 'what's got away', a sense of something that has been eluded or that which eludes us. If this conclusion is inconclusive and impervious to our interpretation, simultaneously resistant in its hardness, and equivocally fluid, the poem as pail is, nonetheless, something undeniably solid that has been offered to us. Opening with the invitation to 'Remember my little granite pail?', the speaker has extended a handle to us, so to speak; in turn, there is also a sense that the marshaling of these thoughts into these lines has given the poet a handle on the situation.

¹⁷In the earlier version of this poem, i.e. that which appeared in *New Goose* (1946) and *My Friend Tree* (1961), there was an exclamation point at the end of line three. Niedecker's revision of the poem to include the dash instead of the exclamation point in this version (as it appears in *T&G: The Collected Poems* (1936-1966) and *My Life By Water: Collected Poems, 1936-1968*) semantically and tonally opens the poem up, making it more fluid.

When Niedecker agreed to have this poem published in a collection (*My Friend Tree*) by Jessie McGuffie and Ian Hamilton Finlay at Wild Hawthorn Press in 1961, the latter proposed a Scots translation:

D'ye mine on wee bit paillie?
The haunnle wis blue whan new.
Och, think on aas gane bust ii ma life.
Weel aye, bit we've warselled thru.¹⁸

Niedecker was opposed to this version: 'The wee bit of wit that mine had: *carry* pail or in pail, and *carry* me thru life. – is lost!'.¹⁹ From the various resonances of *carry* emerges the cumulative sense that the very act of carrying the pail (which carries its own contents) has the potential to carry her through, 'To conduct or bring [her] safely through difficulties, or a crisis [...] to the natural end' (*OED*). The poem's symmetry and use of rhyme, in turn, carry its utterance through the crisis or complication of its ambiguity, to its natural end. Making use of Finlay's own adjectival phrase 'wee bit', Niedecker's response regarding her 'wee bit of wit' emphasises that this play on the word *carry* is integral to her poem. The subtle clustering of sounds in her extension of Finlay's phrase ('wee bit of wit') additionally highlights that the poem's meaning is bound up with the relationship between its compressive smallness, and the way in which this smallness nonetheless comprises more extensive relations. The fact that the pail is specifically 'little' is therefore significant, as is the way in which the sound of the word goes on to saturate other words that follow: *granite, it*.

If, for Niedecker, 'the sentence lies in wait – all those prepositions and connectives – like an early spring flood', the result of her follow-up feeling to condensery is observable in this poem as a foregoing of one means of connection (the use of prepositions and

¹⁸As copied out by Niedecker in *Correspondence with Zukofsky*, 290.

¹⁹Niedecker, *Correspondence with Zukofsky*, 290.

connectives and a consequently clear, linear pattern of cause and effect) in favour of another: that of weaving a relationship between the solid and the liquid, the securely remembered and that which has gotten away, the carrier and the carried. This relationship is woven so thoroughly into the poem that it is present even at its smallest level, that of the sounds of its words. Considering the ‘phonosemantic’ work of poetry, that is, the sense-making capacity of its phonemes, ‘the shapes of sounds in the mouth formed naturally as physical analogues to the shapes of real things and processes in the world’,²⁰ Don Paterson has proposed the analogy that ‘Consonant is bounded form, non-durational, atemporal, like the static object; vowel is spatially free, durational, temporal, like the dynamic process’.²¹ Going by this framework, Niedecker’s use of consonant endings (‘pail’ and ‘life’) in lines one and three, and vowel rhymes (‘blue’ and ‘thru’) in lines two and four, stages the interaction between solid bounded form and liquid spatial freedom, condensing the poem’s thematic content within the smallest units of its morphemes.

Her long poem sequence *Lake Superior* embodies this relationship between dynamic flow and static containment in an even more sustained manner. Writing to Corman in July 1965 about her impending vacation to the Black Hills of South Dakota, Niedecker described how ‘I have to take my eyes from the minute for two weeks – to the spacial’.²² *Lake Superior*, emerging from further travels to the region around Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, just east of South Dakota, is certainly more sprawling and ‘spacial’ than the compact verses of *New Goose*. Taking its title from the name of the largest freshwater lake in the world, it is nonetheless made up of short, discrete stanzas,

²⁰Don Paterson, ‘The Lyric Principle: Part 1: The Sense of Sound’, *Poetry Review* 97.2 (Summer 2007): 68.

²¹Paterson, ‘The Lyric Principle: Part 2: The Sound of Sense’, *Poetry Review* 97.3 (Autumn 2007): 67.

²²As quoted in Peters, *A Poet’s Life*, 194.

‘cut [...] into short, sharp (we hope) nuggets of that rocky tour’, as Niedecker described to Jonathan Williams.²³ Her word choice of ‘nugget’ demonstrates again the compatibility, in the poet’s mind, of the processes of geology and writing; it specifies, moreover, that the kind of geological process, to which writing is comparable, relates to the condensery required to form nuggets, notably small lumps of pure, concentrated metal that are the result of larger, more extensive weathering processes, frequently involving the work of watercourses.

As her ‘*magma opus*’ emerging from the ‘millenium of notes’ that she took during her travels around the region,²⁴ the poem’s compositional process, as traced by Penberthy, could certainly be likened to that of liquid magma cooling and hardening into solid rock. While all the notes for the Lake Superior project are undated, Penberthy has sorted them into a convincing compositional chronology: the bulk of the notes, amassed before the trip, includes practical tourist information, as well as rigorous preparatory documentary apparatus including survey maps issued by the American government, and geological collections in the Milwaukee Public Museum.²⁵ Then, belonging to the ‘undeniably post-trip notes’, a twelve-page retrospective prose account, first titled ‘Lake Superior and Minnesota Vacation Trip 1966’, then revised to ‘Lake Superior Country: Vacation Trip 1966’.²⁶ Penberthy reads this narrative as ‘the first evidence of an attempt to synthesise the research notes’, and flags up the ‘densely paced ten-page typescript titled “Notes from the Trip”’, which pieces together passages from the prose narrative alongside primary research notes.²⁷

²³As quoted in Penberthy, ‘Writing Lake Superior’, 71.

²⁴Niedecker, *Between Your House*, 94.

²⁵Peters, *A Poet’s Life*; 207, 212.

²⁶Penberthy, ‘Writing Lake Superior’, 66.

²⁷Penberthy, ‘Writing Lake Superior’, 67.

Having taken her eye from the minute to the 'spacial' for two weeks, Niedecker ultimately reconfigured the 'spacial' back in terms of the minute. The discrete stanzas of her final poem were subsequently condensed out of the 'spring flood' sentences of these prose narratives: in contrast to the sheer volume of preparatory material, she told Corman that 'I maintain a long poem is made up of short ones',²⁸ and considered 'just mak[ing] a small book of [*Lake Superior*] with a short poem on each page'.²⁹ This was in accordance with the work's own metonymic guiding principle. Every part of the sequence, even its phonemes (the smallest, most elemental parts), simultaneously works towards, and partakes of, the whole. Despite its right to magnitude, given the physical enormity of its subject, there is therefore a condensed economy about *Lake Superior*. As Peters has noted, the work's opening lines, as well as others such as 'his bones of such is coral' (233),³⁰ and 'the leaf beside it / once was stone' (236), directly echo what Niedecker had read in Herman and Nina Schneider's book *Rocks, Rivers and the Changing Earth*, originally published in 1952, and one of the books which she had consulted for the project:

The leaf was once the stone, the cloud was once the sea. The earth tells its story over and over again – the leaf will become a stone, the cloud will become the sea again. [...] You are part of the earth's story. In your blood is iron from plants that drew it out of the soil. Your teeth and bones were once coral of the sea.³¹

These economical cycles of interconnectedness within the natural world contribute an additional tributary to the circulating network of sources and principles that undergird

²⁸As quoted in Peters, *A Poet's Life*, 208.

²⁹Niedecker, *Between Your House*, 101.

³⁰There are echoes of both Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* here; I will say more about Niedecker's echoes in the following section.

³¹Herman and Nina Schneider, *Rocks, Rivers, and the Changing Earth* (1952) (New York: Dover, 2014); 3, 171.

Lake Superior. Whereas the Schneiders guide their reader carefully through these cycles, however, Niedecker further economises, condensing the same phenomena into a few phrases, and dropping the explicitly explicatory nature of her source.

She retains, significantly, the sense of evolving, interrelated scales that is apparent in the weaving of the minute (iron in your blood) and 'spacial' (the sea) in the above passage. What is most immediately significant about *Lake Superior* is that, despite its title, there is more mention of rocks and minerals in the poem than water. Here is how it opens:

In every part of every living thing
is stuff that once was rock

In blood the minerals
of the rock

(232)

Comprising the opening lines to a sequence that will allude to specific historical figures who famously passed through the region, this image presents a form of journeying that, while occurring at a much smaller, mineral scale, not only relates all living things, but also outlives them all. Paterson's framework of conceiving phonemes in spatial and temporal terms is useful here, for analysing how the phonosemantic effect of these lines supplements their diction and syntax. If the repeated syntactic structure of 'In [...] rock' in both stanzas demonstrates the way in which all organic forms could ultimately be reduced to rock, the vowel patterning across the two stanzas cumulatively reinforces this idea: the first line, 'In every part of every living thing', uses five different vowel sounds; the vowel variation is particularly apparent in 'every part of every', which employs vowels that do not reappear in these lines. The result of these different sounds, clustered within a single line and putting the mouth to dynamic work in creating

different and discrete aural shapes, is the ‘spatial and temporal separation’ that Paterson describes as a result of vowel variation,³² conducting an aural survey of ‘every part of every living thing’ across all time. In contrast, the latter three lines employ only three main vowels (and the singular instance of the vowel in *that* in line two), creating the effect of ‘space-time parallels, proximity, and similarities of interior spirit’, pointing out the ubiquity, across time, of these minerals in the rock.

Above all, it is the mineral stuff of rock that is being flagged up here. If *Lake Superior* is particularly resonant when read against Paterson’s lyric principle, this is because Niedecker’s language is describable by Paterson’s comparably rock-like terms:

Language behaves in a curiously material-like way, and placed under the dual pressures of emotional urgency and temporal limit, will reveal its crystalline structure and intimate grain. Poetry only exaggerates and makes manifest features already present in the tongue.³³

Paterson’s description of the ‘crystalline structure and intimate grain’ of language resonates with the ‘short, sharp nuggets’ of Niedecker’s rocky, episodic poem; his suggestion of the work of poetry as bringing to language these ‘dual pressures of emotional urgency and temporal limit’ likewise provides us with an explicit model applicable to Niedecker’s own compositional process.

Having grasped the fundamental historic processes that geographically shaped Lake Superior, Niedecker exerted these pressures upon her work. As geologist John C. Green says of the Great Lake, its past has ‘more to do with flows of hot magma than waves of cold water’, the latter being what remains for the modern sightseer.³⁴ 24 million years of magma production and volcanic activity shaped the low basin in the land, into

³²Paterson, ‘The Sound of Sense’, 67.

³³Paterson, ‘The Sense of Sound’, 60.

³⁴John C. Green, ‘The Lake Superior Basin’s Fiery Beginning’, *Lake Superior Magazine* (1 June 2002). <https://www.lakesuperior.com/the-lake/natural-world/243-lake-superior-basin-fiery-beginning/>.

which streams channelled gravel, sand and mud, and which would in turn be ultimately excavated and displaced by the water from ice sheets melting (in early spring floods, for example).³⁵ In other words, if the great Lake Superior region straddles several North American states, it is itself a product of physical inter-states, interactions between solid and liquid. Water is acknowledged as a vehicle for the minerals in the second poem of the series: 'Iron the common element of earth / in rocks and freighters [...] The waters working together / internationally' (232). Exporting iron abroad, the freighters in these lines are carried by water; described as being 'coal-black', 'iron-ore-red' and 'topped with what white castlework', they are themselves figured in terms of the mineral and rocks that they transport. The poet's own process of composition stages, and is in turn shaped by, natural processes of dispersal and condensation, flow and arrested momentum; on a smaller level, the interaction between solid and liquid plays out in the poem's rich patterning of solid consonants and liquid vowels. Just as igneous rocks retain, in their geological structure, the temperature and pressure by which they are shaped from molten lava, Niedecker's '*magma opus*' bears traces of the vast network of notes and material out of which it emerged.

What is additionally illuminating about Penberthy's cataloguing of Niedecker's research notes for the project is the poet's sustained interest in points of meeting: where and how rivers and smaller lakes join up; meetings between explorers and native dwellers. This principle in turn directs the referencing system employed by the poet in organising her notes, piecing together her personal notes and external sources, and illuminating the connections. We might therefore conceive Niedecker's entire compositional process as an act of condensery, the result of which is so highly

³⁵Green, 'The Lake Superior Basin's Fiery Beginning'.

condensed that the poem, thus conceived, is itself a meeting point. The reader is invited to carry on the cyclical process through our voicing and listening to her text, whose aural patterning of phenomes and use of repetition then reveal themselves. Particularly apparent, when read aloud, is the alliteration of: ‘with what white castlework // The waters working together’ (232), ‘Did not man / maimed by no / stone-fall / mash’ (235), and even more simply, ‘big boats’ (232), ‘passed peaks’ (235) and ‘great granite’ (236). More subtly, the poet makes use of syntactic repetition, often condensing her clauses together: ‘In every part of every living thing [...] In blood the minerals’ (232); ‘And at the blue ice superior spot [...] And his bones of such’ (233); ‘Wave-cut [...] wave-washed’ (235). I will say more on the use of echoic repetition in the next section; in the meantime, what is significant here is that the work’s sense of continuity and unity is attributable, in part, to its aural landscape.

The following passage, witnessing part of Schoolcraft’s journey, is figured in terms of the interplay of solid and liquid, just as its lines narrate this relationship:

Passed peaks of volcanic thrust
Hornblende in massed granite
Wave-cut Cambrian rock
painted by soluble mineral oxides
wave-washed and the rains
did their work and a green
running as from copper

(235)

Moving from hard and rocky ‘peaks of volcanic thrust’ to waves and running copper rains, the syntactic structure of these lines enacts a gradual dissolution from distinct and well-defined noun-headed clauses (‘peaks of volcanic thrust’, ‘Hornblende in massed granite’, ‘Wave-cut Cambrian rock / painted by soluble mineral oxides’) to a more indeterminate mix of verbs, adjectives and adjectival verbs, linked loosely by the

preposition *and*. At a smaller, aural level, the positioning of plosives (i.e. hard *t/k/p* and *d/g/b* sounds) is initially densely concentrated, then grows gradually diffuse: I count seven plosives in the first line, five in the second, four in the third, five in the fourth, and then a mere seven spread across the last three lines. The stanza thus structurally and aurally enacts the dissolution, but also the interdependence, of ‘Wave-cut Cambrian rock / painted by soluble mineral oxides’, that have in turn been washed from a solid mineral substance.

Niedecker describes in a letter to Gail Roub of June 1967 how, during this period, she is:

Much taken up with how to define a way of writing poetry which is not Imagist nor Objectivist fundamentally nor Surrealism alone [...] The basis is direct and clear – what has been seen or heard etc ... - but something gets in, overlays all that to make a state of consciousness... The visual form is there in the background and the words convey what the visual form gives off after it’s felt in the mind. A heat is generated and takes in the whole world of the poem. A light, a motion, inherent in the whole [...] The *tone* of the thing. And awareness of everything influencing everything.³⁶

As the culmination of this process, *Lake Superior* highlights the geological undertones of this ‘way of writing poetry’: the plate tectonics of personal experience (‘what has been seen or heard etc’) and that which ‘gets in, overlays all that to make a state of consciousness’, and the heat, light and motion of the ensuing result. If ‘The only time the lava really flows is those moments while the poem is being written’, Niedecker’s completed sequence finally resembles the ‘short, sharp (we hope) nuggets’ that bear traces of the larger, underlying process of liquid matter shifting and settling into solid forms.

³⁶As quoted in Penberthy, ‘Writing Lake Superior’, 73.

The poet also thought about her own place within these larger weathering and compositional processes alike. During the writing of *Lake Superior*, she quoted extensively from Robert Duncan's 1964 essay 'Towards An Open Universe' in letters to Nero. She copied out, for instance, Duncan's statement that 'We are all the many expressions of living matter'.³⁷ The following passages would likewise have struck a chord with her attempt to have 'the words convey what the visual form gives off after it's felt in the mind', and to convey an 'awareness of everything influencing everything':

Central to and defining the poetics I am trying to suggest here is the conviction that the order man may contrive or impose upon the things about him or upon his own language is trivial beside the divine order or natural order he may discover in them. [...]

The materials of the poem – the vowels and consonants – are already structured in their resonance, we have only to listen and to cooperate with the music we hear.³⁸

Duncan's ideas offered her a means by which to approach the 'way of writing poetry' that she had mentioned to Roub, and a significant aspect of this was the principle of man's own, relatively 'trivial', place in the larger order: 'we have only to listen'. If the *Lake Superior* project was Niedecker's attempt to work against 'the order man may contrive or impose upon the things about him or upon his own language', her compositional methodology took its structure from the organic processes underlying her subject, the liquids and solids mutually moving, carving, and exchanging material.³⁹ The work is aurally and syntactically composed, in turn, according to Duncan's

³⁷Penberthy, 'Writing Lake Superior', 78.

³⁸Robert Duncan, 'Towards An Open Universe', in *A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (New York: New Directions, 1995), 6; 7.

³⁹Douglas Crase, situating Niedecker's work within an Emersonian tradition characterised by 'a passionate deference to the organic and inorganic commonwealth that cannot speak for itself', has eloquently and evocatively described it in terms of 'not the egotistical, but the evolutionary sublime'. See Crase, 'Niedecker and the Evolutionary Sublime', in *Lines from London Terrace: Essays and Addresses* (Brooklyn: Pressed Wafer, 2018), 112.

instruction to ‘cooperate with the music we hear’, inherent in vowels and consonants themselves. When Niedecker depicts ‘Wave-cut Cambrian rock / painted by soluble mineral oxides / wave-washed and the rains / did their work and a green / running as from copper’, she therefore shaped these sounds to her subject, leaving her syntax similarly soluble, deferentially acknowledging this work as not hers alone.

4.2 Echoes

Having noted the echoic repetition within Niedecker’s manipulation of syntax, and use of consonance and assonance, in the first part of this section I will consider her use of excavated voices, and the shape and form of these echoes. These voices, fragmentary and stripped from context, are more expansive and connective than they initially let on. I will then consider the kinds of spaces that are most conducive to echoing, as epitomised by the resonance of texts against the silence of the blank page, and the way in which the cavernous environments of Niedecker’s brief, discrete stanzas spatially amplify a particular temporal implication of the minutest of their echoes.

As is highlighted by the fate of the Greek nymph who personifies the phenomenon, an echo is ‘matterless’ in that it is all voice. Echoes occur in Niedecker’s work in the form of disembodied voices; take, for instance, the following poem from the 1956 manuscript *For Paul and Other Poems*, which she had intended to publish as a second collection.⁴⁰ In this poem, the unearthing and echoing of historical voices within Niedecker’s own present is staged within a literal act of digging, and it succinctly suggests to me the resonant, echoic potential held by rocks and rocky terrain for her.

To Aeneas who closed his piano

⁴⁰Penberthy, ‘Life and Writing’, in *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 7-8. The poem ultimately appeared in *My Life by Water*.

to dig a well thru hard clay
 Chopin left notes like drops of water.
 Aeneas could play

the Majorcan sickness, the boat on which pigs
 were kept awake by whips
 the woman Aurore
 the narrow sand-strips.

“O Frederic, think of me digging below
 the surface – we are of one pitch and flow.”

(158)

This poem was written for Aeneas McAllister, a neighbour and close companion on Black Hawk Island for seven years from June 1953. Aeneas and Niedecker read biographies of Chopin and Beethoven, and listened to classical music records together in her cabin. Aeneas recalls to Glenna Breslin how, once, Niedecker had wondered: ‘How can you dig a well and play the piano with those hands?’.⁴¹ This was in reference to an incident in the summer of 1953 when the McAllisters’ well ran dry, and Aeneas dug through fourteen feet of hard clay until he hit a sand-strip where he could tap into fresh water;⁴² here, significantly, is another wall of solid rock that leads to water.

Manuscript notes reveal that the poet, annotating her draft, ‘[w]as amazed and delighted to find it fell into stanzas with end rhyme [...]. Aurore is George Sand’s 1st name’.⁴³ Following a second draft of the poem, whose first and third stanzas are identical to those in the third, final draft, an alternative last stanza is considered:

“O Frederic – can you forgive
 this well deep piano?
 – we are of one pitch
 and flow.”⁴⁴

⁴¹Glenna Breslin, ‘Lorine Niedecker: The Poet in Her Homeplace’, in *Radical Vernacular*, 201-203.

⁴²Breslin, ‘Lorine Niedecker’, 203.

⁴³Penberthy, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 405.

⁴⁴Penberthy, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 405.

Niedecker's annotation here reads: 'sandstrips – they dig here till they come to a sand-strip',⁴⁵ and the implication is clear enough: the poet intended to ally Aeneas with one of his favourite composers in the way in which he understood and was able, in his own piano-playing, to plumb the tumultuous depths that underpin Frederic Chopin's delicate, clear notes 'like drops of water'.

Her choice to ultimately retain the more subject-ambiguous version of the final stanza is significant, because it introduces the possibility of another voice, the poet's own. Mention of 'this well deep piano' in the rejected version of the stanza identifies its speaking voice to be Aeneas's; stripped of this specificity, however, the more streamlined and tonally disembodied lines are coloured by the poet's own act of digging, her music-making excavation of Chopin.

"O Frederic, think of me digging below
the surface – we are of one pitch and flow."

Niedecker chose to refer to George Sand by her more anonymous first name 'Aurore' and, in mention of 'the narrow sand-strips', inserted the latter's presence with a pun. Sand was Chopin's lover at the time, and Aeneas similarly suggests that his and Niedecker's companionship was more than merely platonic when he describes how 'I was a half-assed lover of hers [...] I guess our age difference hobbled us'.⁴⁶ This mirroring of relationships could thus be read as sublimated into – and echoing through – the ambiguous, disembodied first-person voice of the poem's final lines: it is both Aeneas's, tapping into the same deep well of emotion as he played Chopin's music, and Sand's, familiarly addressing her lover. It is also Niedecker's, sharing her companion's love and understanding of the music, locating poetic resonance via the sublimation of

⁴⁵Penberthy, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 405.

⁴⁶As quoted in Breslin, 'Lorine Niedecker', 198.

the excavational act of writing a poem with simultaneously historical and autobiographical content. With her pun on Sand's hidden signature, the poet has woven together her own time signature, where the smaller scale of the poet's own immediate present is played against a larger historical backdrop.

In 'Darwin', the poet utilises the effect of disembodied quotation again, this time to excavate a historical figure who shared her interest in the natural sciences:

I.
 His holy
 slowly
 mulled over

 matter

 not all "delirium
 of delight"
 as were the forests

 of Brazil

 "Species are not
 (it is like confessing
 a murder)
 immutable"

(295)

At the heart of this first section of the poem is Darwin's admission, here quoted as it appeared word for word in a letter to Joseph Dalton Hooker in January 1844: '& I am almost convinced (quite contrary to opinion I started with) that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable'.⁴⁷ Aptly, Darwin's parenthetical admission that he had altered his earlier opinion serves as evidence further supporting his point. This larger theme of mutability pervades Niedecker's poem in a suitably small way; evolutionary mutation occurs, after all, at the minute level of the cells of a species. It

⁴⁷Darwin Correspondence Project, 'Letter no. 729'. Cambridge University Library, University of Cambridge, 2018. <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letters>.

makes its way into her lines in the rhymes of ‘His holy / slowly’, for instance, as well as in the common sounds within ‘illness’ and ‘billiard’, and those already present in another quoted phrase, ‘delirium / of delight’, this time from a 1832 letter to Frederick Watkins.⁴⁸ With their common roots of one or two shared syllables, these words demonstrate Darwin’s conviction of mutability at a tiny, linguistically localised level; they reveal, too, the poet sharing the scientist’s work of slowly mulling over words, the matter of her chosen field.

Unanchored to the specific contexts from which Niedecker drew them, quotations from Darwin’s biographical material appear, free-floating, throughout the rest of the poem, revealing themselves to be similarly mutable in the resonant potential which they assume in their new environment. Scientifically, to mull is to convert solid material into a suspension of smaller, finely ground solids in a liquid (*OED*). Here, the poet has broken down the passages of her subject’s prose, and suspended its fragments within her flowing stanzas, foregrounding the particular music of their echoes. In the opening lines of the second section of the poem, for example, is the description of ‘Andean peaks “tossed about / like the crust / of a broken pie”’ (295), a quotation drawn from a letter from Darwin to Susan Darwin in 1835.⁴⁹ This gustatory metaphor reverberates in section IV, against the image of how Darwin had

Brought home *Drosera* –
saw insects trapped
by its tentacles – the fact
that a plant should secrete

an acid acutely akin
to the digestive fluid
of an animal! Years
till he published

⁴⁸Darwin Correspondence Project, ‘Letter no. 181’.

⁴⁹Darwin Correspondence Project, ‘Letter no. 275’.

He wrote Lyell: Don't forget
 to send me the carcass
 of your half-bred African cat
 should it die⁵⁰

(298)

The natural world, too, is full of the capacity to mull, to break material down into smaller parts: from the way in which the surface of the earth is broken up, pie-like, by geological forces, through the carnivorous digestive process of the *Drosera*, to the decomposition of an African cat. This principle synthesises the otherwise apparently abrupt movement from mention of the *Drosera* to that of the African cat, and is reinforced by Niedecker's deliberate placement of lines: the syntactic symmetry of 'to the digestive fluid / of an animal!', and 'to send me the carcass / of your half-bred African cat', is highlighted by their appearance in their corresponding positions within the respective stanzas. If her variously indented lines, zigzagging down the pages, initially appear to be as arbitrary in shape as the Andean peaks 'tossed about', they ultimately reveal themselves to be full of echoes, 'not built by brute force / but designed by laws' (299).

Mention of the *Drosera* in this poem, in turn, resonates with its appearance in 'Wintergreen Ridge', from the earlier *North Central*. There, it 'sticks out its sticky / (Darwin tested) / tentacled leaf' (250), catalogued alongside 'thin to nothing lichens' that 'grind with their acid / granite to sand' (253). Here, the consonant-solid *sticks* slides into the more indeterminate *sticky*, and *grind* is broken down into the first and final sounds in *granite* and *sand* respectively, Niedecker's sounds enacting the work of

⁵⁰In fact, Darwin had asked W. D. Fox for this carcass, not Lyell: 'Dont [sic] forget, if your half-bred African Cat should die, that I should be very much obliged, for its carcase sent up in little hamper for skeleton'. (Darwin Correspondence Project, 'Letter no. 586'.) This erroneous attribution seems more likely to be the result of misremembering, rather than a deliberate choice by the poet. It nonetheless further demonstrates, inadvertently or not, the mutability of memory and recollection, and the changes that can (and usually will) occur when matter undergoes processing.

dissolution undertaken by their subjects. The repetition of particular local flora and phenomena across poems and collections clearly demonstrates the poet's sustained interest in specific organisms and organic occurrences; for the reader, reading across Niedecker's oeuvre, there emerges a sense, shared with Darwin, of 'the jig-saw gists / beginning to fit' ('Darwin', 297).

For Eiseley, 'Darwin [...] must have passed rapidly [from conviction of the reality of evolution] to the suspicion that the effects of small, controlled variations might in reality be potentially endless'.⁵¹ That these variations are small and controlled is important; Niedecker registers this fact with the tiny but significant qualification in her description of 'the jig-saw gists / beginning to fit', as opposed to the jig-saw gists instantaneously fitting. In her work, the small is simultaneously a microcosm and a model of slow, gradual accretion, such that a larger idea or framework is encompassed within the structure of a single unit (a word, an echoed phrase, an image), instances of which are, in turn, potentially endlessly accumulated. This poem, processing the way in which 'His holy / slowly / mulled over / matter', presents its own findings in a form that re-enacts this process, with its echoes rippling outwards from the minutest linguistic units.

Another disembodied quotation in the poem, from Darwin's experience in the Andes, offers a final means of mulling over the nature of Niedecker's echoes:

"Dear Susan ...
 I am ravenous
 for the sound
 of the pianoforte"

(296)

⁵¹Eiseley, *Darwin's Century*, 186.

Niedecker gleaned these words from a letter from Darwin to his sister in April 1835, in which he described how ‘I shall be ravenous for the Piano-forte.’⁵² In the same letter, he had said: ‘I am afraid you will tell me, I am prosy with my geological descriptions & theories’.⁵³ Incorporating selected quotations into her poem, Niedecker slightly altered Darwin’s phrasing, changing the anticipatory ‘I shall be ravenous’ to the hungry ‘I am ravenous’, and specifying this appetite as being for ‘the sound / of’ the pianoforte. If Darwin had come to ‘believe Man ... / in the same predicament / with other animals’, finding himself amongst Andean peaks and ravines, he might not only have hungered for the music of the pianoforte, named for its ability to alternate between soft and loud passages; significantly, he also felt hollowed out (*ravine*, v., *OED*), and thus made comparably smaller by the magnitude of his surroundings: ‘the enormous mass of mountains, the peaks of which rise to 13 & 14000 ft’.⁵⁴

Darwin’s discoveries destabilised the centuries-held conviction of the argument from design. Opening with the bold implication that an intelligent creator has been replaced, Niedecker’s poem ultimately recognises that man, alongside other organisms, is similarly matter over which ‘His holy / slowly / mulled’. Despite this simultaneity of scales, Niedecker’s excavational representation of Darwin’s ideas and biographical material sends them echoing forward, from his nineteenth to her twentieth century, in another model of mutating continuity. These ideas, too, have evolved; as we encounter them in Niedecker’s poem, their echoing is the result of the poet having extracted them, as ‘seeds / from bird dung’ (298), then hollowed them out from their original contexts, and then arranged them to resonate anew.

⁵²Darwin Correspondence Project, ‘Letter no. 275’.

⁵³Darwin Correspondence Project, ‘Letter no. 275’.

⁵⁴Darwin Correspondence Project, ‘Letter no. 275’.

We might therefore conceive Niedecker's poems as cave-like environments, full of rocky surfaces that are conducive for the work of echoing. In February 1968, she related to Corman the writing advice that she had offered to fellow poet Clayton Eshleman: 'I tell him why set fire to page after page, why not arrest it at moments into quiet, enduring love? [...] Also that there is such a thing as silence'.⁵⁵ The qualities of silence and endurance evoked here might lead us to a conception of this model of writing in terms of petrification: writing as 'conversion into stone or a stony substance' (*OED*), as entering a stony silence, being dumb as a rock. Far from being deaf and dumb, however, the rocks in and of Niedecker's poems are resonant, although it is equally important that they retain this initial, immediate connotation and context of silence; as with cave acoustics, after all, silence is necessary in order for echoes to fully resonate in their brevity.

To Corman, she thus described how 'I like planting poems in deep silence, each person gets at the poems for *himself*. He has to come to the poems with an ear for all the music they can give and he'll hear that as Beethoven heard tho deaf'.⁵⁶ She also repeatedly refused to give public readings of her work, wanting 'the silence and space of the page to allow the poem to reverberate'.⁵⁷ This equivalence of the space of the page with silence in enabling the poem's reverberations is important for us in considering the kind of music that her poetry, with its frequently scant stanzas, can give. This is music of a different, spatial scale, and one to which Western ears might not traditionally be attuned. Given that for her, Corman was 'the only one who can carry

⁵⁵Niedecker, *Between Your House*, 153.

⁵⁶Niedecker, *Between Your House*, 241.

⁵⁷Jenny Penberthy, *Lorine Niedecker's Century 1903-2003* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Woodland Pattern, 2015), 17-18.

over the silence into poems',⁵⁸ the influence of Corman (and, consequently, that of Japanese poetry) warrants further exploration, especially since his own explanation of the relationship between silence and poetry echoes her sentiments regarding the ideal context in which to receive a poem: 'In short, silence is not poetry; but it is the ground out of which and to which poetry comes and goes...'.⁵⁹ For both poets, the poem, thus conceived, was itself a kind of echoic utterance; positioned against the silence and space of the page, however, the temporal smallness of such a transient echo held particularly resonant potential.

Corman lived in Kyoto for fifty years, and the influence of the seventeenth-century Japanese haiku master Matsuo Basho is immediately detectable from the former's commentary in the introduction of his 1968 co-translation of Basho's *Oku no Hosomichi* (*Back Roads to Far Towns*), completed a decade before the comments quoted above:

[Basho's] poems are not isolated instances of lyricism, but cries of their occasion, of some one intently passing through a world, often arrested by the momentary nature of things within an unfathomable "order."

If, at times, the poems seem slight, remember that mere profusion, words piled up "about" event, often give an illusion of importance and scale belied by the modest proportion of human destiny. Precise conjunction of language and feeling, appropriately sounded, directness and fullness in brevity, residual aptness and alertness, mark *haiku* at best (as in those of Basho): grounded in season and particularity, no matter how allusive.⁶⁰

In contrast to 'mere profusion, words piled up "about" event', Niedecker admired

Corman's own poetry for the economic reticence of such lines as "each man an empire

⁵⁸Niedecker, *Between Your House*, 49.

⁵⁹Cid Corman, 'Poetry as a Mode of Realisation', in *Word for Word: Essays on the Arts of Language* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1977), 20.

⁶⁰Cid Corman, 'Introduction', in *Back Roads to Far Towns: Basho's Oku-No-Hosomichi*, trans. Cid Corman and Kamaike Susumu (New York: White Pine Press, 1986), 10.

when he enters / a silence” – if only those poets who throw a million words at you in a year understood that’.⁶¹

Fewer words, ‘appropriately sounded’, therefore enable ‘fullness in brevity’ when given the space to resonate against a surrounding silence. The organic image of poetry as it ‘comes and goes’ out of silence thus makes lyrically manifest the equivalent relative brevity of ‘some one intently passing through a world’. This idea of transience underpins much haiku, particularly Basho’s, which Corman held in greatest esteem. It is central to perhaps the most well-known haiku of all, Basho’s 1686 ‘Old pond: frog jump in water-sound’, as it appears in Harold G. Henderson’s *An Introduction to Haiku*, a copy of which Niedecker owned.⁶² Niedecker also owned a copy of Kenneth Rexroth’s *100 Poems from the Japanese*, originally published in 1955, in which Rexroth’s translation of this haiku appears as such:

An old pond –
The sound
Of a diving frog.⁶³

Both of these books belonged on Niedecker’s ‘immortal cupboard’, her shelf of most prized books.⁶⁴ She was familiar enough with Basho’s work, and with this one in particular, as to allude to it with ‘Spring – marsh frog-clatter peace / breaks out’ (126), and to invite her reader to ‘Hear // spring’s / first frog’ (237), but also to attempt her own version of the piece:

Frog noise
suddenly stops

⁶¹Niedecker, *Between Your House*, 35.

⁶²Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Basho to Shiki* (New York: Anchor, 1958), 19.

⁶³Kenneth Rexroth, *100 Poems from the Japanese* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 113.

⁶⁴Niedecker, *Between Your House*, 33.

Listen!
They turned off
their lights

(203)

The dynamic between silence and sound is evident, with each small stanza opening with the invitation to listen, and then closing as quickly as it began; in fact, to use the poem's own imagery, just like two short rapid flashes of light. The imperative to 'Listen!' for the turning off of lights may initially seem strange, since lights do not make noises, until we realise that we are being told to listen, instead, to the *lack* of noise. Niedecker is highlighting the resonant, echoing quality of haiku, the result of which is that 'What Basho doesn't say moves at least as much as what he does'.⁶⁵

Her interest in this particular preoccupation of haiku is apparent from as early as 1956, when she first mentioned Rexroth's translations in a letter to Zukofsky, noting her two favourites from the collection. Here is the first of these, originally by Yakamochi:

The cry of the stag
Is so loud in the empty
Mountains that an echo
Answers him as though
It were a doe.⁶⁶

The phenomenon described in this poem recalls the classical myth of Echo and Narcissus from Ovid; the way in which Rexroth has employed end-rhymes in the third, fourth, and fifth lines of the poem particularly evokes the way in which Echo is doomed by Juno to only be able to repeat final syllables. John Hollander, in delineating the myth of Echo as it manifests itself in Western poetry, describes how, in its most

⁶⁵Corman, 'Introduction', *Back Roads*, 11.

⁶⁶As copied out by Niedecker in *Correspondence with Zukofsky*, 229.

common form, 'Whenever possible, her fragmentary response involves a pun or other alteration of sense'.⁶⁷ This use derives from the force of the Ovidian Echo's responses to the lover who had spurned her.⁶⁸ In Rexroth's poem, the rhyming of 'echo'/'as though'/'doe' reverberates down the poem's final three line-ends; the last two rhymes in particular, as practically homonyms, reinforce the way in which the listener could increasingly convince himself ('as though') of the presence of a respondent ('a doe'). In this way, the voice of Echo, as here that of a doe, does indeed resolutely 'remain voice only, unseen, but ever heard'.⁶⁹

Niedecker would have been aware of the classical reference in Rexroth's translation, given that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was present among the books in her personal library.⁷⁰ It is worth taking a moment here to consider the gendered resonance that emerges when one considers the Echo myth alongside Niedecker's excavational echoing of historical male figures like Darwin and Chopin, as well as her responses to contemporary men like Zukofsky, Corman, and Rexroth. Discussing the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Seamus Heaney has delineated a 'feminine mode' of poetry, in which 'the language functions more as evocation than as address, and the poetic effort is not so much a labour of design as it is an act of divination and revelation'.⁷¹ Asking that its reader attend, as it attends, to the sounds inherent in, and shaped by, the natural world, Niedecker's work could be said to exemplify this mode; however, she

⁶⁷John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (London: University of California Press, 1981), 26.

⁶⁸There are traces of this sort of echo throughout the ventriloquised local voices in *New Goose*.

⁶⁹Hollander, *The Figure of Echo*, 9.

⁷⁰Margot Peters, 'Lorine Niedecker's Personal Library of Books: A Bibliography'. The Friends of Lorine Niedecker, Inc., 2018. https://lorineniedecker.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/NiedeckerLibraryupdated_000.pdf.

⁷¹Seamus Heaney, 'The Fire I' the Flint: Reflections on the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 60 (1974): 421-22.

additionally blurs the distinction between evocation and address, her use of echoes a particular means of addressing *by* evoking.

Significantly, in Rexroth's poem, the stag himself also remains unseen; in belonging to the tradition of haiku as described by Corman as 'the cries of their occasion', the poem is itself presented as sheer utterance. This would situate it within the other classical narrative surrounding the figure of Echo, popularised by Longus, in which her still-singing body is torn apart by Pan's doing. These narratives emphasise language and the potential of the echo to alter meaning, as well as Echo's music-making, and the preservation of her song as it is scattered in nature. The poetic utterance itself may thus be conceived as an echo to whose subsequent reverberations the reader has to attend, by 'com[ing] to the poems with an ear for all the music they can give'. In Rexroth's poem, it is imperative that the stag's cry is 'so loud' 'that an echo / Answers him', hollowing out the rocky mountains that are now 'empty', and that this process of echoing is potentially transformative (i.e., that it is figured as the voice of a doe). This loudness or magnitude is visually enhanced in the haiku with the 'fullness in brevity' enabled by fewer words surrounded by the hollowed out, white space of the page. Niedecker's version of Basho, with her spacing of each stanza horizontally and vertically apart from each other, demonstrates her understanding of this additional visual effect of haiku.

It is also part of the effect of the *haibun* form in which Basho composed his travelogue, comprising prose passages interwoven with haiku. Here is his account of his visit to the Ryushakuji mountain temple, as rendered by Corman:

This mountain one of rocky steps, ancient pines and cypresses, old
earth and stone and smooth moss, and on the rocks temple-doors
locked, no sound. Climbed along edges of and crept over boulders,

worshipped at temples, penetrating scene, profound quietness,
heart/mind open clear.

silence itself is
in the rock absorbing
cicada sounds⁷²

Following the journey up the steps through the trees, the panoramic prose, barely narrative to begin with, gives way to the paratactic observations of a ‘heart/mind open clear’. The haiku, isolated from the margins on either side, visually enacts the very starkness of the cicada sounds recorded, transient in the face of the ancient rock which will silently outlive both human and cicada. The resulting effect of its line breaks (that is, its negotiation of the blank space of the margins) is that of concentrated, gradually accretive description: given that it is suspended at the end of the first line, for instance, we are able to parse the word *is* as a standalone verb (“silence itself *is*”), before it goes on to become an auxiliary verb (“silence itself *is* / in the rock”). Likewise, *absorbing* works simultaneously as an adjective (“silence itself *is*, in the rock, *absorbing*”) and a verb (“the rock *absorbing* / cicada sounds”).

The impact of these slow, small mutations of meaning is particularly effective in direct contrast to the prose that comes just before it, and although Niedecker’s finished work does not use this formal combination of prose and verse, her method of condensing poetry out of prose drafts in a work like *Lake Superior*, her own narrative-resistant version of Basho’s travelogue, might have been inspired by the *haibun* form. After all, she had encountered an early version of Corman’s co-translation of *Back Roads* in *Origin* magazine, in July 1964 – only two years before her *Lake Superior*

⁷²Basho, *Back Roads*, 34.

project.⁷³ Moreover, the pun embedded within her description to Corman of the regional greeting *Bosho* (from *bonjour*) suggests that the Japanese poet was not far from her mind in her observation that 'The Northwest passage to the Orient has its Bosho only like a ton of rock. [...] But some kind of poetry has been felt by several of the geologists in that region'.⁷⁴ This statement, evocative in its use of the verb *felt* instead of *heard*, weds poetry to the groundbreaking work of an earthquake.

At this point, a comparison with Pound is again necessary, given his description of 'In a Station at the Metro' as a '*hokku*-like sentence'.⁷⁵ While both Niedecker and Pound were influenced by Japanese poetics, the latter's version of the haiku presents initially disparate-seeming images that, as in a vortex, come to reinforce and transform each other; he is thus interested in the synthesising potential of the haiku. His interest in the sculptural potential of the poem ('as much like granite as it can be') is closely tied with his description of the artist as original creator, a figure exemplified for him by the French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, whose artistry lay in his '*conceiving* instead of merely reflecting and observing'.⁷⁶ For Pound, the value of the synthesising potential of the haiku was its provision to the poet of a new means of conceiving, namely, the technique of 'super-position', or 'one idea set on top of another'. He therefore explicitly described the way in which he 'found [super-position] useful in getting out of the impasse in which I had been left by my metro emotion'.⁷⁷

In contrast, the deepest affinity which Niedecker's work shares with haiku lies in its compatibility with the principles of Zen Buddhism. As Yoshinobu Hakutani describes, 'the *hokku* poet aims at understanding the spirit of nature. Basho, a Zen-inspired poet,

⁷³Faranda, *Between Your House*, 92; Penberthy, 'Writing Lake Superior', 66.

⁷⁴Niedecker, *Between Your House*, 91.

⁷⁵Pound, 'Vorticism', *Fortnightly Review* 96 (September 1914): 467.

⁷⁶Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska* (London: John Lane, 1916), 103.

⁷⁷Pound, 'Vorticism', 467.

recognises little division between humanity and nature, the subjective and the objective'.⁷⁸ This is particularly apparent in Niedecker's sparest of poems, which repeatedly gesture towards these larger, more intricate dances of organic interdependence and interrelation, their own rhymes and acoustic echoes highlighted by the interplay between the printed word and the surrounding white space of the page:

Springtime's wide
water-
 yield
but the field
will return

(184)

Writing, as an act of attention in this haiku-like poem, resonates with the Zen belief that 'Things in nature are equal to human beings; both exist through and because of each other'.⁷⁹ Where Pound's lines strive for the sculptural density of granite, Niedecker's echoing rhymes aurally embody the Zen vision of interdependence, the craggy, uneven edges of her lines visually evoking the resonant interior surfaces of rocky caves.

For Paterson, silence is 'the poet's ground';⁸⁰ in this analogy, we hear an echo of Corman, for whom silence is 'the ground out of which and to which poetry comes and goes'. When Paterson goes on to add that '[silence] seems to stand for a realm of perception where all things are connected [...] before the fall into time and category',⁸¹ this description draws out a further resonance to Niedecker's desire to plant poems 'in deep silence'. We get the sense that this is a silence as deep as deep time, the idea that the earth must be older than the millennia that scientists had previously posited, thus

⁷⁸Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Haiku and Modernist Poetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 81.

⁷⁹Hakutani, *Haiku and Modernist Poetics*, 2.

⁸⁰Paterson, 'The Lyric Principle: Part 1', 62.

⁸¹Paterson, 'The Lyric Principle: Part 1', 64.

necessitating a thorough reconceiving of the comparative scale of the human inhabitant. Coming to Niedecker's poems with an ear for all the music they can give, the reader hears echoes of older voices and older traditions, the ear a cave enlarged with the reverberation of these echoes. The poems implicate us in extending their own acts of attention to us, acknowledging that we are a small part of a greater network of processes and cycles (through which, and because of which, we exist), awaiting our own overhearing of how they might briefly resonate in us.

4.3 The lapidary

In the first section of this chapter, I spoke about Niedecker's larger compositional process as being shaped by the interactions between solid and liquid that geologically undergird the Lake Superior region. In this section, I will focus on the way in which the smallest instances of rocky, geological material bear visual traces, in their colouring, of the vast phenomena from which they emerge. Niedecker was interested in colour, and her description to Corman, of always feeling 'kind of faded out – my way of writing' like 'the piece of wash that has hung too long in the sun', is telling of the particular colouring of this interest. Apparently self-deprecating, her comparison of herself to a faded piece of wash actually highlights one of the characteristics of her work, one that is imbued with a sense of joy. She was preoccupied by the capacity of colour to fade or exist along a spectrum, particularly as part of organically occurring processes. This preoccupation is evident from early poems such as 'Progression', describing 'that yellowing season of earth / with more than nine hundred ninety recombinations of yellows' (27), 'brown laterals of the same day', and 'trees pink-rust' (31). In much of the later work, this motif of colour transition presents itself in the form of minerals and

precious stones, abundant in *Lake Superior*. If we ordinarily conceive of a rock as a solid, opaque surface, gemstones defy these assumptions in their ability to conduct light; their dazzling colours are testimony of the ability of these small stones to absorb certain colours in light, while reflecting others.

Here is a passage from the *Lake Superior* prose narrative:

The north is one vast, massive, glorious corruption of rock and language – granite is underlaid with limestone or sandstone, gneiss is made-over granite, shale, or sandstone and so forth and so on and Thompsonite (or Thomsonite) is often mistaken for agate and agate is shipped in from Mexico and Uruguay and can even be artificially dyed in the bargain. And look what's been done to language! – People of all nationalities and colour have changed the language like weather and pressure have changed the rocks.⁸²

In the verse that eventually emerges, condensed as rocks from the magma of this prose, Niedecker foregrounds this sense of corruption that is common to the natural (rock) and human (language) worlds, and a result of journeying and exchange. Underlying the biggest colour changes, in other words, are interactions at the minutest atomic level. Niedecker was aware of this role, played by colour, in identifying one stone from another; this is evident in the above passage, where the simplest process of artificially dyeing a South American agate can deceptively render it passable for one from Lake Superior.

What Denise Riley identifies as the lapidary style is an illuminating framework by which to consider Niedecker's interest in geological compression as a form of transition or progression, and in these processes as they visually manifest themselves. For Riley, at its simplest definition, 'a style of writing, especially in verse, is called lapidary if it has dignity and concision'. Etymologically derived from the Latin *lapis* ('stone'), it applies to

⁸²As quoted in Penberthy, 'Writing Lake Superior', 67.

gravestone epitaphs or inscribed monuments, but is also relevant to ‘any writing that’s extremely concise, and tersely expressive’.⁸³

Remember my little granite pail?
The handle of it was blue.
Think what’s got away in my life –
Was enough to carry me thru.

(96)

Niedecker’s tonally elegiac poem is a good exemplar for the lapidary style as outlined by Riley, when considered in light of the ‘link between the functional and the expanded senses of the lapidary’ that the latter goes on to elaborate as she introduces the additional definition of *lapidary* as referring to the ‘gem-like’: ‘There’s an oscillation of meaning here between the brilliant gem and the unbright solid stone’.⁸⁴ The pail, functionally granite, yet adorned with its strikingly ornamental – even precious – blue handle, could not be a more striking example of this style.

For Riley, the lapidary is ‘monumental, declarative, and admonitory’, and ‘carries with it a certain authoritative overlay’ – as, for instance, with the imperative to ‘Remember’ a granite pail.⁸⁵ As opposed to the simplistically and unthoughtfully contracted, the lapidary requires ‘a notion of a sharpness of thought and an economy of expression as together enabling clarity’; this clarity of thought is wed to the literal clarity of precious stones, which reflect and refract light. Just as it requires skill to express an enormously complex idea in a laconic manner that itself gestures towards (and boasts) this underlying complexity, ‘[t]he work of cutting has to maximize each gemstone’s colour, brilliance, fire, and scintillation’.⁸⁶

⁸³Denise Riley, ‘On the Lapidary Style’, *differences* 28.1 (2017): 17.

⁸⁴Riley, ‘On the Lapidary Style’, 18-19.

⁸⁵Riley, ‘On the Lapidary Style’, 20.

⁸⁶Riley, ‘On the Lapidary Style’, 22-24.

Niedecker's work is richly exemplary of the 'curious sort of synaesthesia' that is, for Riley, 'this question of concentratedness and of "implication"', how it is 'that the exactness of some fine cutting comes to be associated with being admirably see-through'.⁸⁷ Amidst this discussion of the craftsmanship of the lapidary stylist, Niedecker calls our attention back to the rocks and precious stones themselves. Her work highlights that this oscillation belongs in a larger process of interdependent transition or progression: that there can be no brilliant gem without unbright solid stone. Some chemical investigation, for instance, reveals that there are even more relationships in 'Remember my little granite pail?' than those already discussed. When exposed to impurities such as iron or titanium oxides, granite has the capacity to turn blue; more commonly in household implements or kitchen counters made of light-coloured granite, the use of certain glues results in the green or blue 'blooming' discoloration of the granite.

Niedecker's rocks, to echo Marianne Moore's words in another context, acknowledge the forces which have shaped them; nowhere is this more apparent than in *Lake Superior*. The poet's geological knowledge is evident in the comprehensive list of rocks and gems mentioned in the sequence, and the processes that she traces. From its vast and general opening pronouncement of 'stuff that once was rock // In blood the minerals / of the rock' (232), the work gradually comes to be studded with specific geological specimens: the description of 'hornblende granite / basalt the common dark / in all the Earth' (233), for instance, ties together two kinds of igneous rock (granite

⁸⁷Riley, 'On the Lapidary Style', 24-25.

and basalt) with ‘the common dark’ of hornblende, a group of minerals ranging from dark green to black in colour, that is a common constituent of both.⁸⁸

Even more complex are the connections traced in the following lines:

Ruby of corundum
 lapis lazuli
 from changing limestone
 glow-apricot red-brown
 carnelian sard

 Greek named
 Exodus-antique
 kicked up in America’s
 Northwest
 you have been in my mind
 between my toes
 agate

(234)

With the intimate phrasing of ‘you have been in my mind / between my toes’, with its rare instance of the first-person pronoun (otherwise only occurring in the poem’s final two sections), this section serves as a microcosm of how the entire poem might be plumbed in our reading of it. Earlier, the poet had noted ‘Beauty: impurities in the rock’ (233); these lines more fully bear witness to how. ‘Ruby of corundum’ traces how corundum, a mineral chemically composed of aluminum and oxygen and commonly containing impurities of chromium, iron, vanadium and titanium, might make itself manifest as the red gem ruby, when there is a higher percentage of chromium in its composition. This is a matter of even a single atom being replaced, out of a million in its composition: another atom different, and the same corundum may give rise to blue sapphire, its other primary variety of gemstone.⁸⁹ Lapis lazuli, in the second line, usually

⁸⁸Jolyon Ralph, ‘Hornblende’, *Mindat*. Hudson Institute of Mineralogy, 1993-2019. <https://www.mindat.org/min-1930.html>.

⁸⁹Ralph, ‘Corundum’, *Mindat*. <https://www.mindat.org/min-1136.html>.

occurs in crystalline marble as the result of contact metamorphism (a process of change in a mineral that is the result of its encounter with the heat in magma). Sharing the same shades of blue, it was commonly referred to as a sapphire in the classical and Middle Ages.⁹⁰ Crystalline marble, in turn, derives from the ‘changing limestone’ invoked in the third line, which could equally make manifest chalcedony, a quartz that in turn, coloured by iron oxide, presents us with the ‘glow-apricot red-brown’ ‘carnelian’ and ‘sard’, two varieties of chalcedony that are similarly coloured and commonly confused.

The first line of the next stanza subsequently reminds us that Niedecker was interested in transition and progression not only as they play out in geological morphology, but also etymologically: ‘Greek named’ presumably refers to the ‘agate’ that closes this section and that was named by Theophrastus, a student of Aristotle’s, by the Sicilian river Achates.⁹¹ Returning to the first line of the previous stanza, the etymological ancestry of corundum lies in the Tamil *Kurundam* and, even further back, in the Sanskrit *Kuruwinda* which, significantly, refers to ruby (*OED*): thus taken back in a linguistically reversed process of its geological progression, the preposition in ‘Ruby of corundum’ takes on an additional semantic layer. Ruby may come *of*, or derive from, corundum, when there are impurities present; equally, *ruby* is the etymological parent *of*, or responsible for, *corundum*. Carnelian, given its blood-like ‘red-brown’ colouring by iron oxide, takes us back to the Latin *carnis*, for ‘flesh’ (*OED*); hence, ‘in blood the minerals of the rock’, ‘Iron the common element of earth’.

⁹⁰Walter Schumann, ‘Sapphire’, *Gemstones of the World*, trans. Annette Englander and Daniel Shea (New York: Sterling, 2006), 102.

⁹¹Patti Polk, *Collecting Agates and Jaspers of North America* (Iola, Wisconsin: Krause Publications, 2013), 11.

Ultimately, the focal point of this section is the agate, leading up to whose naming the second stanza's lines cumulatively pile up, like complex adjectives for an epithet: 'Greek-named, Exodus-antique, kicked-up-in-America's-Northwest, you-have-been-in-my-mind, between-my-toes agate'. We are led to read the rest of the lines in this manner as a result of our priming by the first two adjectives ('Greek-named' and 'Exodus-antique'), particularly the adjectival construction of the latter. Niedecker's celebration of agate does not mention the fact, but more digging reveals that the Lake Superior agate was legislated as the official state gemstone of Minnesota in 1969. This was due not only to its prevalence in beaches ('between my toes'), on hiking trails, and amidst gravel banks along rivers and streams, but also to the way in which the geographical ancestry of Minnesota is memorialised in the physical and visual characteristics of the stone: the tectonic forces that created the basin for Lake Superior also left behind lava flow that subsequently solidified into pockets; these, when encountering iron, quartz and other minerals carried by passing groundwater, would eventually crystallise into agate, to be freed, transported, shaped, and polished by the Superior lobe of glacier that entered Minnesota 10-15,000 years ago.⁹²

Most distinctively, Lake Superior agate is red-orange because of the presence of oxidised iron, leached from other rocks, particularly those from the iron-ore mining industrial districts around the region:

Iron the common element of earth
in rocks and freighters

Sault Sainte Marie – big boats
coal-black and iron-ore-red
topped with what white castlework

⁹²Scott F. Wolter, 'Minnesota's State Gem: The Lake Superior Agate', originally published in *The Minnesota Volunteer* (Jan/Feb 1988). As reproduced by Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, 2019. <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/education/geology/digging/agate.html>.

The waters working together
 internationally
 Gulls playing both sides

(232)

With the close sound patterning of these lines, Niedecker re-enacts the prevalence of even the smallest traces of the mineral, just as the rocks and freighters alike transport the iron. The vowel of the second syllable of ‘Iron’ therefore echoes throughout the first line: ‘Iron the common element of earth’. Then, as if taking her cue from the sibilance of ‘Sault Sainte Marie’, the alliteration and assonance (‘big boats / coalblack’; ‘with what white castlework’) and visual symmetries (‘coalblack and ironorere’) in the second stanza take over this theme of repetition with a difference in form, as is apt in capturing the organic journey of the mineral as it is carried through, shaped by, and manifested in, different new compounds and contexts. Its final word, ‘castlework’, too, carries over into the final stanza, stonework spilling into ‘waters working together / internationally’.

Scott F. Wolter highlights how, during the Great Ice Age, the Superior glacier ‘acted like an enormous rock tumbler, abrading, fracturing, and rough-polishing the agates’ that had formed to fill the existing trough, and that then were freed and transported by cycles of freezing and thawing.⁹³ Niedecker has, in turn, hewn her lines to her subject matter. Both are the way of the lapidarist, chiseling and faceting in order to maximise internal light and refractivity. Notably, she has done this in a way that acknowledges, even pays homage to, the forces that have worked organically to produce her materials. With its simultaneously flowing and static movement as a series of smaller sections amounting to a long sequence, the form of *Lake Superior* sweeps across swathes of

⁹³Wolter, ‘The Lake Superior Agate’.

geological history, from the ‘azoic’ (233), through ‘The Age of Fishes’ (234), to the ‘Cambrian’ (235), and the historical milestones and figures that have passed through Lake Superior terrain; at the same time, it arrests and distills this monumental landscape within the smallest of scenes.

To stud her ‘magma opus’ with so many minerals and gemstones, the smallest constituents of rock, Niedecker demonstrates how ‘In every part of every living thing / is stuff that once was rock // In blood the minerals / of the rock’. Yet conversely, just as we are able to trace the industrial bedrock of a state and its geographical formation from a single band-planed, translucent, rust-red agate kicked up between the toes of a beachcomber, Niedecker’s poem, barely over five pages in length, condenses more than a billion years’ worth of phenomena into the traces that this time has left behind, both geographically and linguistically. Precious stones are precious because they are small, but it is also a necessity that they be small, because their brilliance and translucency is a result of the amount of crystallising, chiselling, polishing, and whittling down that is required to give them their condensed colour and fire.

If it is difficult to excavate and expound upon this grammatically condensed work without repeatedly revisiting certain passages, that is because Niedecker has forged numerous tight connections not only within stanzas, but also across sections, foregoing a straightforward narrative. ‘Sault Sainte Marie’ (232) thus reappears as ‘the Soo’ (235) eight sections later, derived from the localised pronunciation of the French *Sault*. The enduring motif of shared elements and minerals emerges again in the section titled ‘Wild Pigeon’:

Did not man
maimed by no
stone-fall

mash the cobalt
and carnelian
of that bird

(235)

Mourning the extinction of the titular creature, the cobalt and carnelian invoked can be mashed and taken apart to reveal much more about a common mortality. Jay Yencich points out that cobalt etymologically derives from the German *kobold*, an imp or demon often found around silver deposits.⁹⁴ The *OED* further expands upon ‘the ore of cobalt having been so called by the miners on account of the trouble which it gave them [...] its mischievous effects upon their own health [...] due mainly to the arsenic and sulphur with which it was combined’. Thereafter, ‘[f]rom the miners of the Harz or Erzgebirge the name became common German, and then passed into all the European languages’ (*OED*), the element being prevalent across geographical boundaries. Not only merely occurring in ores, small deposits of cobalt may also be found in alloys of natural meteoric iron,⁹⁵ as well as the active center of a particular type of coenzyme present within the bodies of all animals; the most commonly known variety of this coenzyme is the vitamin B12, an essential trace mineral.⁹⁶ Ultimately, the human in this section, while apparently invincibly ‘maimed by no / stone-fall’, proves to be equally, vulnerably, implicated in common, carnelian terms.

For Riley, the lapidary style ‘cuts away, gouges out, as its way of compressing. But these elements of incisiveness are saved from the taint of destruction [...] by [its]

⁹⁴Jay Yencich, ‘Passenger Pidgin: Niedecker’s Road Trip through the Geo-Linguistic Strata of *Lake Superior*’, *Poetry Northwest* (18 April 2015). <https://www.poetrynw.org/jay-yencich-passenger-pidgin-niedeckers-road-trip-through-the-geo-linguistic-strata-of-lake-superior/>.

⁹⁵Randy L. Korotev, ‘Meteorite Regmaglypts’. Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, Washington University in St. Louis, 2018. <http://meteorite.wustl.edu/id/regmaglypts.htm>.

⁹⁶David Lindsay and William Kerr, ‘Cobalt Close-Up’, *Nature Chemistry* 3 (2011): 494.

stillness'.⁹⁷ Thus, while the 'very material of stone itself conveys the duration of time as endurance, as hardening,' '[i]t also marks the evanescence of human temporality'.⁹⁸ It would appear that Niedecker, too, agrees about our human temporality, given the apparent smallness and inconsequentiality of a human lifespan in the face of geologic ages:

Stone
and that hard
contact –
the human

On the mossed
massed quartz
on which spruce
grew dense

I met him
We were thick
We said good-bye
on The Passing Years
River

(240-41)

Significantly, this poem goes both ways, so to speak, in mapping the geological to the human just as it conversely names a river after human time. In doing so, it enlarges a human experience otherwise defined by brevity and impermanence. Likewise, 'Remember my little granite pail?', while elegiac for a lost or otherwise forgotten object, finally ends on human terms, and on a note of survival. Niedecker's is a lapidary style, then, that is less singularly stony, and not necessarily characterisable by 'stillness' as in Riley's terms, but one that considers the place of the smallest precious stone within the larger picture. The hardening and calcification by which Riley describes the endurance

⁹⁷Riley, 'On the Lapidary Style', 33.

⁹⁸Riley, 'On the Lapidary Style', 33.

of the lapidary, for Niedecker, is less ultimately definitive: 'In every part of every living thing / is stuff that once was rock'.

Towards the end of *Lake Superior*, the poet thus observes how:

The smooth black stone
I picked up in true source park
the leaf beside it
once was stone

Why should we hurry
Home

(236)

Joseph Conte has rightly picked up on the irony implicit within Niedecker's mention of 'true source park', the designated source of the Mississippi River.⁹⁹ I would like to add that Niedecker's use of the lowercase suggests that there is no singular and definitive true source; instead, there are numerous true sources for all phenomena. After all, even 'true source park' itself is a translation and therefore a secondary derivation of Itasca State Park, named by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft from the Latin *veritas caput* ('true head').¹⁰⁰ This park, whose region was formed by the repeating glaciers, contains moraine (glacial debris) in the form of 'coarse, gravelly materials and boulders pock-marked with countless lakes, ponds and bogs'.¹⁰¹ Out of this interplay of sand and water emerges the vegetation of the park, accounting for 'the leaf' that 'once was stone'. The poet would also have been careful to note how this was a cyclical process. In a letter to Corman, she describes an agate (a Lake Superior agate, given its 'wide orange band') she had picked up from a gift shop during her Lake Superior trip: 'Seems petrified wood

⁹⁹Joseph M. Conte, 'Natural Histories: Serial Form in the Later Poetry of Lorine Niedecker', in *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 1996), 352.

¹⁰⁰'Itasca State Park', Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR), 2019. https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/park.html?id=spk00181#information.

¹⁰¹MNDNR, 'Itasca'.

and agate have a connection – almost all petrified wood and agate have a connection – almost all petrified wood is agate-ized wood, I’ve read. The circles in the agate are of growth’.¹⁰² Indeed, as the name itself suggests, petrified wood refers to the outcome of a process, taking up to millions of years, in which the organic contents of trees come to be completely replaced by mineral deposits (such as the quartz of agate).

This reverse capacity, from stone to leaf, of wood to become stone, is significant because Niedecker was careful to avoid too heavy an emphasis on a single teleological direction governing *Lake Superior*. Faranda notes, for instance, Niedecker’s rearrangement of the sections, as well as her removal of the Roman numerals by which the sections had originally been ordered, and which had lent to the work ‘a relentless linear movement’.¹⁰³ Conte, too, picks up on these changes, flagging them up as significant for the poet herself, who had described ‘a couple of small but important revisions [...] [which] make all the difference’.¹⁰⁴ For him, these changes demonstrate the emphasis that Niedecker placed on the recurrence of the minerals in a circular, rather than linear, form.¹⁰⁵ I wish to take this further: these changes render Niedecker’s sequence in a form that mimics the structure and composition of the very precious stones that stud it.

If Riley describes how, like the gem-cutter’s job, the ‘writing of poetry can demand extreme compression and the dispersal of as much internal light as possible’,¹⁰⁶ Niedecker’s careful positioning and presentation of the sections of *Lake Superior* may thus be conceived as the poet’s lapidary work of polishing and faceting a gemstone. The

¹⁰²Niedecker, *Between Your House*, 94.

¹⁰³Lisa Pater Faranda, ‘Composing a Place: Two Version of Lorine Niedecker’s “Lake Superior”’, *North Dakota Quarterly* 55 (Fall 1987): 354.

¹⁰⁴Niedecker in a letter to Roub, as quoted in Conte, ‘Natural Histories’, 354.

¹⁰⁵Conte, ‘Natural Histories’, 354.

¹⁰⁶Riley, ‘On the Lapidary Style’, 24.

maximum internal light (i.e. inner reflectivity) of a gemstone, after all, is enabled by the lapidary's accurate positioning of facets upon a gem, as well as the smoothness of its surface: working in conjunction, these two factors ensure that light leakage is reduced.¹⁰⁷ In the case of *Lake Superior*, the sections' grammatical and narrative sparseness, along with their recurring use of the same regionally native minerals and stones, altogether present a work that is as compressed and multi-faceted, as internally refractive and connected, as these stones.

This is its final section:

I'm sorry to have missed
 Sand Lake
 My dear one tells me
 we did not
 We watched a gopher there

(237)

Niedecker has chosen to close an otherwise geographically and historically sprawling work with a location presented as being so unmemorable that the only detail recovering its memory is a gopher sighting. This is an instance of the poet's tendency, shared with the lapidary, to compress, to taper a monumental work down to the ultimately (and comically) mundane. What is remarkable about this tonal diminution, however, is that it simultaneously enlarges the speaker, her 'dear one', and the gopher sighted, drawing them together into the vast historical landscape of the region, which is made, after all, of the individual experiences and encounters of passers-through, be they intrepid voyagers or curious holiday-goers. This ending also asserts the ultimate kinship of *Lake Superior*, one of Niedecker's later and longer works, with the earlier, more minimal, 'Remember my little granite pail?'. In both, the poet highlights the quality of interdependence, or

¹⁰⁷Jill Banfield and Hanna Cook-Wallace, 'Lecture 7: Colour in Minerals'. College of Natural Resources, University of California Berkeley, 2002. <https://nature.berkeley.edu/classes/eps2/wisc/Lect7.html>.

what it means to ‘carry me thru’: her dear one reminding her what they had seen together, and filling in gaps in her own memory, just as agate, washed into the wood of a fallen tree trunk, fills its decomposing cavities; or as iron oxide gives Lake Superior agate its distinctively reddish-brown colouring.

I opened this chapter by thinking about Niedecker’s *condensery*, and will close it by looking at the word again, as it appears in an iteration of itself. In her work, the ability of organic matter to retain imprints of its making is mapped back upon the human, as in this poem, worth revisiting in full:

Stone
and that hard
contact –
the human

On the mossed
massed quartz
on which spruce
grew dense

I met him
We were thick
We said good-bye
on The Passing Years
River

(240-41)

The presence of the word *dense* is to Niedecker’s (here unspoken but nonetheless governing) principle of *condensery* what the stanzas themselves are to the larger processes of growth, formation, and separation. According to the *OED*, *contact* is a piece of geological terminology referring to ‘the plane between two adjacent bodies of dissimilar rock’. Forms of geological contact may include contact-deposits or contact-veins, in which the resulting body of rock bears testament, in these various forms, to this interaction.

Niedecker's poem is itself a contact zone, bringing together disparate organisms: 'On the mossed / massed quartz / on which spruce / grew dense', with its 'mossed/massed' rhyme, simultaneously conjures different scales of quartz. First, an image of moss agate, a semi-precious gemstone comprising a field of clear quartz containing green traces of impurity in such a manner that it is named for its mossy appearance. Upon this is layered the larger-scale image of a forest of 'spruce / grew dense' upon quartz cliffs, equally 'mossed / massed' in appearance as it is in minutiae. We are then introduced to a different form of contact, 'the human' – where 'We were thick' again closely layers the colloquial sense of the word ("We were thick as thieves") upon the existing organic vocabulary of dense, compact vegetation.

These stanzas petrify and fossilize the brief moment of the relationship described (that is, the contact-vein between 'We were thick' and 'We said good-bye'). On a linguistic level Niedecker similarly fossilizes, through her diction, the way in which the colloquial capacity of *thick*, to refer to the relationship between two individuals, derives from the word's original connotations of 'large numbers in a relatively small space [...] densely arranged' (OED) – as in a forest, or in a mass of moss. On a larger level, the poem mediates between the solid and the liquid, opening with stone and closing with a river, embodying the environment described at its heart, of damp moss and hard quartz from which spruce may thrive.

Stone
and that hard
contact –
the human

The reader's first experience of the poem is that of stone; we come up against something, a wall 'that hard' from the start. The incomplete sentence fragments and

the dash introduced in the third line do nothing to alleviate this initial sense of denseness, of hardness or difficulty. And yet from ‘contact – / the human’ onwards, something more familiar yields, and is offered up.

Niedecker’s clustering of consonants in ‘mossed / massed’ and her use of vowel echoes in *On/mossed/quartz/on* and *spruce/grew* are particularly pronounced due to her use of exclusively monosyllabic words. These lines phonosemantically evoke our understanding of the underlying ideas of closeness and contact; they even result in a central stanza that, while ostensibly describing geographical features, densely conveys the quality of the human relationship later described simply by the phrase ‘We were thick’. The connotations (of closeness and interdependence) conjured by the word ‘thick’ here, in other words, have already been described by the organic imagery and the sound of its description in the previous stanza. In stark contrast to the tightly patterned second stanza, with its run-on lines, is the poem’s final stanza, whose enjambment coincides with the abrupt, discrete phrases that delineate the stages of this relationship: ‘I met him / We were thick / We said good-bye’. The line that particularly stands out is ‘We said good-bye’, the poem’s only instance of a line ending with a vowel, a non-bounded sound that stretches out the implications of saying goodbye, extending its echoes across the space of the margin – until it, too, must be terminated by the closing consonants that follow in ‘on The Passing Years / River’.

There is no evidence to suggest that ‘The Passing Years River’ is an actual river; however, one of the sections in *Lake Superior* provides a possible means by which we are to read it:

Their South Shore journey
as if Life’s –

The Chocolate River
The Laughing Fish
and The River of the Dead

(235)

The South Shore journey made by Schoolcraft and his crew is here compared to that of 'Life' perhaps because of the presence of rivers so evocatively named that they might as well be allegorical, memorialising events or encounters in life. In fact, unlike The Passing Years River, these three are actual rivers, listed in a Schoolcraft booklet within Niedecker's Lake Superior notes:

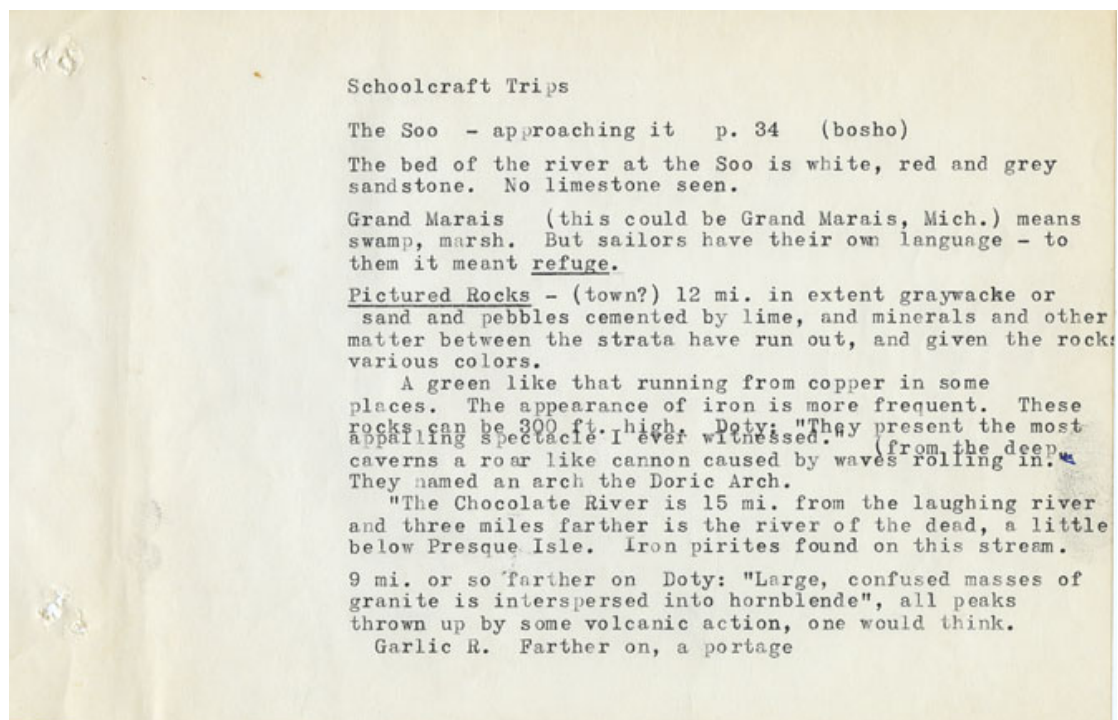


Figure 4.1 Lorine Niedecker, page from handmade book titled *Schoolcraft*:

"The Chocolate River is 15 mi. from the laughing river and three miles farther is the river of the dead, a little below Presque Isle."¹⁰⁸

Conversely, Niedecker's apparent coinage of 'The Passing Years River' situates the relationship between 'him' and 'I' within a larger geological duration. 'We were thick',

¹⁰⁸'Schoolcraft'. Archive document. University of Wisconsin Digital Collections, 2019. <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/WI/WI-idx?id=WI.FASchoolcraft>.

but for how long – a week, or a lifetime? Neither of these might seem to amount to much when perceived on the geological scale of deep time. The possible sense of futility here is echoed in one of the handmade booklets in which she transcribed memorable exchanges between herself and her husband. Niedecker records:

In the new museum on Wis. Ave. back of the Central Library – we
stood before the exhibit of arrowheads of Indians 8,000 years
before Christ.

L: I'm scared

Time means nothing here.¹⁰⁹

'Time' here refers to human time, the time of the living present in which 'I met him' in Niedecker's poem. If this time means nothing in the face of millennia, Niedecker's act of relating the relationship to the natural or the geological might therefore offer some form of consolation in its suggestion of the natural inevitability of this outcome ('We said good-bye'); more importantly, it does this in an act of naming and of inscription.

I read this poem as ultimately monumentalising the relationship that it describes, temporally extending and setting in stone, so to speak, the spatially brief and fleeting moment of this encounter, sending its memory echoing onwards. Critically, it does this in a form and manner that captures and preserves this brevity and transience, without sullyng or altering it. I thus also read Niedecker's as a vision of a mutable, permanently impermanent world, in which humans fit seamlessly in, and that, ultimately, seems to be reassuring. After all, the poet was a fan of *The Flintstones*, finding the cartoon 'funny'.¹¹⁰ Its humour derives largely from its satirical presentation, within the Stone Age, of a typical twentieth-century American family. Things were different, then (having

¹⁰⁹As transcribed from pages from the Niedecker archive shown to the viewer in *Immortal Cupboard: In Search of Lorine Niedecker*, directed by Cathy Cook (Wisconsin/Baltimore: Sprocket Productions, 2009). DVD.

¹¹⁰Niedecker, *Correspondence with Zukofsky*, 339.

to make do with the work of animals before the invention of modern technology, for instance), but they are also ultimately the same. Likewise, Niedecker may have remarked that 'Time means nothing here', but this statement is eloquently equivocal, simultaneously suggesting that its speaker is intimidated, and nonchalantly throwaway; there might be nothing to be scared of, after all.

5 Turning Out Kay Ryan

It is not a stretch of the imagination to consider Kay Ryan to be a poet of smallness. Her poems are visually small, typically composed of single stanzas, and rarely extend beyond five words per line. They have been described as ‘filament-like’,¹ and ‘so tiny you could almost tweet them’.² She is a poet with a ‘penchant for brevity’,³ to whom ‘nothing could be more of an anathema than bigness’.⁴ The latter sentiment is backed up by the poet herself in an article titled ‘Antagonism: Walt Whitman’ for *Poetry* magazine, in which she blankly states that ‘I don’t read Whitman because I don’t need Whitman’s big stride, his wide, encompassing arms, his hug’.⁵ What Ryan seems to object to is the bigness of the monolithic, a position that is apparent in a poem poking fun at the titular ‘Great Thoughts’:

Great thoughts
do not nourish
small thoughts
as parents do children.

Like the eucalyptus,
they make the soil
beneath them barren.

Standing in a
grove of them
is hideous.⁶

¹Emily Moore, ‘On Kay Ryan’, *New Haven Review*, 3 August 2008, <http://www.newhavenreview.com/blog/index.php/2008/08/on-kay-ryan>.

²Dwight Garner, ‘Stealthy Insights Amid Short Phrases’, *The New York Times*, 4 March 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/05/books/05book.html>.

³Sarah Fay, Kay Ryan, ‘The Art of Poetry No. 94’, *The Paris Review* 187 (Winter 2008), <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5889/kay-ryan-the-art-of-poetry-no-94-kay-ryan>.

⁴Adam Kirsch, ‘Think Small’, *The New Yorker*, 12 April 2010, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/04/12/think-small>.

⁵Kay Ryan, ‘Antagonism: Walt Whitman’, *Poetry* (October 2004): 50.

⁶Ryan, ‘Great Thoughts’, in *Say Uncle* (New York: Grove Press, 1991), 46.

In a poem opposing overt greatness, Ryan's tone is appropriately understated and ironic, the unexpectedly colloquial anticlimax of her final stanza resisting any sort of further explanation that might even begin to take the shape of a great thought.

Yet Sarah Fay points out that Ryan disagrees with any straightforward description of her aesthetic: 'Although she says she likes to "squeeze things until they explode," she insists "there's a sense of air and ease in even the smallest of my poems".'⁷ Ryan's conception of her own variety of poetic smallness is telling. If we had thought that explosion by squeezing was contradictory or contrary to a sense of air and ease, we are asked to make further room, still, for finer consideration. Her description resonates with a piece like 'Spiderweb', which first appears among the new poems in *The Best of It* (2010):

From other
angles the
fibers look
fragile, but
not from the
spider's, always
hauling coarse
ropes, hitching
lines to the
best posts
possible. It's
heavy work
everyplace,
fighting sag,
winching up
give. It
isn't ever
delicate
to live.⁸

⁷Fay, 'The Art of Poetry No. 94'.

⁸Ryan, 'Spiderweb', in *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 26.

The spider's work of 'hitching / lines' invites us to read the creature as a surrogate for the poet herself, composing and arranging her lines.

The idea of hard work underpinning the apparent ease of a poem is not a particularly new or original one. However, in Ryan's work, the distinction between difficulty and ease is not always as straightforward as a simple shift in perspective between the spider's and other angles, or a matter of making hard work look easy. In fact, her poems complicate dichotomies or classifications, and caution against any conclusive association of smallness with vulnerability or simplicity. Her description of the poem as 'an empty suitcase that you can never quit emptying' encapsulates this sense that nothing is absolute, and that there is always more to be made of (or taken away from) something.⁹ The 'sense of air and ease' in Ryan's poems is very different, after all, from the ease of Whitman. In her inclination to squeeze things until they explode, additionally, is a difficulty or meanness that sits in direct contrast to the implied amplitude and affability of Whitman. There is ease in terms of her poems' movement, quick and concise and therefore seemingly easy; however, if there is air within them, there is also an atmospheric pressure, the feeling of holding one's breath.

As Ryan's spider reminds us, 'It / isn't ever / delicate / to live'. In considering the smallness of the poems, the first two-thirds of my discussion will broadly concern themes of survival, what the relationship between the small part and the larger whole might have to do with it, and how this plays out within humans and other organisms or in the life of the poems themselves. Smallness here, then, is relative; size is a question of scale but also of perspective. As such, I consider the ways in which the qualities of vulnerability, brevity and levity, despite connoting various forms of smallness, are

⁹Ryan, 'The Art of Poetry No. 94'.

revealed in Ryan's work to have just as much to do with their larger, antithetical counterparts. In the final part of the chapter, I take my cue from Ryan's description of 'Whitman's big stride, his wide, encompassing arms, his hug', which renders the act of reading a poem in social terms. Considering the poems in relation to other similarly compact forms, I ask the following questions: what is the nature of the larger relationship between the reader and Ryan's poems, and how is this relationship shaped by their physical smallness?

Much of the chapter will concern the comic, in its various guises or contexts of the nonsensical, the Freudian, the satirical, or the forms of the joke or the riddle. The comedy of Ryan's work is significant, given the poet's description of her own response to the poetry that she enjoys. For her, Robert Frost's 'Nothing Gold Can Stay' is 'a perfect poem', in that it invokes in her 'one of those involuntary *hals* that jump out when you've witnessed a wonderful magic trick'.¹⁰ Does Ryan consider deception of the consequently passive or vulnerable viewer/reader to be at the heart of both the perfect trick and the perfect poem?

And that's poetry, this impossible pang, which seen another way is a tremendous bullying job to which we submitted before we knew it. We're done for so fast we can't stop to think [...]. Too late; we're stuck in Frost's little house, shingled-in with the overlapping arguments, nailed down with the tidy, rhymed couplets. It's the strangest thing; the poem is a trap – that is a release. It's a small

¹⁰Here is Frost's poem, as reproduced by Ryan:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

door to a room full of gold that we can have any time we go through the door, but that we can't take away.

Ha!

At about nine months, a baby starts to laugh when something is suddenly taken away from her. One of a baby's first games is peek-a-boo, where someone repeatedly disappears and reappears (the enjoyment of which is, incidentally, considered a key indicator of later language acquisition skills). Frost's poem could be thought of as a kind of peek-a-boo. The rhythm of its repeated take-aways may go all the way back to our deep early enjoyment of loss, which we register with laughter.¹¹

There is a great deal to be gleaned from this passage and considered in light of her own poetry, not least the fact that Ryan has chosen to write about Frost's poem as a specifically 'little house', and also about a baby's game. As the speaker in 'Spiderweb' cautions against assuming the fragility of the spider's threads, Ryan has chosen to build a larger point upon the small, or what could easily be condescended to. This notion of belittlement, with its positive and negative nuances, thus underpins the chapter as a whole: when might belittlement be rescued from its satirical inflections, for instance, such that it becomes nurturing, or potentially even generative? As will be demonstrated, smallness is repeatedly a complex strategy in Ryan's poetry, and one that bears greater import beyond itself.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes 'the first game played by a little boy of one and a half and invented by himself', in which 'the only use he made of any of his toys was to play "gone" with them', and to find pleasure therein:

What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same uttering his expressive "o-o-o-o". He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its

¹¹Ryan, 'A Consideration of Poetry', 150.

reappearance with a joyful “*da*” [“there”]. This, then, was the complete game – disappearance and return.¹²

Ryan’s description of the baby’s first game of peek-a-boo alludes to Freud’s game of *fort/da*. In both, what is apparent is this ‘deep early enjoyment of loss’. Freud remarks that ‘the unpleasurable nature of an experience does not always unsuit it for play’; on the contrary, the game might represent ‘the impulse to work over in the mind some overpowering experience so as to make oneself master of it’: ‘At the outset [the child] was in a *passive* situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part’.¹³

In this early experience of loss, the child learns to enjoy absence by learning to choose to let go. When, in turn, Ryan describes poetry as ‘this impossible pang, which seen another way is a tremendous bullying job to which we submitted before we knew it’, and ‘a trap – that is a release’, she finds an analogue, in poetry, to the baby’s early game. For her, the poem is a game as well. Reading Frost’s poem, we are relinquishing control, letting ourselves be ‘done for so fast we can’t stop to think’. If we are tempted to conceive of this experience as operating in an opposite direction to that of Freud’s baby (i.e., in the former, the game is followed by loss, whereas in the latter, the game ends with the return of the lost object) we must also consider our own position as the reader, and how this might complicate the analogy: in the game of poetry, are we the parent, the baby, or the toy? Which is the poet, and what does that make the poem? In her discussion of Frost’s lyric, Ryan re-enacts the older poet’s work of giving us access to

¹²Sigmund Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXI, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 14-15.

¹³Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, 16-17. Drawing upon the *fort/da* game, Alexander Freer has explored the way in which rhythm structures affective experience, not only from a psychoanalytic perspective, but also in terms of verse hermeneutics. See Freer, ‘Rhythm as Coping’, *New Literary History* 46.3 (Summer 2015): 549-68.

a room full of gold and then taking that away; her segue, via a single *Ha!*, to the unexpected description of a baby's first game, does to us what Frost's poem had done to her. Shifting positions from that of the reader to that of the writer, Ryan reclaims control.

The rhythm and effect of her prose here is significant because it is the same as that which underpins much of her poetry. The child's first experience of loss, and their process of achieving active playful mastery in this passive situation, gives us the shape of a tension that governs her work, and that will also inform this chapter as a whole. Following the passage previously quoted, Ryan identifies 'Something nonsensical at the heart of poetry', and then goes on to consider 'nonsense when it sails under its own colours', bringing into her discussion a poem by Edward Lear.¹⁴ This admission of 'something nonsensical' is helpful for us when situating Ryan's work within a specific literary tradition. Hugh Haughton's description of nonsense verse as 'a liberating way of dealing with the intolerable, or at least handling the impermissible'¹⁵ certainly allows us to characterise Ryan's interest in Frost's poem as an interest in its nonsensical aspects; I am therefore interested in thinking about the way in which the nonsensical (a form of smallness, too, as a relatively minor or marginal poetic genre) informs her work.

This is all to say that we are held, by a Kay Ryan poem, in a different way to that of being held by a Whitman poem; the former's poems do not envelop us in the nurturing, paternal way that is suggested by her image of Whitman's 'encompassing' 'hug'. Instead, they actively and intently hold us in a dynamic of push and pull; they play games with us and keep us on our toes, and in this way they make strategic use of the nonsensical. As

¹⁴Ryan, 'A Consideration of Poetry', 150-51.

¹⁵Hugh Haughton, 'Introduction', *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), 13.

Freud's baby achieves mastery over an unpleasurable experience via play, this is a game of poetry that controls its losses in a similarly fugitive manner. The small doors of Ryan's poems are entrances into entrancing passageways through which we pass 'so fast we can't stop to think', only to find ourselves in unexpected places – to which we nonetheless return. The following quotation from Robert Lowell serves as an epigraph for her poem 'Blue China Doorknob': 'I was haunted by the image of a blue china doorknob. I never used the doorknob, or knew what it meant, yet somehow it started the current of images.'¹⁶ As with Lowell's doorknob, her poems open themselves up to what is left at large, and pull us in.

5.1 'how well / some separate part might manage'

With these themes of play, small doors, entrancing passageways, and children, the nonsense playground of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is one of the disembarking points of Ryan's work, especially considering the poet's numerous references to *Alice*.

Yeses

Just behind
the door,
a second.
But smaller
by a few inches.
Behind which
a third again
diminishes.
Then more
and more,
forming a
foreshortened
corridor or

¹⁶Ryan, *The Niagara River* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 34.

niche of yeses
 ending in
 a mouse's
 entrance
 with a knob
 too small
 to pinch.¹⁷

This poem resonates with Ryan's analogy of Frost's poem as a little house. As the speaker gradually shows us these increasingly diminishing doors, the final one with 'a knob / too small / to pinch', Alice's first foray into Wonderland comes to mind:

Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole: she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains, but she could not even get her head through the doorway; "and even if my head would go through," thought poor Alice, "it would be of very little use without my shoulders."¹⁸

For Alice, the garden with its bright flowers and cool fountains represents what Ryan describes as the 'magic in certain small things. [...] by changing size, so that we can't get in there anymore, generating rooms too small to actually occupy, we give ourselves the possibility of everything turning out otherwise than it does *here*. We loosen an imaginative space that gets larger as it gets smaller.'¹⁹ This is the space of poetry as an 'impossible pang', the re-enactment and mastery in play of an experience that has mastered and, crucially, continues to master us; a game of departures and returns that is ultimately played with the self as simultaneously subject and object, a game to which we repeatedly submit ourselves.

¹⁷Ryan, *Say Uncle*, 43.

¹⁸Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Penguin, 1994), 16.

¹⁹Ryan, for 'A Symposium on the Miniature', *The Threepenny Review* 145 (Spring 2016): 16.

Alice cannot envision getting through that doorway without leaving her shoulders behind: as it is, she is the wrong size to fit in the garden. When she finds the bottle marked 'DRINK ME' and the little cake marked 'EAT ME', and consequently shrinks and expands upon following their instructions, these experiences are characterised by out-of-body thoughts, thoughts in which the self is divided, comprising estranged or conflicting parts. She thus recalls how 'sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes; and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself'.²⁰ Upon growing to be more than nine feet tall, and finding her own feet too far away to reach, she wonders: 'Oh, my poor little feet, I wonder who will put on your shoes and stockings for you now, dears? I'm sure *I* shan't be able! [...] Let me see: I'll give them a new pair of boots every Christmas. [...] and how funny it'll seem, sending presents to one's own feet!'²¹

Ryan's poetry draws extensively upon the shifts of size and scale, and ideas of self-estrangement, that similarly pervade *Alice*. Like Ryan, Carroll is interested in doorknobs 'too small / to pinch', rooms 'too small to actually occupy'; in *Alice*, this is made manifest in the impossible tensions that inform Alice's predicaments. William Empson has observed that 'Alice peering through the hole into the garden may be wanting a return to the womb as well as an escape from it; she is fond, we are told, of taking both sides of an argument when talking to herself, and the whole book balances between the luscious nonsense-world of fantasy and the ironic nonsense-world of fact'.²² Certainly, the womb here is not simply nurturing but also suffocating, as evidenced by the way in

²⁰Carroll, *Alice*, 19.

²¹Carroll, *Alice*, 21-22.

²²William Empson, 'Alice in Wonderland: The Child as Swain', in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935), 271.

which Alice ‘longed to get out of that dark hall’. By extension, parenting in Carroll’s world is often depicted as smothering or physically combative, as is evident in the lyrics of the lullaby that the Duchess sings to her baby: ‘Speak roughly to your little boy, / And beat him when he sneezes: / He only does it to annoy, / Because he knows it teases’.²³ When she tosses the baby to Alice, the latter learns that ‘the proper way of nursing it’ is ‘to twist it up into a sort of knot, and then keep tight hold of its right ear and left foot, so as to prevent its undoing itself’.²⁴ From the outset, Wonderland is as much a place of violence as it is of play. That Alice recalls boxing her own ears and scolding herself to tears upon cheating against herself in croquet not only flags up the violence inherent in play; it also highlights the stakes of the games that we play. If to nurse and nurture a baby is to be violent towards it, the body continues to tear itself asunder for the sake of, ironically, self-preservation in the face of its own undoing.

Two other poems by Ryan are particularly suggestive of these themes in Carroll’s text: ‘Rats’ Tails’, imagines the titular ‘rats’ tails, / just scattered / bits of script’,²⁵ evoking Alice’s imagining of the Mouse’s ‘long and [...] sad tale’ takes the concrete shape of a mouse’s tail, the words scattered and undulating down Carroll’s page.²⁶ Secondly, ‘Cheshire’, coming just before ‘Yeses’ in *Say Uncle*, is again preoccupied with the disintegration of a self, and how the smallest parts might remain of a larger whole:

It’s not the cat
it’s the smile that
lasts, toothy
and ruthless.
It’s facts like this
we like to resist –
how our parts
may lack allegiance

²³Carroll, *Alice*, 72.

²⁴Carroll, *Alice*, 73.

²⁵Ryan, ‘Rats’ Tails’, in *The Niagara River*, 15.

²⁶Carroll, *Alice*, 37.

to the whole;
 how the bonds
 may be more casual
 than we know; how
 much of us
 might vanish
 and how well
 some separate part
 might manage.

(42)

The attitude of this poem, with its conclusion that ‘some separate part / might manage’, lies in opposition to Alice’s early assumption that ‘even if my head would go through, it would be of very little use without my shoulders’. Later, before she encounters and speaks to the Cheshire Cat, she is flung the Duchess’s baby, which, thus abandoned, promptly begins to transform itself into a pig, before setting off quietly into the woods. Ryan’s poem is characterised by the same defiance; with its bold claim of the counterintuitive as simply ‘facts like this’, it shares an affinity with the character from whom it takes its title, which, when told that the Duchess’s baby had turned into a pig, merely says, ‘I thought it would’.²⁷ ‘Throwing away his toy so that it was “gone”’, for Freud, ‘might satisfy an impulse of the child’s, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him’.²⁸ The Duchess’s baby’s transformation into a pig could be said to embody this desire to assume an active role, just as in Ryan’s poem the speaker wrestles the feeling of passive loss and abandonment into a choice more actively constructed.

In Freud’s 1927 essay ‘Humour’, he considers the situation of a prisoner who, bound for the gallows on a Monday, quips: ‘Well, the week’s beginning nicely’.²⁹ For Freud,

²⁷Carroll, *Alice*, 78.

²⁸Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, 16.

²⁹Freud, ‘Humour’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXI, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 161.

this is a ‘situation of humour, in which a person adopts a humorous attitude towards himself in order to ward off possible suffering. Is there any sense in saying that someone is treating himself like a child and is at the same time playing the part of a superior adult towards that child?’³⁰ Here, self-division by way of the humorous belittlement of oneself is a strategy for seizing the reins and, paradoxically, making one feel bigger and more secure. We are reminded of Alice, commenting on ‘how funny it’ll seem, sending presents to one’s own feet!’ and attempting, similarly, to re-adjust to a situation in which she otherwise had no control. As Ryan notes, our deep early enjoyment of loss is registered with laughter; Freud’s prisoner’s response to their predicament suggests that this use of humour remains even – especially – in what might be said to be the starkest extreme of situations of loss, that of one’s own life, and enables us to see beyond it. In Freud’s version of self-division or self-estrangement, the superego’s assumption of the humorous, parental position is intended to say to that of the ego as suffering child: ‘Look! here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children – just worth making a jest about!’.³¹ The world, thus shrunk to child’s play, is not so terrifying after all. And yet, just as Carroll’s use of *funny* draws out its colloquial connotation of the odd and unexpected (*OED*), this second meaning of the word highlights the fact that when we find something funny, we are letting ourselves be implicated, letting something happen to us. The word, with its undertones of both the funny-peculiar and the funny ha-ha, encapsulates the peculiar comedy of Ryan’s poems.

³⁰Freud, ‘Humour’, 164.

³¹Freud, ‘Humour’, 166.

5.2 'a tiny but powerful / kit for adapting'

The theme of self-division as a strategy for self-preservation is one that recurs in Ryan's work, and this act of division is indicative of an ability to occupy a greater vantage point from which one may cope with the world and its cruel realities. In other words, a small fragmented part might actually hold the key to something larger and yet unknown. In 'Playacting', for instance, we are told that 'some fraction of the self / has always held out', 'What could it / be for but passage out?'.³² In 'Why We Must Struggle', too, the poet remarks: 'how strange / it is that one sector / of the self can step in / for another in trouble, / how loss activates / a latent double'.³³ And this instinct 'Born into each seed / could be a small / anti-seed useful / in case of some / complete reversal: / a tiny but powerful / kit for adapting it / to the unimaginable'.³⁴ The uncertainty within the choice of words such as *strange* and *unimaginable* is significant. Over and over again, the poetry is testament to 'how / much of us / might vanish / and how well / some separate part / might manage', but there is reason also to believe that this stray, small, separate part might not only manage on its own, but might even lead us beyond current limitations:

To the Young Anglerfish

For now and for the next 400-plus generations,
 the hornlike symptom on your brow
 will itch and be subject to irritation.
 At that point it will begin to resemble a modification
 useful for tricking food. It will at last begin
 to begin to do some good.
 Meanwhile, the problems of life enhance:
 an awkwardness attends the mating dance
 and an inexplicable thoughtfulness
 at the wrong moments.

³²Ryan, 'Playacting', in *Erratic Facts* (New York: Grove Press, 2015), 17.

³³Ryan, 'Why We Must Struggle', in *Say Uncle*, 54.

³⁴Ryan, 'In Case of Complete Reversal', in *Elephant Rocks* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 61.

That part of you that is pledged to the future
 abstracts you in some way from nature
 with the small *n*. You feel a
 comical, budding power, and then
 you don't again.³⁵

We are quite quickly made aware, in reading this poem, that it addresses not just a specific young anglerfish, but also the young of the species as a whole. However, in anchoring the poem more to the situation and scale of the present individual, rather than to the larger species, Ryan lightens its tone. If 'an awkwardness attends the mating dance / and an inexplicable thoughtfulness / at the wrong moments', these 'problems of life' and of survival that are faced by the still-evolving species are also the quotidian ones of the fumbling adolescent: inaptitude at picking up the ladies, a tendency for bad timing.

Speaking from so many years in the future, with the available hindsight of 'the next 400-plus generations', the speaker's tone is reassuring, but it comes from a great distance, at the remove that makes it possible to locate humour in the young anglerfish's current suffering. As we are informed by the poem's epigraph, 'The angler's lure required 500 separate modifications to attain its exquisite mimicry'.³⁶ There is so much evolution left to undertake, the sprawling process ahead enacted in the future tense and syntactic construction of the promise that 'It will at last begin / to begin to do some good'. In contrast, the young anglerfish is infinitely small and helplessly ignorant of what is yet to come. Or is it? The last lines of the poem introduce the possibility of the anglerfish's triumph over its own suffering. If 'That part of you that is pledged to the future' is thus subservient to the something greater that you have yet to become, this

³⁵Ryan, *Elephant Rocks*, 27.

³⁶Stephen Jay Gould, as quoted in Ryan, 'To the Young Anglerfish', in *Elephant Rocks*, 27.

same part nonetheless ‘abstracts you in some way from nature / with the small n’ and, it is implied, helps you locate your rightful seat among Nature with the big N: the itching, irritated anglerfish is thus elevated.

Ultimately, the life of this anglerfish, one generation in hundreds yet to come, is reduced to the sensation described in the poem’s final line: ‘You feel a / comical, budding power, and then / you don’t again’. Ryan’s comic timing in these lines is crucial. By building a sense of anticipation in the line break following ‘and then’, before deflating it with the half-rhyme of ‘you don’t again’, the poet’s use of bathos plays with diminishing returns, flirting inconclusively with a conclusion in which the anglerfish finally has the upper hand. Its life, after all, is a brief moment; collapsed into such phrases as ‘For now’ and ‘Meanwhile’, it is simply an aside, a diversion en route to a more important end result. And yet, by switching between the present and future tense, and with its use of the second-person pronoun, Ryan’s poem gives us a glimpse of the possibility of the same act of self-estrangement of which Freud speaks.

Why do we find the poem funny? I have suggested that the humour of the poem lies in the safe remove at which it is possible to find the anglerfish’s suffering comical, as well as in Ryan’s downsizing of the scale of suffering to that of awkwardness and itchy irritation. In fact, the latter personifies the anglerfish, making it human and thus closer to us in its predicament, so that when we locate the humour from a safe remove, this is a safe remove from ourselves. In other words, if we laugh at the anglerfish because of the relatable humanness of its suffering, we are only able to laugh because this suffering has been transposed upon an anglerfish that is non-human, and unrelated to us.³⁷ In turn,

³⁷Laura White has, relatedly, examined the way in which such comically hybrid animals as those pervading the works of Carroll and Lear, were characteristic of the early Victorian period, and tied to human anxieties about our long-held sovereignty in the Great Chain of Being. See White, *The Alice Books and the Contested Ground of the Natural World* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 80.

our appreciation of the anglerfish's feeling of 'comical, budding power', even and especially vague and momentary as it is, is an appreciation of the possibility that there is 'some good' in our own larger unseen future. Comprising occasional end-rhymes and scattered internal rhymes, there is a disparate momentum in the poem's form that could ultimately be described as harmonious; as with the rhyming of 'you don't again' with 'nature / with the small n', the poem itself muddles towards a larger future endpoint in which everything is okay.

Of course, this future is impossible without the struggles of the individual, laughably negligible as these may seem. If the angler's lure required 500 separate modifications, each of these played its part, however small; in fact, by reminding us of the 500 discrete modifications that were necessary, Ryan's poem highlights precisely the necessity and power of each small, momentary modification out of the 500. On an evolutionary scale spanning centuries, the individual might therefore be for its species what the funny bone is to the prisoner bound for the gallows on a smaller individual scale; Ryan's poem, demonstrating the triumphant potential of the comical, suggests to us that this pattern of survival via the small is translatable across varying scales.

A poem regarding the work of Darwin is helpful to us for thinking further about the connection between the evolutionary trait and the sense of humour; specifically, the ability in both for adaptation, and for turning a situation around:³⁸

I marvelled At How Generally I Was Aided

I marvel at how generally
I am aided, how frequently

³⁸There is a rich seam of scholarship on nonsense literature and evolution. For Empson, for instance, Darwinian ideas pervade Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published six years after Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859). Jean-Jacques Lecercle, too, has explored the way in which nonsense and evolutionary theories flowered in the period, the former drawing extensively from the latter. See Empson, 'Alice in Wonderland: The Child as Swain', 254-6; Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 201-4.

the availability of help
 is demonstrated. I've had
 unbridgeable distances collapse
 and opposite objects coalesce
 enough to think duress itself
 may be a prayer. Perhaps not chance,
 but need, selects; and desperation
 works upon giraffes until their necks
 can reach the necessary branch.
 If so, help alters; makes seven vertebrae
 go farther in the living generation;
 help coming to us, not from the fathers,
 not to the children.³⁹

The poem takes its title from a quotation by Darwin in his *Autobiography*, recounting an early faith: 'I remember in the early part of my school life that I often had to run very quickly to be in time, and from being a fleet runner was generally successful; but when in doubt I prayed earnestly to God to help me, and I well remembered that I attributed my success to the prayers and not to my quick running, and marvelled how generally I was aided'.⁴⁰ Darwin's religious faith was to be complicated by his working through of the principles of natural selection ('duress itself / may be a prayer'), although he never entirely renounced the possibility of God. Ryan's poem is faithful to Darwin's admission, even and especially late in his life, that 'The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; & I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic'.⁴¹ As an admission of, and subjection of oneself to, the limitations of what one can know, this is a humble position to take. It ties Darwin, the speaker of this poem, to the young anglerfish of the previous poem, who cannot know what part it plays towards developments unfurling over future centuries.

³⁹Ryan, *Flamingo Watching* (Providence: Copper Beech Press, 1994), 42.

⁴⁰Charles Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 1, ed. Francis Darwin (London: John Murray, 1887), 31.

⁴¹Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 1, 313.

Despite the dominance of the hypothetical, conditional, and therefore uncertain ('may be'; 'Perhaps'; 'If so') in this poem, what is unquestionable is the ability to marvel; that is, to be able to appreciate something despite inadequate understanding. This ability, too, is allied to that of laughing, a form of agency in the face of the forced smallness of limitation. Actually, the verb itself suggests that this agency might be stronger than expected. If Darwin had marvelled at how generally he was aided in getting to school on time, attributing his success to divine intervention instead of his own quick running, his anecdote draws out a usage of *marvel* in American slang: to marvel, in fact, could mean 'to go quickly, to move smartly' (OED). To be quick is to be smart, and to have a sense of humour is to be quick-witted and able to think on one's feet; these are traits that take one not just to school on time, but far in life. Ryan's poem makes us aware that in marvelling at how he is aided, beyond comprehension, to achieve his ends, Darwin has in fact made it happen through his own sheer necessity.

Given Ryan's fondness for idiomatic and colloquial expressions, she would certainly have been aware of these connotations behind the expression. I would go so far as to suggest that in choosing to title and open her poem with Darwin's description, she was sufficiently struck by the aptness of his word choice to construct the poem around what it suggests, and consequently to tie a moment in the evolutionary scientist's early life to the natural mechanisms that he would eventually posit. Thus if 'duress itself / may be a prayer' to positive outcome, this is because *duress* refers both to the condition of limitation (OED: 'restraint or restriction; confinement, imprisonment'), as well as to the outcome thereof (OED: 'hardiness of endurance, resistance'). Perhaps it is not such a stretch, after all, to suggest that the survival of the species as a larger whole lies in the individual's strategies of self-preservation, however seemingly small. Whether by chance

or need, the ability to make ‘seven vertebrae / go farther’ such that giraffes, with their standard mammalian anatomy, may nonetheless ‘reach the necessary branch’, is a stretching of means in order to ensure survival. On a larger scale, but nonetheless working to the same principle, the variation within a species enables the process of natural selection to favour the longevity of the better adapted. In a poem concerning these processes, the poet herself has practised the same marvellous economy in making single words collapse distances and go farther, tying together smallness and speed.

It could be said, then, that Ryan is interested in resilience not simply in the face of, but particularly because of, necessary limitation. Her work abounds in motifs of size and scale because, for her, the ways in which we are circumscribed are precisely what measures are available to us, the meanest of circumstances still very much a means nonetheless. There are manifestations of this mechanism everywhere, organisms thriving because of depletion.

Struck Tree

You could start
to think a struck
tree’s new leaves
from up in the
good part would
turn out halves,
but you have to
laugh at yourself:
loss doesn’t get
into the subsets
of absolutely
everything.⁴²

This poem is a single sentence that spans twelve lines, and is divided into halves at the point at which the words themselves bear the suggestion of a struck tree’s new leaves

⁴²Ryan, *Erratic Facts*, 62.

turning out halves; this invitation to read the poem self-referentially is reinforced by its title. Just what is a struck tree? At the mention of ‘new leaves / from up in the / good part’, suggesting by contrast the presence of a bad part, we might think of the tree as being negatively struck, as in ‘subjected to a blow or stroke’ (*OED* II.2.a.); struck by lightning, perhaps. Yet for a plant or a tree to be struck could also mean that it has ‘put forth roots’ (*OED* II.7). These two meanings, one relating to destruction and the other to creation, are not as distant or disparate as we might think, not least when we consider the way in which plants often put forth roots from precisely their split points, after being struck, or divided, into cuttings. We are struck by the poet’s work of selecting a word that encompasses separate meanings, that not only holds the negative and positive simultaneously within itself, but that also admits the existence of this dichotomy as continuous. Significantly, as with the 500 separate modifications that are each required for the anglerfish’s evolution, the process of cutting down, or the experience of being cut down, here reveals the power of the diminished part, and our own parsing of the word productively reveals the ideas encompassed within.

Concerned as they are with the survival mechanisms of struck trees and a yet-unevolved anglerfish, Ryan’s poems take a cue from their subjects in their own constitution. Nowhere is the poet’s interest in the survival of the whole via the small, stray, compromised part more evident, than in her ability to plumb the ambiguities of words in order to begin to turn a situation around. The poems, quick-witted, survive by generating unexpected meanings and drawing out connotations that would have otherwise remained unnoticed. When, for Ryan, ‘by [...] generating rooms too small to actually occupy, we give ourselves the possibility of everything turning out otherwise

than it does *here*', the 'magic in certain small things' must therefore refer also to the magic in words, the certain small things with which the poet works.

5.3 'whatever you think of, it wants to live'

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, Ryan consistently addressed each of her collections as being 'for Carol', her longtime partner. Carol Adair died in 2009. In 2015, on the dedication page of *Erratic Facts*, Ryan addresses the collection: 'for Carol anyhow'. The addition of this single adverb, comparable to a shrug of the shoulders, simultaneously conveys something of the shapelessness and helplessness of grief, as well as the determination to persist regardless. This linguistic gesture, in such a paratextual context, is suggestive of how Ryan's work, concerned with the theme of survival, might itself be a form of coping – poetry *as* adaptation. Bearing witness to evolutionary mechanisms, with their subjects adapting themselves in the smallest of ways in order to survive, the poems are themselves characterised by adaptability. On a formally small scale, her words repeatedly bear the same comical, budding power to embody variety and its generative potential. For them, too, this is power related to life and death, a linguistic strategy for staying alive; the poet substantiates this idea when, in an interview, she describes the provenance of her poems: 'Metaphors have an ambition to live [...] Once they occur in your mind [...] whatever you think of, it wants to live'.⁴³ In two poems addressing the workings of language, the poet's interest in survival mechanisms in the natural world is directed towards that of the stuff of her own poems:

⁴³The Aspen Institute, 'Dana Gioia talks to US Poet Laureate Kay Ryan', YouTube video, 8:39, 25 May 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOkIySzTZN4>.

Chemistry

Words especially
 are subject to
 the chemistry
 of death:
 it is an acid bath
 which dissolves
 or doubles
 their strength.
 Sentiments
 which pleased
 drift down
 as sediment;
 iron trees
 grow from filament.⁴⁴

Chemistry is ‘the branch of science concerned with the substances of which matter is composed, the investigation of their properties and reactions, and the use of such reactions to form new substances’ (OED). Ryan’s poem is reactive in a comparable way. Stating that ‘Words especially / are subject to / the chemistry / of death’, the words that constitute it are themselves demonstrably matter. Thus ‘Sentiments / which pleased’, but perhaps no longer can, sour and ‘drift down / as sediment’, the hard middle ‘t’ sound of *sentiments* dissolving, as via corrosion in an acid bath, to the softer ‘d’ in *sediment*, three lines down, deposited as a sedimentary by-product from the alliterative intermediary verb-phrase of ‘drift down’. Following this, we are told that ‘iron trees / grow from filament’. The lines of the poem are pleasurable to read, easy on the tongue with their end rhymes of ‘pleased’ and ‘trees’, ‘sediment’ and ‘filament’. Their sense, however, requires more effort, even as their aural compatibilities work to convince us that everything is sound.

⁴⁴Ryan, *Elephant Rocks*, 8.

How do ‘iron trees / grow from filament’? (What is an iron tree?) I suppose we are to arrive at ‘filaments’ (OED 1.a.(b): ‘scraps’, ‘shreds’) as a synonym for ‘sediments’ (OED 2: ‘Earthly or detrital matter deposited by aqueous agency’), this pair of synonyms demonstrating another form of linguistic synchronicity. Ryan’s preceding choice of phrase in ‘drift down’ gives us leave to think of the movement of falling leaves, an image reinforced by the subsequent mention of ‘iron trees’. Metaphorically drawing from metallurgical processes, the poem’s iron trees could refer to the dendritic (tree-like) crystal structures that are produced when an (acidic) iron solution precipitates onto a seed wire, a demonstration commonly employed to deduce the relative reactivity of different metals.⁴⁵ The concept of relative reactivity is significant, and brings us back to the poet’s earlier statement that ‘it is an acid bath / which dissolves / or doubles / their strength’.

Comparable to metals, words ‘are subject to / the chemistry / of death’, the strength of their meanings subject to shifting scales. If ‘Sentiments / which pleased / drift down / as sediment’, the poet makes physical the deadening sedimentation of the word *sentiment*, once used to ‘appeal to the tender emotions in literature or art’, now ‘chiefly in derisive use, conveying an imputation of either insincerity or mawkishness’ (OED 9a). Likewise, the description of how ‘iron trees / grow from filament’ encapsulates, within a single image, both the organic ‘animal or vegetable structure’ (OED 1a[a]) usually referred to by the word *filament* (particularly its botanical usage as a name for part of a plant’s reproductive organs), as well as its specialised use to refer to a metallic conductor (OED 1b). Unearthing the various meanings (or shades of meaning) of a lone word, and playing these meanings against one another in order to derive new meanings, Ryan

⁴⁵Credit for the chemist’s reading of the lines must be given to Ewan MacAulay.

experiments with the enlarging reactivity of certain words to others. In the poet's hands, the words, thus alive, build each other up towards something bigger, the poem a small but fertile breeding ground for ideas.

Another poem about language concerns the process of composition and, as such, serves as an even more explicit *ars poetica* of sorts. For Ryan, language is matter, and this fact matters because poetic composition has as much to do with composing the work as a whole, as it does with knowing what constitutes this composite whole, down to the smallest and most elemental parts. In 'Composition', Ryan thus responds to an epigraph from Joseph Brodsky: 'Language is a diluted aspect of matter':

No. Not *diluted*.
 Flaked; wafered;
 but not watered.
 Language is matter
 leafing like a book
 with the good taste
 of rust and exposure
 the way ironwork
 petals near the coast.
 But so many more
 colors than rust:
 or, *argent*, others –
 a vast heraldic shield
 of beautiful readable
 fragments revealed
 as Earth delaminates:
 how the metals scatter,
 how matter turns
 animate.⁴⁶

If Ryan has characterised her poems as “how-something-works” poems,⁴⁷ they account for a contraption or a mechanism by taking it apart, splitting things apart in order to show how many constituent parts make up the whole. In doing this, they demonstrate

⁴⁶Ryan, 'Composition', in *Say Uncle*, 11.

⁴⁷Ryan, 'A Consideration of Poetry', 152.

the hair's breadth (if anything) between the very large and the miniscule, her poetics one of everything and nothing at once.

'Composition' is thus really a poem about decomposition in both language and matter. Language leafs just as ironwork petals, these related metaphors nudging us towards the discovery, not necessarily relevant, that the word *metaphor* itself aptly lies audibly somewhere in between *metal* and *matter*. And language leafs rust from chemical process to metallic tinctures (*or, argent*). Language itself leafs rapidly from the consonants of 'heraldic' to those of 'shield', the vowels of 'shield' to those of 'revealed', taking us from 'metals' to 'scatter' to 'matter' to 'turns', and then from 'delaminates' to 'animates'. This is a procession of rhymes and linguistic echoes mimicking the processes observable in leaves and petals being shed, or metal flaking off into rust. The poet's insistence on 'flaked' and 'wafered' over Brodsky's choice of 'diluted' emphasises the fact that the particles microcosmically retain the concentrated intensity of the whole – but there is also a sense, throughout, that the parts of language, as with those of the natural world, need to be perceived interdependently alongside other parts in order to form patterns, to achieve rhymes. The effect is that of simultaneous self-dependence and interdependence, each small whole simultaneously a part that gestures towards something even larger. Matter turns animate because of the poet's handling of language, which simultaneously guides us from 'good taste' to 'rust and exposure' to 'ironwork' via the iron taste of rust. In fact, language is animated, made material in the poet's attention to its weight and freight.

Certainly, this is the work of poetry as a whole, particularly that of lyric poetry, in which the maximum of meaning must be contained within minimum space. The task of keeping language charged with meaning and therefore alive is undeniably also one that

is undertaken by other poems. What I wish to emphasise, however, is that in Ryan's work, the ability of single words or phrases to proliferate in meaning, repeatedly resonates alongside the themes of survival and resilience in the poems themselves. You might say that the stakes claimed by a Ryan poem are often so enormous that its constituent units of language are roped in to assist. In fact, the emphasis works the other way as well: the whole is simply not possible without its parts, the economising adaptability of language – the poems' own strategy for survival – dynamically determining the direction taken by the work.

5.4 'the biggest little poems going'

This might explain why Ryan admires the work of Frost. Like her, the older poet consistently 'wants to press thoughts, run them out to the point where they either self-destruct or turn around and become their opposite'.⁴⁸ She attributes this to the 'generative potential' of Frost's mind in her review of the latter's *Notebooks* for *Poetry* magazine, calling it '[a]n analogy machine where the turnover time is next to nothing'.⁴⁹ This description highlights the need for speed, a need that Ryan emphasises again when, in an essay titled 'Specks', she describes how 'only high speeds permit the transmission of thought, the brief mutations of substance, the continued whispered advance of some articulation that is at once autonomous and at the same time completely the product of what's available to make itself out of'.⁵⁰

As the title of the essay indicates, speed, in being related to the brief, is also related to the small; the particular combination of smallness and speed, moreover, is a potentially

⁴⁸Ryan, 'I Demand to Speak with God', *Poetry* (September 2007): 426.

⁴⁹Ryan, 'I Demand', 425.

⁵⁰Ryan, 'Specks', *Poetry* (September 2013), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70041/specks>.

generative one. David Kirby's 2005 *New York Times* review of *The Niagara River* describes Ryan's poems as 'the biggest little poems going',⁵¹ and the reviewer's choice of the present continuous verb, with its connotation of transience, is particularly apt. We might therefore conceive the relationship between size and speed in Ryan's work as follows: her poems, most of which are scarcely a page long, are partly big in their littleness because of the multitudes made possible, from next to nothing, by their dynamism – the very quality that might make them appear brief, or temporally small, to begin with. But they also move along, and move along quickly, because it is the only thing for them to do. We glimpse this imperative in Ryan's discussion of brevity in the work of Stevie Smith:

The most beautiful thoughts and feelings can barely settle or they break us. We can't endure more than the briefest visitations. [...] The only reason it's bearable to know the things [Smith] stubs her toe on is the offhand method of arrival and her chronic throwaway, 'hi-ho' tone. She sends very hot things through the cooling coils of her poems and plays with them in her bare hands. For of course poems must include hot things; if all the hot things are removed the result cannot be poetry since it is the job of poetry to remain open to the whole catastrophe.⁵²

Here, underlying the brief is something bigger, of which the small can only allow a glimpse. The stakes that Ryan claims for Smith's poetry are grand ones ('it is the job of poetry to remain open to the whole catastrophe'), and they are the stakes that she claims for her own work.

Ryan's description of Smith's writing is thus helpful for us in thinking further about the brevity of Ryan's own poems, and worth unpacking a little more. For her, the effect of 'the briefest visitations' in Smith's work is achieved by her 'offhand method of arrival

⁵¹David Kirby, 'The Biggest Little Poems', *The New York Times*, 18 December 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/18/books/review/the-biggest-little-poems.html>.

⁵²Ryan, 'Specks'.

and her chronic throwaway, “hi-ho” tone’; that is to say, the quality of brevity in Smith’s work is related to the levity of her approach, her brevity the soul of her wit. If brevity and levity are thus allied, though, this is an alliance that necessarily entails what lies at the opposite extreme, and Ryan’s choice of the peculiar phrase ‘chronic throwaway’ is particularly telling. To be chronically throwaway is to be casual, trivial, and shortlived in a paradoxically intense and drawn-out way. With its further connotation of disease, to be chronically throwaway is to also readmit the human dimension that is excluded in the image of the poet as merely an analogy machine.

In her commentary on Smith’s work, Ryan highlights a further, heavier impetus for drawing upon nonsense strategies, one that is also evident in the earlier work of Edward Lear, whose ‘Gosky Patties’ she employs to discuss ‘Something nonsensical in the heart of poetry’.⁵³ Among the qualities Ryan admires and finds exemplary in Lear’s nonsense recipe is its ‘perfect absence of sentiment’: ‘I believe that feelings, *attached* feelings that is, are also dead weight in a poem’;⁵⁴ by contrast, the implied ideal is levity as a result of non-attached feelings, feelings that are thus regulated in some way. In 1870, Lear wrote to William Holman Hunt about ‘this ludicrously whirligig life which one suffers from first and laughs at afterwards’.⁵⁵ For the nonsense poet, laughter is an aftermath of sorts, and the use of humour in his poetry is a necessary means of coping with pain. The whirligig, ‘an instrument of punishment formerly used, consisting of a large cage suspended so as to turn on a pivot’ in the 17th century (*OED* 2a), thus becomes the roundabout or merry-go-round used for play and entertainment (*OED* 2b). Ryan’s poetry, tapping into this vein of nonsense, is at times similarly located at this

⁵³Ryan, ‘A Consideration of Poetry’, 150.

⁵⁴Ryan, ‘A Consideration of Poetry’, 154.

⁵⁵Edward Lear, quoted in Vivien Noakes, *Edward Lear: 1812-1888* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985), 165.

intersection of pleasure and pain, gravity and levity. As we are reminded by ‘Struck Tree’, ‘You have to / laugh at yourself’, then; you *have to*, partly because otherwise you would have to cry, instead. If we had previously examined how some of Ryan’s poems concern themselves with the ways in which, across various contexts, the small part might ensure the survival or salvaging of the whole, we must now also turn around and consider the poems whose brevity or levity, conversely, bear indelible traces of the disaster against which the surviving or salvaging must happen.

We might thus conceive a Ryan poem as similarly employing the momentum of a whirligig; in other words, as ‘the biggest little poems going’, their balancing of major and minor, gravity and levity, is dependent on their momentum and brevity, the act of their going. Discussing William Empson’s ‘Missing Dates’, a poem that is ‘all about inadequacy’, Michael Wood points out that Empson’s use of the villanelle form ‘starts up a counter-movement’ in the way in which ‘Its very economy, its sparsity of rhyme, resists the idea of waste’.⁵⁶ This image is helpful to us: in the case of Ryan’s work, the poems’ thematic and linguistic content (that is, what they say and what they do) frequently work in tandem to establish an economy that is similar to that of ‘Missing Dates’ in that it is taken to such an extreme that a counter-momentum emerges out of it, the instrument of punishment spinning into a merry-go-round. Often, this counter-momentum involves a tonal ambiguity that is a result of Ryan’s particular economy. What, for instance, do we make of the following poem?

The Best of It

However carved up
or pared down we get,
we keep on making

⁵⁶Michael Wood, ‘Missing dates’, in *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 144-45.

the best of it as though
 it doesn't matter that
 our acre's down to
 a square foot. As
 though our garden
 could be one bean
 and we'd rejoice if
 it flourishes, as
 though one bean
 could nourish us.⁵⁷

'However carved up / or pared down we get', the process of splitting and fragmentation is the same, yet the adverbs are never used interchangeably. The meaning lies in the detail: what is being upped or increased in the process of carving up is the number of constituent pieces into which the object is being divided. In contrast, the result of something being pared down is a smaller whole that is the result of the sloughing away of excess. These are inverse processes that nonetheless commonly lead to diminution; the pairing of expressions like 'carved up' and 'pared down' is characteristic Ryan, making us reexamine stock phrases while holding contrasts in tension. The poem itself, too, is a gradual process of carving up or paring down. Here, 'as though', repeated thrice in the poem's thirteen lines, simultaneously carries out the syntactic work of carving up its clauses, and paring it down from acre to square foot to single bean. The phrase 'as though' encompasses, with the hopeful *and* mockingly ironic undertones of the subjunctive, the spirit of making the best of something: *dare we dream that one bean could nourish us? How dare we dream that one bean could nourish us*. Its ambiguity admits both readings; dynamically balancing the possibility of everything and nothing, it does not grant us the easy stasis of either.

⁵⁷Ryan, *The Niagara River*, 9.

That Ryan chose to use this poem's title, 'The Best of It', as that of her 2010 *New and Selected Poems*, is telling of the extent to which poetry is, for her, an impossible job that is nonetheless done, a process of summing up and pinning down situations simultaneously at both ends of being *in extremis*. Not only despite, but because of, their brevity, the experience of reading a Kay Ryan poem entails a growing feeling that there are, and will always be, more implications than the lines might admit.

Salvage

The wreck
is a fact.
The worst
has happened.
The salvage trucks
back in and
the salvage men
begin to sort
and stack,
whistling as
they work.
Thanks be
to God – again –
for extractable elements
which are not
carriers of pain,
for this periodic
table at which
the self-taught
salvagers disassemble
the unthinkable
to the unthought.⁵⁸

At the heart of this psychological microcosm of what happens after a disaster is, again, the suggestion of adaptation. Here, the ability to adapt takes the form of growing accustomed to something; this sense of repeated exposure is suggested by the temporal repetition and experience implied by 'periodic' and 'self-taught / salvagers', as well the

⁵⁸Ryan, *The Niagara River*, 35.

adjective, small but set apart and thus highlighted, in 'Thanks be / to God – again –'. After all, if there is room for sarcasm here, an occasion for humour, the possibility to be contemptuous of even the depths to which one has been reduced, then there is something to be made out of these depths, after all. The poem grows from seemingly next to nothing, simultaneously demonstrating and embodying the major implications of the little that is left in the aftermath of something enormous.

In a poem titled 'Salvage', Ryan triumphantly undertakes the titular act at the most miniscule level, as with the syntactic ambiguity of 'trucks' as, suspended before a line break, simply a noun ('The salvage trucks'), and then, with the added ambiguity of 'back', potentially also a verb, modified by 'back' as adverb instead of verb. Here, even language is having to readjust itself to the fact. It does it nonetheless, in a poem whose making is a making do. Tonally, with the nonchalance and detachment with which we are told that the salvage men are 'whistling as / they work. / Thanks be / to God', the poem similarly embodies resilience, another form of salvage. At moments, this stoicism verges on the utterly detached, practically bureaucratic nature of 'extractable elements / which are not / carriers of pain': such is the efficiency of the ongoing act of salvaging; it must not and will not permit pain to enter and hinder it.

Just as the salvagers disassemble, the poem, too, performs the systematic act of disassembly or disassociation: the elements, 'extractable', are separated out from the poem's monolithically uncontested opening statement ('The wreck / is a fact'), the elemental alpha and omega, from the mention of God; from elements we fan further outwards towards the description of a 'periodic / table'. In turn, this pun highlights another implication of the act of salvaging: it is undertaken in order to make new use of, i.e. recycle, what might now no longer fit its original purpose or context. Hence the

periodic table is now another kind of table, a piece of furniture at which the salvagers sit, at which the poet sits, disassembling the multiple referents of a single word.

The poem's closing lines demand re-reading in their meandering complexity, but in this way they serve as a *précis* of what the poem itself is doing – or, by now, has done without our knowing. From the unthinkable (that is, the 'worst') mentioned at the poem's opening, the lines have taken us back to the *unthought*: the reverse of, and past tense to, the undesirably anticipated future-tense *unthinkable*. For all its suggestion of a prelapsarian state, the slate wiped blissfully clean, however, the coinage of *unthought* invariably and by definition carries within it the presence of what it seeks to negate. It additionally bears the self-chastising weight of other connotations: that which had not been thought of, the unthoughtful, the thoughtless, the fault. The counterintuitive preposition in 'disassemble / the unthinkable / to the unthought' (my emphasis) amplifies these connotations of culpability and causality. Here, the unthought is not easily (or possibly, even) extractable from the unthinkable, and it must carry within it some degree of pain.

Actually, far from reducing the wreck to nothing, this process of deliberately clinical, ruthlessly efficient salvaging has manufactured more implications than had originally been budgeted or bargained for. Ryan describes how 'You have to make some room for your mind. You have to open something up. And you can't just slam it from the other side. [...] You open up the picture, so you can know two things at once'.⁵⁹ If 'Salvage' thus exemplifies the poet's process of opening up the picture and making unexpected room from the corner to which one has found oneself reduced, this is a double-edged sword, since the very process of opening up also grants admission to the possibility of

⁵⁹Ryan, 'The Art of Poetry No. 94'.

this space being demolished. The dually-facing irony of small linguistic moves like ‘as though’ and ‘Thanks be / to God – again –’ encapsulates the tonal ambiguity of Ryan’s own chronic throwaway style. Interweaving levity and gravity, they reintroduce some heaviness to the hopeful buoyancy of my earlier description that, for Ryan, ‘the ways in which we are circumscribed are precisely what measures are available to us, the meanest of circumstances still very much a means nonetheless’.

An anecdote by the poet might help us better to understand this tension:

I am sure that there is a giggly aquifer under poetry.

Right now I am thinking of something unlikely that I saw a few days ago, the morning after my town had experienced a major winter flood. In the middle of a residential street, a cast iron manhole cover was dancing in its iron collar, driven up three or four inches by such an excess of underground water that it balanced above the street, tipping and bobbing like a flower, producing an occasional bell-like chime as it touched against the metal ring. This has much to say about poetry.

For I do not want to suggest in any way that this aquifer under poetry is something silly or undangerous; it is great and a causer of every sort of damage. And I do not want to say either that the poem that prompts me to laughter is silly or light; no, it can be as heavy as a manhole cover, but it is forced up.⁶⁰

As has been discussed, quintessential to Ryan’s poetic voice is a lightness or levity that is specifically produced in unexpected contrast with the otherwise heavy. This relationship, however, significantly works in two directions, both of which appear in this anecdote. By Ryan’s earlier account, Stevie Smith is only able to play with very hot subjects in her bare hands because they have been sent through the cooling coils of her poetry; in other words, poetry is a coping mechanism that enables us to deal with the otherwise unbearable, its levity a means of offsetting gravity. In this observation of a so-

⁶⁰Ryan, ‘A Consideration of Poetry’, 148.

called giggly aquifer, on the other hand, is the suggestion that there is a specific form of lightness or levity that is expressly the result of heavy pressure; this levity is not straightforward but, ambivalently, ‘forced up’. In this image, Ryan has taken an otherwise enormously grave predicament (a heavy, cast iron manhole cover forced up by an excess of underground water) and not only reduced it to smaller, less consequential, terms (a dancing flower with a bell-like chime), thus making it more manageable and less devastating; she has also specifically attributed the latter to the former, without which it would not exist. By the same token, she describes Emily Dickinson’s ‘The Morning After Woe’ as being ‘a grief-giddy poem, dazzled with loss and filled with extreme invention’. Here, the compound adjective suggests, again, that the giddy is made possible by the grief; and the invention, by the loss.

Most significantly, this pressure does not go away with the lightness, either. The two are necessarily intertwined (as is encapsulated in Kirby’s compound description of her ‘biggest little poems’), such that ‘if all the hot things are removed the result cannot be poetry’. The philosopher Ted Cohen describes how ‘To joke about death is a way of domesticating something that essentially cannot be tamed’, so as to utilise ‘joking as a way of restoring to oneself enough power and control to speak of the unspeakable’.⁶¹ The seemingly impossible job description of ‘domesticating something that essentially cannot be tamed’ gets at the paradox at the heart of Ryan’s description of the poem as being ‘a trap – that is a release’. Situated in interstitial, impossible spaces, Ryan’s poems demonstrate how the large and heavy may be made smaller and more manageable, while at the same time acknowledging the major, inescapable debt that levity, the seemingly minor, can owe to gravity.

⁶¹Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 44-45.

5.5 ‘nothing but a game for children’

For Ryan, ‘Edges are the most powerful parts of the poem. The more edges you have the more power you have. They make the poem more permeable, more exposed’.⁶² Her work combines this concurrent sense of power and exposure in its edginess: the poems are simultaneously at the cutting edge (sharp, incisive), and on edge (defensive, peculiar, nervous). Their edges are related to the spaces they leave on the page; this, in turn, relates to their brevity, since the power to be derived from this exposing permeability is associated with the capacity for combustive transformation. As previously discussed, this is the capacity within a single thought or statement for alchemy upon exposure to other elements: associative detours, for example, or linguistic camaraderie in the form of wordplay. It enables the speed and unpredictability necessary in order to avoid predation and to ensure survival. Yet this characteristic of the poems implicates the reader as well, in that it enables them to swerve just as quickly out of our grasp and, in so doing, paradoxically keep us around. Unpredictable in its flammability, a Ryan poem catches on us and spreads; as the poet’s use of the word ‘power’ acknowledges, this is their hold on us.

In contrast to the experience of being ‘done for so fast we can’t stop to think’, the sheer amount of dwelling that I have done on each poem in this chapter is testament to the fact that Ryan’s compact stanzas demand, in their brevity, that we repeatedly return to think about them; this is a temporal dynamic encapsulated by the poet’s own description of the ‘chronic throwaway’. Just as her poems are frequently concerned with ends as a means of continuing, the end of a Ryan poem, however quickly it comes, is never fully the end of our encounter with it. If we had previously examined the ways in

⁶²Ryan, ‘The Art of Poetry No. 94’.

which her poems might be seen to grow from seemingly nothing, we must also consider how we are implicated in relation to this growing, and how we are made to relate differently to the poems as a result. In the following poem, for instance, something specifically small persistently and extendedly eludes us:

Playacting

Something inside says
 there will be a curtain,
 maybe or maybe not
 some bowing, probably
 no roses, but certainly
 a chance to unverse
 or dehearse, after all
 these acts. For some
 fraction of the self
 has always held out, the
 evidence compounding
 in a bank becoming
 grander and more
 marble: even our
 most wholehearted
 acts are partial.
 Therefore this small
 change, unspendable,
 of a different metal,
 accruing in a strange
 account. What could it
 be for but passage out?⁶³

What does it mean for there to be ‘a chance to unverse / or dehearse, after all / these acts’? Given that the poem’s title is ‘Playacting’, and that its opening lines mention a curtain, some bowing, and roses (or the lack thereof), we might interpret ‘dehearse’ as some reversing or undoing of the process of rehearsing for a play, after the fact of the play. As neither ‘reverse’ nor ‘inverse’, ‘unverse’ is a little more unexpected. What it negates, along with the way in which the poem starts *in media res*, implying that we are

⁶³Ryan, *Erratic Facts*, 17.

right now in the midst of ‘all / these acts’, makes us want to read this poem self-referentially. Who or what is the ‘Something inside’, and what are we to make of the metaphors of the theatre and the bank, mixed together in this ‘strange account’? Perhaps ‘this small / change’ is what the poem itself has secreted away, the passage of writing ‘but passage out’. We might conceive this as yet another means of survival, a chance to ‘dehearse’, and to thus keep death at bay; this time, however, the poem’s surviving is dependent upon its sneaking away from us.

‘Playacting’ might be a more extreme example in its patent treatment of the theme of unknowability, but it is representative of the way in which Ryan’s poems are frequently elusively odd. In their wordplay, their language-driven logic, and the downright strangeness of words such as ‘post-pupid’,⁶⁴ ‘dehearse’, and ‘unverse’, certain small details in the poems arrest our attention, an effect that is amplified by the poems’ brevity. Robert Pinsky compares poems to successful jokes in that they share a common ‘alert social texture’; he thus describes the ‘social liveliness’ in both: ‘In the joke this liveliness is ephemeral and contingent. In the poem, it is the enduring generosity and subtlety of a human presence’.⁶⁵ For him, ‘the way a work of art struggles for a claim on our attention [...] is in a way a social grace or art – like the ability to time and present a funny story’.⁶⁶

Pinsky’s comparison gets at the way in which a poem by Ryan, sharing the contingency of the joke in the enigmatically eloquent brevity of its form, lays claim to our attention. In fact, Ryan’s poems are arresting not in spite, but because of, their diminished stanzas. Like jokes, their condensed form relies on something tacitly

⁶⁴Ryan, ‘Gravity’, in *Say Uncle*, 62.

⁶⁵Robert Pinsky, ‘Poetry and Pleasure’, *The Threepenny Review* 15 (Autumn 1983): 3-4.

⁶⁶Pinsky, ‘Poetry and Pleasure’, 4.

required of the reader, which Ryan herself acknowledges when she describes the permeability of edges, the spaces where the poems end and our response begins. However, despite her use of humour, her poems are not entirely jokes; or, if they are, they are weird jokes with punch-lines that hang around in the air instead of dissipating with laughter. If we had wanted to simply get the poem as we might get a joke, or perhaps even as a predator gets its prey, we are explicitly made to think again.

People have trouble with my work because they want to say it's humorous the way Billy Collins's poetry is humorous, and that it's witty. But there's something else, this cartoony thing. When I read my poems to any audience there's a lot of laughing, but I always warn them that it's a fairy gift and will turn scary when they get it home.

I can't bear work that takes itself too seriously, but that doesn't mean that my work isn't serious.⁶⁷

The poem, described by Ryan as 'a fairy gift', appears to be some sort of changeling, a child foisted upon the reader. Taken alongside her observation that one of the shared characteristics of poetry and nonsense is that 'the reader is made into a co-conspirator',⁶⁸ we might begin to conceive ourselves as co-parent or foster parent to the poem.

But how do we attend to the poem, given the warning that it 'will turn scary'? As with the 'chronic throwaway', something persists, after the fact, in Ryan's description of the poem being a fairy gift that will turn scary when taken home. In his essay on the uncanny, or the *unheimlich* ('unhomely'), Freud notes the two categories of meaning to which the *heimlich* might belong: 'on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight'.⁶⁹ He traces an etymological connection between the two categories: 'From the idea of "homelike",

⁶⁷Ryan, 'The Art of Poetry No. 94'.

⁶⁸Ryan, 'A Consideration of Poetry', 153.

⁶⁹Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 224-25.

“belong to the house”, the further idea is developed of something withdrawn from the eyes of strangers, something concealed, secret’.⁷⁰ This, in turn, evolves into ‘The notion of something hidden and dangerous’, such that Freud is able to conclude that ‘*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*’.⁷¹

A Ryan poem grows in a similar direction of ambivalence: its levity and its treatment of everyday, familiar subjects in colloquial terms, not to mention its physical smallness, might amount to a complacent description of it as being simple (or trivial), or an assumption that we might easily ‘get it home’. Its surface simplicity belies a deeper strangeness. If it shares the tacit quality of the joke as a small, social form that reaches out to its audience, its engagement with us is stranger and less straightforward, and in this way the smallness of its simplicity and seeming familiarity could be said to be *unheimlich*. Sianne Ngai’s aesthetic category of the cute, that which demands care and results in ‘a desire to belittle or diminish [it] further’,⁷² provides us with a means of further delineating the kind of trouble that people have with Ryan’s work ‘when they get it home’:

[...] cuteness revolves around the fantasy of a commodity addressing its “guardian” in the one-on-one, intimate manner associated with lyric poetry. The cute commodity flatteringly seems to want us and only us as its mommy [...]; conversely, in a perfect mirroring of its desire, as if we had already put ourselves in its shoes, we as adoptive “guardians” seem to “choose” it. The cute commodity, for all its pathos of powerlessness, is thus capable of making surprisingly powerful demands...⁷³

⁷⁰Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 225.

⁷¹Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 226.

⁷²Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3.

⁷³Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 64.

In their physical compactness, their thematic preoccupation with the smallness of the compromised or the vulnerable, Ryan's poems could be said to solicit our guardianship in the same way, before subsequently thwarting any straightforward relationship that we might have thought we had with them. The 'trouble' that Ryan describes people as having with her work therefore has something to do with expectation: 'they want to say it's humorous' in a certain way, but 'there's something else', something less easily definable, something more, that does not fit in with these expectations.

As Ngai points out, the nature of the relationship invoked by the cute commodity is a fantasy: the object 'flatteringly seems to want us and only us as its mommy', and 'we as adoptive "guardians" seem to "choose" it'. A number of poems, particularly from Ryan's early collection *Elephant Rocks*, warn against buying too much into the fantasy, and assuming too straightforwardly or complacently the role of a parent or guardian. The danger of this is that of negatively belittling, of imposing an assumed stature in our assumed mastery over something seemingly smaller than ourselves, that is not ours to master. In 'Crib', for instance, the titular basket for a baby, when read as a verb, 'means "to filch"': 'For we want to make off / with things that are not / our own. There is a pleasure / theft brings, a vitality / to the home'.⁷⁴ When the poem 'Simply By Growing Larger', too, opens with the pronouncement that 'As a thing grows larger, / it grows darker',⁷⁵ it sums up this motif: Ryan's small poems demonstrate the ability to grow, evolve, adapt out of compromising situations, but the growing does not necessarily or simply end there; more often than not, they outgrow us, too.

⁷⁴Ryan, 'Crib', in *Elephant Rocks*, 16-17.

⁷⁵Ryan, 'Simply By Growing Larger', in *Elephant Rocks*, 26.

In a poem titled 'On the Nature of Understanding', the process of domesticating something wild – again, of taking something home with us – serves as an analogy for that of understanding; the perils that it points out lie in wait for us:

Say you hoped to
tame something
wild and stayed
calm and inched up
day by day. Or even
not tame it but
meet it half way.
Things went along.
You made progress,
understanding
it would be a
lengthy process,
sensing changes
in your hair and
nails. So it's
strange when it
attacks: you thought
you had a deal.⁷⁶

If, amongst its definitions, *heimlich* could refer to animals that are 'tame, companionable to man',⁷⁷ the object of this poem is expressly none of these; in intending 'to / tame something / wild', you inversely find that 'it's / strange when it / attacks'. That the poem is titled 'On the Nature of Understanding' might give us a means of navigating it in terms of how the understanding might be faulty and break down: 'understanding / it would be a / lengthy process', 'you thought / you had a deal'. The problem, we come to realise, rests in the one-sided expectations or assumptions upon which understanding stands, such that 'it's strange' when these expectations are thwarted or unsatisfied. The further problem with this realisation, of course, lies in the fact that this interpretation constitutes our own understanding of the poem itself. Ryan's reader may be a co-

⁷⁶Ryan, 'On the Nature of Understanding', in *Erratic Facts*, 2.

⁷⁷Daniel Sanders, *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* (1860), as quoted in Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 221.

conspirator, but this does not stop her poem from running away from us, or turning out strange before our eyes. If to understand a subject is to domesticate it – to size it up with the intention, in fact, of sizing it *down* – this poem reminds us that this understanding cannot necessarily be accomplished on our own terms entirely. Thus it revolts, its terms turning against us: the wild external unknown, failing to be domesticated, has instead gradually set up home inside us, manifesting as ‘changes / in your hair and / nails’.

To account more fully for the distinctive form of Ryan’s spare, lean poems, it is worth thinking about how they not only share the attributes of the joke (brief, tacitly social in its use of humour), but, at times, also those of a similarly compact form, the more enigmatic, but often similarly playful, riddle. Eleanor Cook asks: ‘If the riddle is a net, is it a trap or is it an exercise for the brain? It all depends on where you are. Are you caught inside the riddle? Or are you in the process of answering the riddle, safely outside its clutches, at least for the moment? [...] To answer an enigma may also be to turn it inside out.’⁷⁸ This question of position is an important one, because where you are affects what and how you see. In the 1540 *Elementa rhetoricae*, Camerarius classifies some of Aesop’s fables as ‘enigmas: [...] a kind of practice where play is woven into teaching by means of clever things’.⁷⁹ In Ryan’s most self-referential poems, that is, those ostensibly to do with the process of understanding or apprehension, and implicitly to do with the process of apprehending her poems, she plays with our position in relation to the poem as ‘a trap – that is a release’.

‘Learning’, for instance, opens as a lesson that is directly delivered, but quickly grows to be more enigmatic:

⁷⁸Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 207.

⁷⁹As quoted in Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles*, 50.

Whatever must be learned
 is always on the bottom,
 as with the law of drawers
 and the necessary item.
 It isn't pleasant,
 whatever they tell children,
 to turn out on the floor
 the folded things in them.⁸⁰

What is implied by 'the law of drawers / and the necessary item' that is 'always on the bottom' is straightforward enough; put in other words, the things you need are always in the last place you look. Parsing the second half of the poem, however, is more complicated. Given the syntax, we are tempted to read thus: *they may tell children that it is pleasant to turn folded things out on the floor, but it isn't*. Yet this does not make sense.

Given the extra work and disarray, it surely is not pleasant to turn folded things out on the floor; even the poem explicitly says this: 'It isn't pleasant'. So why might they tell children that it is? (And who are 'they'?) Moreover, the phrasing of 'to turn out on the floor / the folded things in them' introduces more ambiguity: coming after 'whatever they tell children', we might be tempted to read 'the folded things in them' as referring to the folded things in the people who are doing the telling, or the folded things in the children themselves.

Reasoning leads us to conclude that 'the folded things in them' refers to the contents of the drawers mentioned in the previous sentence, but this does not preclude the sense of these other possible interpretations emerging from Ryan's ambiguous phrasing. If we ultimately conclude that, in order to make sense and be reconcilable with what we do know that people tell children, the phrase 'It isn't pleasant, / whatever they tell children' must refer not to the turning out of folded things, but to learning ('Learning is

⁸⁰Ryan, 'Learning', in *Elephant Rocks*, 43.

fun'), this begs the further question: why do people tell children that learning is fun when, as described here, it clearly is not? In fact, this is a lesson that we all have to learn, or unlearn, in the process of growing from children to whom these things are told, to the people who tell these things to children. Ryan's choice of the multivalent phrase 'to turn out' implicates us, the unnamed reader of this poem, as well, making us not only subject but also object: instead of turning out (*OED* 3: 'to cause to go or come out; to drive out or forth, to expel') folded things on the floor, we might ourselves turn out, with a thud of realisation, 'to be ultimately found or known, to prove *to be*' (*OED* 20.c) the folded things now on the floor.

Finding ourselves in this predicament is really a predicament of finding ourselves; this is not as much of a contortion or convolution as might initially seem, when we read Ryan's account, in the poem 'Houdini', of the process of the titular escape artist: 'At the / end of each such / mix he had to / extract himself, 'breaking / back into the / same Houdini'.⁸¹ Or, in 'Legerdemain', how 'Some days one gets / the *in* but not / the *out* part of the / rabbit/hat trick'.⁸² Or, again, in 'Sock': 'Imagine an / inversion as / simple as socks: / putting your hand / into the toe of / yourself and / pulling'.⁸³ The 'something else' of Ryan's poem as fairy gift situates it in the realm of the *unheimlich* when it comes to things turning out different or in ways otherwise unanticipated, the contents of the poem-as-drawer unexpectedly voluminous. 'You could start / to think a struck / tree's new leaves / from up in the / good part would / turn out halves', then, 'but you have to / laugh at yourself', and in so doing, turn out different from how you had started. This is another form of self-estrangement: the self made strange or

⁸¹Ryan, 'Houdini', in *The Niagara River*, 46.

⁸²Ryan, 'Legerdemain', in *The Niagara River*, 45.

⁸³Ryan, 'Sock', in *Erratic Facts*, 36.

unfamiliar, but thereby discovered or recovered; a form of self-discovery, in fact, as the title of Ryan's poem 'Learning' suggests. If, at the start of the poem, we had thought ourselves securely and familiarly on the side of the adult imparting a lesson that we thought we already knew, by the end, this lesson – and the poem – has grown away from us. We are left, as in 'On the Nature of Understanding', with our newly unfamiliar selves.

For the fourth-century Donatus, the enigmatic is 'obscure because of some hidden likeness of things'.⁸⁴ If, thus enigmatically, a Ryan poem handed to us sends us hunting for this hidden likeness, perhaps the likeness is our own. Perhaps, in other words, what they teach is what we want to learn.

When I was first thinking about this relationship between poetry and nonsense, I opened [Emily Dickinson's] collected to find an example in her work, and the book fell to a remarkable demo poem that I hadn't previously known at all. But the truth is, when you're reading closely, almost any poem can be a great demo poem. Almost any random poem by a great poet can become your private key to their enigma machine; although the enigma machine keeps spitting out different daily codes, you will sense the same deep gizmo behind it.⁸⁵

Why is it that 'when you're reading closely, almost any poem can be a great demo poem'? I think that Ryan is suggesting that, by the fact of your close reading, you have already turned the poet out from the poem, and implicated yourself in a certain way. Which is to say that 'the same deep gizmo behind it' might not, in fact, refer to something in the 'enigma machine' of the poem itself, but instead to what we want poetry to do for us, what we believe that it can do for us, what we need it to do for us. If Ryan's choice of words of 'deep gizmo' and 'enigma machine' is unexpectedly,

⁸⁴As quoted in Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles*, 32.

⁸⁵Ryan, 'A Consideration of Poetry', 156.

deflatingly ironic in relation to the repeated greatness of ‘a great demo poem’ by ‘a great poet’, the joke is squarely on the reader, the poet herself included.

A Ryan poem is ‘an empty suitcase that you can never quit emptying’, then, because it is seemingly possible to take away endlessly from it. Ryan-the-reader’s conclusion about reading poetry thus reveals the same deep gizmo behind Ryan-the-writer’s poems, which ultimately concern themselves with the relationship between the poem and its reader, and, in accentuating this relationship, illuminate what the reader desires from this relationship. If we can conceive ourselves as the knowing parent or the shared custodian of the poem, ready to laugh easily at, or be entertained by, the poems, we can just as easily become the needy child requiring or desiring something from them. Ryan’s mention of a ‘private key’ is evocative. When Alice tries to access the garden in Wonderland, she is too small, at first, to reach the little golden key atop the table; then, having grown more than nine feet high, she is too large to pass through the doorway, despite now possessing the key. The key, then, does not matter so much as the lengths to which we go in order to make it matter, the ways in which we stretch or shrink ourselves to fit. By playing with the expectations that we bring to a poem, Ryan highlights them, as well as the desires that accompany this encounter.

Reading Lear’s nonsense poems in terms of the ideas of Donald Winnicott, Adam Phillips writes that the latter ‘believed that a person was at their most compliant when they were at their most coherent, that nonsense was a resource and a strategy, and that just as much as a person wanted to be understood there was a protest against being intelligible, against being drawn into intelligibility, being acculturated into making

sense'.⁸⁶ We might repurpose this formula in relation to Ryan's work, reading 'a person' here as referring to a Ryan poem. In employing the strategies of nonsense, as well as those of jokes and riddles, the poems, handed over to us, request our society and solicit our understanding, and thereby draw us in. With these same resources of making strange, however, they simultaneously resist us. For Ryan, 'by changing size, so that we can't get in there anymore, generating rooms too small to actually occupy, we give ourselves the possibility of everything turning out otherwise than it does *here*'. Her poems, as enigma machines, turn out death and life, the tragic and the hilarious, the heavy and the light, the obscure and the revealed, all part of a ludicrous whirligig that, turning, blurs the dividing lines. Hers is a version of smallness that makes room for understanding, and, even further within this understanding, for it to turn out that some things are bound to remain at large.

⁸⁶Adam Phillips, 'Edward Lear's Contribution to British Psychoanalysis', in *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, ed. James Williams and Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 345.

Afterword

(no detail too small)

‘...and every hour possible I have taken away to her, which has
made even smaller my “inch or two, of time”.’
–Emily Dickinson¹

‘I undertook “The Edges of Time” with no more than a tiny
vision of time as a physical substance, flattening out at the edges.
[...] I was stirred to action by not having time, by time’s
diminishment or thinning.’
–Kay Ryan²

In the introduction to this thesis, I noted that close-reading, a specifically literary form of miniature thinking, is able to toy with size and scale because it rejigs the temporality of how we experience a poem. To read closely is to read slowly, and to give the poem not simply the space, but also the time, required in order for it to grow. Concerning the time that the reader brings to the poem, the duration of our encounter with it, this is a means of shaping time according to space, or of reconceiving space in terms of time.

What has since emerged, from thus dwelling upon the poems in the ensuing chapters, is a cumulative sense, across the work of all five poets studied, of the further complexity of time as it relates to space. I would therefore like to conclude this thesis by thinking a little more about the size and scale of time. For, when Dickinson quotes directly from Isaac Watts’s Psalm 39 (‘Teach me the measure of my days’) in her description of her ‘inch or two, of time’, and when Ryan undertakes her poem with ‘a

¹Dickinson to Abiah Root (25 July 1854), *Letters*, I:298.

²Ryan, ‘Poet’s Choice: “The Edges of Time”’, *Washington Post*, 20 September 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/17/AR2009091703730.html?sid=ST2009091801904>.

tiny vision of time' in terms of its 'diminishment or thinning', they are both conceiving time not simply in terms of the spatial, but specifically in terms of the spatially small.

A long period was needed to miniaturise the world, then, but we have always measured time in terms of small things. The hourglass, also known as the sand clock, was in common use since the fourteenth century; marking the passing of an hour by the cumulative effect of sand grains draining from one bulb to the other through the force of gravity, each of its tiny component grains marks an infinitesimal unit of time. We might thus think about Dickinson's 'inch or two, of time', and Ryan's portrayal of time as 'flattening out at the edges', in terms of hourglass imagery; they conjure up, respectively, an image of the amount of sand left in the upper bulb, and that of the thin trickle between the two bulbs.

Despite serving as a stark visual reminder of the finitude of time, however, the symmetry of the hourglass's design significantly also gestures towards eternity. After all, it is technically possible, by consistently inverting the hourglass, to mark the passing of an infinite duration, hour by hour. Dickinson's 'Forever – is composed of Nows –' (307: 624) builds upon this notion of time as comprising smaller units.³ William Blake, too, might have been making a reference to the hourglass's potentially endless movement when he described what it was like 'To see the world in a grain of sand', to 'Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour'.⁴

When Bishop received the 1976 Books Abroad / Neustadt International Prize for Literature, her acceptance speech was 'barely three hundred words', 'much-worked-over', and ultimately condensed around a poem that was published fourteen years prior

³For more on Dickinson in relation to temporality, see Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

⁴William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence', in *The Poems of William Blake* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1874), 145.

to the award.⁵ In the speech, Bishop retrospectively measures her life by the motions of her poem's protagonist, a coastal bird, for whom a grain of sand is as small as the diminutive bird is to the poet: 'Yes, all my life I have lived and behaved very much like that sandpiper – just running along the edges of different countries and continents, "looking for something."'⁶

Sandpiper

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
of interrupting water comes and goes
and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

—Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
he stares at the dragging grains.

The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear. The tide
is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
His beak is focused; he is preoccupied,

looking for something, something, something.
Poor bird, he is obsessed!
The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,
mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.⁷

⁵Millier, *Life and the Memory of It*, 517.

⁶Bishop, as quoted in Millier, *Life and the Memory of It*, 517.

⁷Bishop, in *Poems, Prose, and Letters*, 125.

Just as Bishop relates to the bird in his itinerant marginality, he, as her surrogate, is aptly poetic, 'a student of Blake' who 'runs straight through' 'a sheet / of interrupting water', as the poet might similarly run through a sheet of paper on her typewriter.

By her description, the sandpiper is 'finical': 'excessively punctilious or precise' (*OED*), such that he can be found 'watching his toes. / – Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them, / where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains'.⁸ This qualification, along with Bishop's parenthetical comment, embodies the quality not simply in being precise, but in being *excessively* precise; that is, in being precise in a way that results in an effect, increasingly, of *multum in parvo* ('much in little'): not simply the sandpiper's toes, then, but the spaces of sand between them. Against the enormous presence of the Atlantic, the poet is more interested in these finical details; her use of parentheses, breaking up the line, highlights their contents, drawing our attention away from the description of the ocean that follows.

The poem is full of fine detail: 'The world is a mist', that is, a suspension of countless tiny droplets; 'And then the world / is minute and vast and clear'.⁹ Significantly, mist is a natural phenomenon that is constituted of miniscule parts; it is thus possible for the world to be, simultaneously, both 'minute' and 'vast', given that the former refers not only to size ('very small') but also to inner distinction or distribution ('fine, subtle'). The poem's movement from mist to clarity, then, could occur via the act of infinitesimal magnification. In a similar act of intensifying focus, the sandpiper is 'looking for something, something, something', the use of repetition

⁸In Niedecker's *Lake Superior*, another form of quartz is found in a similar location: 'you have been in my mind / between my toes / agate' (234).

⁹For further suggestive reflections on mists and clouds as part of Bishop's aesthetics of defense, see Erica Levy McAlpine, 'Elizabeth Bishop and the Aesthetic Uses of Defense', *Literary Imagination* 14.3 (2012): 335.

here turning the indeterminacy of *something*, unnamed, into the inversely emphatic suggestion of *something*, that is not nothing.

Like Bishop, the sandpiper is more interested in distinguishing between kinds of quartz ('rose and amethyst') and finding even further, finer distinctions within 'the millions of grains', than in the substantial impact of the waves. Nevertheless, 'obsessed' as he might be in doing this, even this seemingly all-consuming quality does not *entirely* occupy him: he is only 'preoccupied', after all, and the prefix within the word is significant. The poet's finical choice of vocabulary opens up the further nuances within this state of being: to be preoccupied is to be engrossed with something 'to the exclusion of other matters' (*OED*); that is, to be distracted from something else. I think that this something else has to do with 'The roaring alongside', the fact that 'every so often the world is bound to shake'. If it is merely the sandpiper's 'beak' that 'is focused', there is an implication here that his 'state of controlled panic' is only possible because of it; without its focus, he might be characterised, instead, by uncontrolled panic in the face of this constant threat of upheaval.

Staring at 'the dragging grains', taking for granted that 'every so often the world is bound to shake', it is as if the sandpiper were living inside an hourglass, primed as he is for the periodic upending of the sands of time. As with the hourglass's simultaneous representation of the infinitesimal and the infinite, his world is similarly also both 'minute and vast'. In Blake's image, a tiny grain of sand is magnified to encompass the entire world, but conversely, the world is also shrunk to a single grain of sand – and consequently made all the more precious. Bishop's sandpiper thus registers the way in which focusing on the small might be a means of holding on in the face of the inevitable passage of time, his obsession preoccupying him from the fact that, as

Niedecker put it, 'Time is nuttn in the universe'.¹⁰ With the temporal resonance of the juxtaposition of 'minute and vast', Bishop's poem registers this relationship between size and scale and time, as does the speaker of the following poem by Dickinson, holding something similarly precious:

I held a Jewel in my fingers –
 And went to sleep –
 The day was warm, and winds were prosy –
 I said "’Twill keep" –

I woke – and chid my honest fingers,
 The Gem was gone –
 And now, an Amethyst remembrance
 Is all I own –

(245: 112)

The crux of this poem lies in the rich ambiguity of its final two lines. With its use of the word *all*, connoting abundance, the declaration that 'an Amethyst remembrance / Is all I own –' is a description of, simultaneously, how little and how much this is. Here, the poet has taken a loss, an absence, and turned it into something, her use of poetic metre similarly establishing a stress on the word *all*. This movement, from the generic (indeed, 'prosy') 'Jewel' and 'Gem', to the vividly specific 'Amethyst remembrance', is comparable to that of the specificity that results from the sandpiper's 'looking for something, something, something', the rose quartz and amethyst that emerge out of 'millions of grains'.

In its relating of a narrative of loss, Dickinson's poem itself is an 'Amethyst remembrance', given that to be a remembrance of something is to serve as 'memory or recollection, in relation to a particular object' (*OED*). 'To own' something, in turn, could additionally mean to 'acknowledge, admit' it (*OED*); with this declaration, the

¹⁰Niedecker, *Correspondence with Zukofsky*, 134.

speaker of the poem thus not only describes the fact of what she possesses, but also discloses this memory to the reader. This remembrance, not prosy but poetic, is what will 'keep'. Here, again, Dickinson's vocabulary, like Bishop's, is finically suggestive: what does it mean for something to keep (as opposed to being kept)? It means that the object will temporally endure, will 'remain or stay for the time' or 'last without spoiling', but it additionally implies that it will serve, in a larger way, to turn around and 'guard, defend, protect, preserve, save' (*OED*) the speaker, who is consequently figured as being smaller and more vulnerable in comparison.

For both Bishop and Dickinson, there is a great deal to be made out of the small (a sandpiper, a precious stone), whose smallness implicates us, but can preserve us, too. Reconfiguring the temporal in spatial terms, a passage by Bachelard describes the predicament of how,

At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability – a being who does not want to melt away, and who, even in the past, when he sets out in search of things past, wants time to "suspend" its flight. In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for.¹¹

This image is reminiscent of the way in which, for Stewart, 'miniature time transcends the duration of everyday life in such a way as to create an interior temporality of the subject'. For both theorists, the interior space of the subject relates to a temporality that goes beyond any ordinary scale. We might think about this by infinitesimally magnifying the contents of the hourglass and, like Bishop's sandpiper or Dickinson's speaker, drawing an analogy from a single crystal of quartz. In 1921, four years after Alexander M. Nicholson's set-up with a grain of Rochelle salt, Walter Guyton Cady

¹¹Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 8.

built the world's first quartz crystal oscillator; this technology, with its precise accuracy of frequency, would gradually replace pendulums in clocks. Utilising the electric charge that is manufactured by a tiny, vibrating quartz crystal in response to mechanical stress, the oscillator serves as the timekeeping mechanism in a quartz clock. Compared to the hourglass, in which many small crystals add up to a long time, the quartz clock is a modern testament to how one small crystal can hold, within itself, an equally long duration.

As is evident in the work of the five poets in this thesis, these two models of the relationship between time and space are not mutually exclusive. Against the predicament of dragging grains, of a world that is bound to shake, the tiny details that distinguish amethyst from rose quartz could be the mainstay that makes all the difference. In the poetry of Dickinson, Moore, Bishop, Niedecker, and Ryan, smallness as a strategy is a means of sizing up by scaling down; their work reveals, additionally, that size and scale are as relevant to time as they are to space. These poets choose to write in terms of the small; in doing so, they expand upon it. Within the brevity of the poem upon the page, their various versions of smallness contain compressed time, their play with size and scale bound up with temporal recalibrations.

During a press conference held before the National Book Awards ceremony in 1952, Moore, who would win the Poetry award, responded to a remark about the relatively small sales of her collection: 'It ought to be work to read something that it was work to write'.¹² It is my hope that the readings in this thesis have served to realise this desire. These poets extend their work to us, drawing the magnifying glass of our attention to ever-finer distinctions in the face of 'the roaring alongside'. Even though 'every so often

¹²As quoted in Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down*, 347.

the world is bound to shake', then, the interstitial parts, these countless alveoli, hold us and keep us; they are, in turn, prolonged and preserved by our temporary attending.

Bibliography

Primary texts

- Bishop, Elizabeth. *One Art: The Selected Letters*, edited by Robert Giroux. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994.
- . *Poems, Prose, and Letters*, edited by Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz. New York: Library of America, 2008.
- Bishop, Elizabeth, and Robert Lowell. *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, edited by Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson. 3 vols. Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958.
- . *The Complete Poems*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson. London: Faber and Faber, 1970.
- . *The Gorgeous Nothings*, edited by Marta Werner and Jen Bervin. New York: Christine Burgin/New Directions, 2013.
- Moore, Marianne. 'Answers to an Enquiry'. *Twentieth-Century Verse*, no. 12-13 (October 1938): 114.
- . 'A Felicitous Response'. *The Christian Science Monitor*, 7 February 1952, 7.
- . *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, edited by Patricia C. Willis. New York: Viking, 1986.
- . *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, edited by Bonnie Costello, Celeste Goodridge and Cristanne Miller. London: Faber and Faber, 1998.
- . *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907-1924*, edited by Robin G. Schulze. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- . *New Collected Poems*, edited by Heather Cass White. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.
- The Marianne Moore Papers, The Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum & Library. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 2019.
- Niedecker, Lorine. "*Between Your House and Mine*": *The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, 1960-1970*, edited by Lisa Peter Faranda. Durham: Duke University Press, 1986.

- . *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931-1971*, edited by Jenny Penberthy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- . *Collected Works*, edited by Jenny Penberthy. London: University of California Press, 2004.
- . *Schoolcraft*. The State of Wisconsin Collection, University of Wisconsin-Madison Digital Collections. 2019.
<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.FASchoolcraft>.
- Ryan, Kay. *Say Uncle*. New York: Grove Press, 1991.
- . *Flamingo Watching*. Providence: Copper Beech Press, 1994.
- . *Elephant Rocks*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.
- . 'Antagonism: Walt Whitman'. *Poetry* (October 2004): 50-51.
- . *The Niagara River*. New York: Grove Press, 2005.
- . 'A Consideration of Poetry'. *Poetry* (May 2006): 148-58.
- . 'I Demand to Speak with God'. *Poetry* (September 2007): 421-9.
- . 'Poet's Choice: "The Edges of Time"'. *Washington Post*, 20 September 2009.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/17/AR2009091703730.html?sid=ST200909180190>.
- . *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Grove Press, 2010.
- . 'Specks'. *Poetry* (September 2013).
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70041/specks>.
- . *Erratic Facts*. New York: Grove Press, 2015.
- . 'A Symposium on the Miniature'. *The Threepenny Review* 145 (Spring 2016): 16.

Secondary texts

- Ades, Dawn. 'The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell'. In *Joseph Cornell*, edited by Kynaston McShine, 15-42. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 1958. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Aristotle. *The History of Animals*, translated by Richard Cresswell. London: George Bell & Sons, 1878.

- Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Glassworlds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Ashbery, John. 'Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop'. *World Literature Today*, 51.1 (Winter 1977): 8-11.
- . 'Joseph Cornell'. In *Reported Sightings*, 14-18. New York: Knopf, 1989.
- The Aspen Institute. 'Dana Gioia talks to US Poet Laureate Kay Ryan'. YouTube Video, 8:39. 25 May 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOkIySzTZN4>.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas. New York: Penguin, 1964.
- Bacon, Francis, *The New Organon or True Directions concerning the interpretation of Nature*, edited by James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Denon Heath. Boston: Taggard and Thompson, 1863.
- . *The Works of Francis Bacon*, edited by James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Denon Heath. New York: Garrett, 1968.
- . 'The world's a bubble'. In *Francis Bacon: The Major Works*, edited by Brian Vickers. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Banfield, Jill, and Hanna Cook-Wallace. 'Lecture 7: Colour in Minerals'. College of Natural Resources, University of California Berkeley, 2002. nature.berkeley.edu/classes/eps2/wisc/Lect7.html.
- Barker, Wendy. 'Emily Dickinson and Poetic Strategy'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, edited by Wendy Martin, 77-90. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Bayard, Thomas L. 'The New "Crystal Pilot"'. *Popular Radio* (April 1926), 342-47. <https://americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Popular-Radio/Popular-Radio-1926-04.pdf>.
- Bazin, Victoria. 'Editorial Compression: Marianne Moore at *The Dial Magazine*'. In *Twenty-First Century Marianne Moore: Essays from a Critical Renaissance*, edited by Elizabeth Gregory and Stacy Carson Hubbard, 131-48. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Benfey, Christopher. *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.
- Bennett, Paula Bernat. 'Emily Dickinson and her American women poet peers'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Wendy Martin, 215-35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Benton, William. *Exchanging Hats*. London: Carcanet, 1997.

- Bevis, Matthew, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Bianchi, Martha Dickinson. 'Emily Dickinson's Garden'. *Emily Dickinson International Society Bulletin* 2.2 (Nov/Dec 1990): 1-2.
- Blair, Ann. 'Humanist Methods in Natural Philosophy: The Commonplace Book'. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1992): 541-51.
- Blake, William. 'Auguries of Innocence'. In *The Poems of William Blake*, 145-49. London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1874.
- Botha, Marc. *A Theory of Minimalism*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Boys, C. V. *Soap-Bubbles: Their Colours and the Forces which Mold Them*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920.
- Breslin, Glenna. 'Lorine Niedecker: The Poet in Her Homeplace'. In *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, edited by Elizabeth Willis, 189-206. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008.
- Brinkman, Bartholomew. *Poetic Modernism in the Culture of Mass Print*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.
- Bromiley, Geoffrey W., ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. 4 vols. Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1979.
- Bromwich, David. 'An Art Without Importance'. In *Skeptical Music: Essays on Modern Poetry*, 1-18. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- . 'Elizabeth Bishop's Dream-Houses'. In *Skeptical Music: Essays on Modern Poetry*, 116-31. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Brown, Ashley. 'Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil'. In *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, edited by Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, 223-41. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.
- . 'An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop'. In *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, edited by George Monteiro, 18-29. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996.
- Burke, Carolyn. 'Getting Spliced: Modernism and Sexual Difference'. *American Quarterly* 39.1 (Spring 1987): 98-121.
- Burr, Zofia. *Of Women, Poetry, and Power: Strategies of Address in Dickinson, Miles, Brooks, Lorde, and Angelou*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.
- Burt, Stephanie. 'Like'. *The American Poetry Review* 43.1 (Jan/Feb 2014): 17-21.

- Cameron, Sharon. *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.
- Canales, Jimena. *A Tenth of a Second: A History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. 1865. London: Penguin, 1994.
- Chillingworth, William. *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation*. 1687. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854.
- Clark, John F. *Bugs and the Victorians*. London: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Cohen, Ted. *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Connor, Steven. *Fly*. London: Reaktion Books, 2006.
- Conte, Joseph M. 'Natural Histories: Serial Form in the Later Poetry of Lorine Niedecker'. In *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*, edited by Jenny Penberthy, 345-60. Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1996.
- Cook, Edward T. 'The Art of Indexing'. In *Literary Recreations*, 55-76. London: Macmillan, 1918.
- Cook, Eleanor. *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- . *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Corman, Cid. 'Poetry as a Mode of Realisation'. In *Word for Word: Essays on the Art of Language*, 18-21. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1977.
- Corman, Cid, and Kamaike Susumu. *Back Roads to Far Towns: Basho's Oku-No-Hosomichi*. New York: White Pine Press, 1986.
- Costello, Bonnie. *Planets on Tables: Poetry, Still Life, and the Turning World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.
- Coyle, Beverly. *A Thought to be Rehearsed: Aphorism in Wallace Stevens's Poetry*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983.
- Crane, Douglas. 'Niedecker and the Evolutionary Sublime'. In *Lines from London Terrace: Essays and Addresses*, 105-26. Brooklyn: Pressed Wafer, 2018.

- Darrigol, Olivier. 'Quantum Theory and Atomic Structure, 1900-1927'. In *The Cambridge History of Science, Volume 5: The Modern Physical and Mathematical Sciences*, edited by Mary Jo Nye, 329-49. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*. Vol. 1. Edited by Francis Darwin. London: John Murray, 1887.
- . *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. London: John Murray, 1859.
- Darwin Correspondence Project. Cambridge University Library, University of Cambridge. 1974-2018. darwinproject.ac.uk/.
- Daston, Lorraine, and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*. New York: Zone Books, 1998.
- Davis, Philip. *The Victorians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- de Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Dickinson family library collection (1810-1943). 591 vols. Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard University. 2006. hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/resources/6412/.
- Doreski, C. K. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Duncan, Robert. 'Towards An Open Universe'. In *A Selected Prose*, edited by Robert J. Bertholf, 1-12. New York: New Directions, 1995.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Infinity of Lists: From Homer to Joyce*, translated by Alastair McEwen. London: MacLehose Press, 2009.
- Eiseley, Loren. *Darwin's Century: Evolution and the Men Who Discovered It*. New York: Anchor, 1961.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and English Traits*, edited by Charles W. Eliot. New York: Cosimo, 2009.
- Empson, William. 'Alice in Wonderland: The Child as Swain'. In *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 253-94. London: Chatto & Windus, 1935.
- . *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1930. Reprint, 1949.
- Erasmus, Desiderius. *The Adages of Erasmus*, edited by William Barker, translated by R. A. B. Mynors. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.

- Faranda, Lisa Pater. 'Composing a Place: Two Versions of Lorine Niedecker's "Lake Superior"'. *North Dakota Quarterly* 55 (Fall 1987): 348-64.
- Fay, Sarah, and Kay Ryan. 'The Art of Poetry No. 94'. *The Paris Review* 187 (Winter 2008). <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5889/kay-ryan-the-art-of-poetry-no-94-kay-ryan>.
- Fenza, David. 'Letters to the Editor'. *Poetry* 187.1 (October 2005): 64-5.
- Finnerty, Páraic. "'Dreamed of your meeting Tennyson in Ticknor and Fields –": A Transatlantic Encounter with Britain's Poet Laureate'. *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 20.1 (2011): 56-77.
- Flint, F. S., and Ezra Pound, 'Imagisme'. 1913. In *Imagist Poetry*, edited by Peter Jones, 129. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
- Freer, Alexander. 'Rhythm as Coping'. *New Literary History* 46.3 (Summer 2015): 549-68.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Vintage, 2001.
- Garfield, Simon. *In Miniature*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2018.
- Garner, Dwight. 'Stealthy Insights Amid Short Phrases'. *The New York Times*, 4 March 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/05/books/05book.html>.
- Gay, John. *The Poetical Works of John Gay*, edited by Thomas Park. London: Stanhope Press, 1806.
- Glück, Louise. *American Originality: Essays on Poetry*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.
- Goldensohn, Lorrie. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
- Green, John C. 'The Lake Superior Basin's Fiery Beginning'. *Lake Superior Magazine*, 1 June 2002. lakesuperior.com/the-lake/natural-world/243-lake-superior-basin-fiery-beginning/.
- Grindon, Leo Hartley. *The Little Things of Nature Considered Especially in Relation to the Divine Benevolence*. 2nd ed. Boston: T.H. Carter and Son, 1866.
- Grogan, Kristin. 'Niedecker's Gift: The Poetics of Work in *For Paul and Other Poems*'. *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 28.3 (2017): 255-74.
- Gunn, Thom, 'Weedy Speech and Tangled Bank: Lorine Niedecker', *Shelf Life: Essays, Memoirs, and an Interview* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 74-76.

- Hakutani, Yoshinobu. *Haiku and Modernist Poetics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Hallett, Cynthia J. 'Minimalism and the Short Story'. *Studies in Short Fiction* 33 (Fall 1996): 487-95.
- Harrison, Victoria. *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Haughton, Hugh, ed. *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1988.
- Heaney, Seamus. 'The Fire I' the Flint: Reflections on the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins'. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 60 (1974): 413-29.
- Heeger, David. 'Perception Lecture Notes: Psychophysics'. Department of Psychology, New York University. 2009.
<https://www.cns.nyu.edu/~david/courses/perception/lecturenotes/psychophysics/psychophysics.html>.
- Henderson, Harold G. *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Basho to Shiki*. New York: Anchor, 1958.
- Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. 'Butterflies in Poetry'. *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 1904): 746-53.
- . *Outdoor Studies*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1900.
- . 'The Soul of a Butterfly'. In *The Afternoon Landscape*, 23. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1889.
- Hitchcock, Edward. *Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomena in the Four Seasons*. Amherst: J.S. & C. Adams, 1850.
- Hofmann, Michael. 'Elizabeth Bishop'. In *Where Have You Been?: Selected Essays*, 57-67. London: Faber & Faber, 2015.
- Hollander, John. *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After*. London: University of California Press, 1981.
- Hollander, Ron. *All Aboard!: The Story of Joshua Lionel Cowen & His Lionel Train Company*. New York: Workman Publishing, 2000.
- Holmes, Richard. *The Age of Wonder*. London: Harper Press, 2008.
- Housefield, James, and Diana K. Davis. 'Joseph Cornell, Geographer of Utopia Parkway'. In *Joseph Cornell: Opening the Box*, edited by Jason Edwards and Stephanie L. Taylor, 47-68. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007.

- Hughes, Ted, ed. *Emily Dickinson: Poems Selected by Ted Hughes*, xi-xvii. London: Faber and Faber, 1964; repr. 2004.
- Hulme, T. E. 'A Lecture on Modern Poetry'. In *Selected Writings*, edited by Patrick McGuinness, 59-67. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Immortal Cupboard: In Search of Lorine Niedecker*. Directed by Cathy Cook. 2009. Wisconsin/Baltimore: Sprocket Productions. DVD.
- Jarrell, Randall. *Poetry and the Age*. New York: Knopf, 1953.
- . 'From "Fifty Years of American Poetry"'. In *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, edited by Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, 198. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.
- Johnson, Dale T., ed. *American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990.
- Kalstone, David. *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*, edited by Robert Hemenway. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Keats, John. *The Letters of John Keats*, edited by H. E. Rollins. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958.
- Kelly, Julia. 'Sights Unseen: Raymond Roussel, Michel Leiris, Joseph Cornell and the Art of Travel'. In *Joseph Cornell: Opening the Box*, edited by Jason Edwards and Stephanie L. Taylor, 69-86. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Kenner, Hugh. *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers*. London: Marion Boyars, 1977.
- Kirby, David. 'The Biggest Little Poems'. *The New York Times*, 18 December 2005. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/18/books/review/the-biggest-little-poems.html>.
- Kirsch, Adam. 'Think Small'. *The New Yorker*, 12 April 2010. newyorker.com/magazine/2010/04/12/think-small.
- Korotev, Randy L. 'Meteorite Regmaglypts'. Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, Washington University in St. Louis. 2018. meteorite.wustl.edu/id/regmaglypts.htm/.
- Leavell, Linda. *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts: Prismatic Color*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995.
- . *Holding On Upside Down: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore*. London: Faber and Faber, 2013.

- Leavitt, Sarah A. 'Deciphering the Genetic Code'. Office of History, National Institutes of Health. 2010. https://history.nih.gov/exhibits/nirenberg/HS1_mendel.htm.
- Leca, Diana. 'Roland Barthes and Literary Minimalism'. *Barthes Studies* 1 (2015): 100-122.
- Lecerle, Jean-Jacques. *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Lehman, David. "In Prison": A Paradox Regained'. In *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, edited by Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, 61-74. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.
- Lindsay, David, and William Kerr. 'Cobalt Close-Up'. *Nature Chemistry* 3 (2011): 494.
- Longenbach, James. 'Modern poetry'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, edited by Michael Levenson, 100-129. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- . *How Poems Get Made*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2018.
- Lowell, Robert. 'Thomas, Bishop, and Williams'. *The Sewanee Review* 55.3 (July-Sept 1947): 493-503.
- Mahood, M. M. *The Poet as Botanist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Manguso, Sarah. 'In Short: Thirty-six ways of looking at the aphorism'. *Harper's*, September 2016. <https://harpers.org/archive/2016/09/in-short/>.
- Martin, S. Rebecca, and Stephanie Langin-Hooper, eds. *The Tiny and the Fragmented: Miniature, Broken, or Otherwise Incomplete Objects in the Ancient World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- May, Simon. *The Power of Cute*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019.
- McAlmon, Robert. *Post-Adolescence: A Selection of Short Fiction*, edited by Edward N. S. Lorusso. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991.
- McAlpine, Erica Levy. 'Elizabeth Bishop and the Aesthetic Uses of Defense'. *Literary Imagination* 14.3 (2012): 333-50.
- McCabe, Susan. *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- . 'Elizabeth Bishop'. In *The Cambridge Companion to American Poets*, edited by Mark Richardson, 300-315. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.

- . *Understanding Media*. 1964. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1994.
- McShine, Kynaston, ed. *Joseph Cornell*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980.
- McTier, Rosemary Scanlon. 'An Insect View of Its Plain': *Insects, Nature and God in Thoreau, Dickinson and Muir*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2013.
- Meredith, William. 'Invitation to Miss Elizabeth Bishop'. In *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, edited by Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, 216-18. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.
- Michelet, Jules. *The Insect*, translated by W. H. Davenport Adams. London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1883.
- Millier, Brett C. *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. 2019. dnr.state.mn.us.
- Mitchell, Domhnall. *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000.
- Moore, Emily. 'On Kay Ryan'. *New Haven Review*, 3 August 2008.
<http://www.newhavenreview.com/blog/index.php/2008/08/on-kay-ryan>.
- Moore, Marianne. 'A Modest Expert: North & South'. In *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, edited by Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, 177-79. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.
- Motion, Andrew. 'Chatterton Lecture on Poetry: Elizabeth Bishop'. Lecture at The British Academy, 8 November 1984.
https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/pubs/proc/files/70p299.pdf?_ga=2.99928669.236443486.1568049251-98617807.1568049251.
- Mukherji, Subha, ed. 'Introduction'. In *Thinking on Thresholds*, xvii-xxviii. London: Anthem, 2011.
- Newhall, Beaumont. 'Introduction'. In *Photography, 1839-1937*, 11-90. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1937.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Noakes, Vivien. *Edward Lear: 1812-1888*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985.
- Oldroyd, Benjamin P., and Siriwat Wongsiri. *Asian Honey Bees: Biology, Conservation, and Human Interaction*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006.

- Olson, Charles. *Call Me Ishmael*. New York: Grove Press, 1947.
- Pagis, Dan. 'Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle'. In *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*, edited by Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman, 81-108. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Paley, William. *Natural Theology, or Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, collected from the appearances of nature*. 1802. Edited by Matthew D. Eddy and David Knight. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Paterson, Don. 'The Lyric Principle: Part 1: The Sense of Sound'. *Poetry Review* 97.2 (Summer 2007): 56-72.
- . 'The Lyric Principle: Part 2: The Sound of Sense'. *Poetry Review* 97.3 (Autumn 2007): 54-70.
- Patterson, Rebecca. *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1951.
- Penberthy, Jenny. 'Writing Lake Superior'. In *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, edited by Elizabeth Willis, 61-79. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008.
- . *Lorine Niedecker's Century 1903-2003*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Woodland Pattern, 2015.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Poetic License*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990.
- Peters, Margot. *Lorine Niedecker: A Poet's Life*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011.
- . 'Lorine Niedecker's Personal Library of Books: A Bibliography'. The Friends of Lorine Niedecker, Inc. 2018. https://lorineniedecker.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/NiedeckerLibraryupdated_000.pdf.
- Phillips, Adam. 'Edward Lear's Contribution to British Psychoanalysis'. In *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, edited by James Williams and Matthew Bevis, 339-46. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Pinsky, Robert. 'Poetry and Pleasure'. *The Threepenny Review* 15 (Autumn 1983): 3-7.
- Plautus. *The Comedies of Plautus*, translated by Bonnell Thornton. London: J. Lister, 1767.
- The Poetry Foundation. 2019. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org>.

- Polk, Patti. *Collecting Agates and Jaspers of North America*. Iola, Wisconsin: Krause Publications, 2013.
- Pollak, Vivian R. *Our Emily Dickinsons: American Women Poets and the Intimacies of Difference*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
- Pontalis, J.-B. *Windows*, translated by Anne Quinney. Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 2003.
- Porter, David. *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Pound, Ezra. 'Vorticism'. *Fortnightly Review* 96 (September 1914): 461-71.
- . *Gaudier-Brzeska*. London: John Lane, 1916.
- . *Pavannes and Divisions*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918.
- . *ABC of Reading*. London: Faber and Faber, 1934.
- Preston, Claire. *Bee*. London: Reaktion Books, 2006.
- Pullman, Bernard. *The Atom in the History of Human Thought*, translated by Axel Reisinger. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Purpura, Lia. 'On Miniatures'. *Brevity* 21 (Summer 2006).
https://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/craft/craft_minis.htm.
- Raffles, Hugh. *Insectopedia*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
- Ralph, Jolyon. *Mindat*. Hudson Institute of Mineralogy. 1993-2019. mindat.org.
- Raphael. *Raphael's Horary Astrology: By Which Every Question Relating to the Future May Be Answered*, 11th ed. London: W. Foulsham, 1920.
- Rashid, Frank Damian. "'Minor Nations': Emily Dickinson and the Entomological". Ph.D. diss., University of Detroit, 1980. ProQuest (303043558).
- Ratcliff, Carter. 'Joseph Cornell: Mechanic of the Ineffable'. In *Joseph Cornell*, edited by Kynaston McShine, 43-68. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980.
- Rawson, Claude. 'Mock-heroic and English poetry'. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, edited by Catherine Bates, 167-92. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Rexroth, Kenneth. *100 Poems from the Japanese*. New York: New Directions, 1964.
- Riley, Denise. 'On the Lapidary Style'. *differences* 28.1 (2017): 17-36.

- Roche, Joanna. 'Joseph Cornell's *Garden 44*: The Poetics of Memory'. In *Joseph Cornell: Opening the Box*, edited by Jason Edwards and Stephanie L. Taylor, 189-204. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Rutledge, Louis C. 'Emily Dickinson's Arthropods'. *American Entomology* (Summer 2003): 70-74.
- Samuels, Peggy. *Deep Skin: Elizabeth Bishop and Visual Art*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010.
- Sandberg, Anders. 'Quantum Gravity Treatment of the Angel Density Problem'. *Annals of Improbable Research* 7.3 (May/June 2001).
<https://www.improbable.com/airchives/paperair/volume7/v7i3/angels-7-3.htm>.
- Saunders, David. 'Joseph Cornell's Stereopticon'. *Turtle Point Press Magazine* (Spring 2013). turtlepointpress.com/traveltainted/joseph-cornells-stereopticon/.
- Schneider, Herman and Nina. *Rocks, Rivers, and the Changing Earth*. 1952. New York: Dover, 2014.
- Schumann, Walter. *Gemstones of the World*, translated by Annette Englander and Daniel Shea. New York: Sterling, 2006.
- Schütt, Hans-Werner. 'Chemical Atomism and Chemical Classification'. In *The Cambridge History of Science, Volume 5: The Modern Physical and Mathematical Sciences*, edited by Mary Jo Nye, 237-54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Schwartz, Lloyd. 'One Art: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, 1971-1976'. In *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, edited by Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, 133-53. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.
- Sewall, Richard B. *The Lyman Letters: New Light on Emily Dickinson and Her Family*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1965.
- . *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. 2 vols. London: Faber and Faber, 1976.
- Shakespeare, William. *2 Henry VI*. In *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd ed. Edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 537-68. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- . *King Lear*, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd ed. Edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 1153-85. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Socarides, Alexandra. *Dickinson Unbound: Paper, Process, Poetics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Sontag, Susan. 'In Plato's Cave'. In *On Photography*, 3-26. London: Penguin, 2002.

- Sorensen, Willis Conner. *Brethren of the Net: American Entomology, 1840-1880*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995.
- Spires, Elizabeth. 'The Art of Poetry, XXVII: Elizabeth Bishop'. In *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, edited by George Monteiro, 114-32. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996.
- Spufford, Francis, ed. *The Chatto Book of Cabbages and Kings*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1989.
- Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Suárez-Toste, Ernesto. "'Telling It Slant': The 'Healthier' Surrealism of Elizabeth Bishop and Joseph Cornell". *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 42 (2001): 279-88.
- Tennyson, Alfred Lord. 'Mariana'. In *The Works of Alfred Tennyson*, 7-8. London: Macmillan, 1884.
- Tesla, Nikola. 'When Woman Is Boss'. Interview with John B. Kennedy at Colliers, 30 January 1926. <http://www.tfcbooks.com/tesla/1926-01-30.htm>.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, 1837-1861*, edited by Damion Searls. New York: New York Review Books, 2009.
- Vendler, Helen. 'Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly'. In *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, edited by Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, 32-48. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.
- Waldman, Diane. *Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams*. New York: Abrams, 2006.
- Warner, Marina. *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Watts, Isaac. *Works*, edited by Rev. George Burder. 6 vols. London: J. Barfield, 1810.
- White, Laura. *The Alice Books and the Contested Ground of the Natural World*. New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Wilkinson, John. *Lyric In Its Times: Temporalities in Verse, Breath, and Stone*. London: Bloomsbury, 2019.
- Willis, Patricia C. 'A Modernist Epithalamium: Marianne Moore's "Marriage"'. *Paideuma* 32, 1/3 (2003): 265-99.

Wiltshire-Gordon, Skip, and Melanie Wolfe. 'Kay Ryan'. Interview for *Free Food for Thought*, podcast audio, April 2019.
<https://soundcloud.com/freefood4thought/kay-ryan>.

Wolter, Scott F. 'Minnesota's State Gem: The Lake Superior Agate'. *The Minnesota Volunteer* (Jan/Feb 1988). As reproduced by Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. 2019. dnr.state.mn.us/education/geology/digging/agate.html.

Wood, Michael. 'Missing dates'. In *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*, 128-57.
 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yencich, Jay. 'Passenger Pidgin: Niedecker's Road Trip through the Geo-Linguistic Strata of *Lake Superior*'. *Poetry Northwest* (18 April 2015). poetrynw.org/jay-yencich-passenger-pidgin-niedeckers-road-trip-through-the-geo-linguistic-strata-of-lake-superior/.

Zigrosser, Carl. *Multum in Parvo: An Essay in Poetic Imagination*. New York: G. Braziller, 1965.