The Stoic Comedy of Elizabeth Bishop and Buster Keaton

In her celebrated exchange of letters with Anne Stevenson in 1964, Elizabeth Bishop offered her correspondent an unsparing review of Orson Welles's film The Trial (1962). After damning Welles's adaptation on the grounds that his one-sidedly nightmarish vision missed the humor of Franz Kafka's novel, Bishop suggested instead that the closest cinematic avatar for Josef K. might actually be the silent comedian Joseph "Buster" Keaton. Within the euphoric slapstick of Keaton's films, she identified countervailing hints of "tragedy," "weirdness" and "pathos" that comprised a discernibly Kafkaesque mode:

> I went to see […] "The Trial" – which is absolutely dreadful. Have you seen it? I haven't read the book for ages – but in spite of the morbidity of Kafka, etc. I like to remember that when he read his stories out loud to his friends he used to have to stop because he got to laughing so. All the way through the film I kept thinking that any of Buster Keaton's films give one the sense of the tragedy of the human situation, the weirdness of it all, the pathos of man's trying to do the right thing – all in a twinkling, besides being fun – all the very things poor Orson Welles was trying desperately to illustrate by laying it on with a trowel.[1]

Bishop's remark subtly enacts the convergence of whimsy and profundity that she extols, since she delights in the playful similarity between K.'s and Keaton's names while also making a more deeply suggestive point about how the filmmaker's style might epitomize the kind of tragicomic "weirdness" which she finds in Kafka. In her opinion, Keaton's aesthetic is superior to Welles's because it refuses to subordinate "fun" to "pathos" but rather sees the two as coexisting in delicate equilibrium. As if mirroring the upset in values that this entails, Bishop's

image works to disrupt our customary sense of importance, as what is conveyed in the "twinkling" of Keaton's filmic eye is not a flicker of amusement but rather one of sorrow: "tragedy," she argues, can be conveyed with a lightness of touch.

Bishop's analysis of Keaton echoes the film critic James Agee, who memorably discerned a "freezing whisper […] of melancholia" lurking "deep below" the filmmaker's ecstatic pratfalls, "giving a disturbing tension and grandeur to the foolishness".[2] Viewed in this way, the slapstick athleticism of Keaton's performances becomes a form of stoical forbearance. The tragicomic energy that Agee and Bishop find embodied in his films is a standard to which she also believes poetry should aspire. Her appreciative remarks about Keaton precede a much-quoted passage from her letters, in which she argues that the poet should hold levity and gravity in the balance with the indefatigable finesse of a slapstick performer:

> I don't like heaviness […] I think one can be cheerful AND profound! – or, how to be grim without groaning […] It may amount to a kind of "good manners," I'm not sure. The good artist assumes a certain amount of sensitivity in his audience and doesn't attempt to flay himself to get sympathy or understanding. (PPL, 864-5)

Throughout her life, "good manners" was a criterion which Bishop valued in others and one by which she measured herself; "she always cherished, as well as practiced, good manners," her friend and editor Robert Giroux recalled.[3] Her conception of "manners" has its basis less in social etiquette than in a mode of conscientious attention. Of the philosopher John Dewey, her neighbor during her years in Key West, for example, Bishop recalled that "he had almost the best manners I have ever encountered, always had time, took an interest in everything, – no detail, no weed or stone or cat or old woman was unimportant to him" (PPL, 846). As a poetic

principle, "good manners" comprises both the sensibility that Bishop praises in Dewey and its logical counterpart: the "kind of 'good manners'" that the poet displays derives not solely from her capacity to observe others but also from her trust in others' powers of observation. Assuming "a certain amount of sensitivity" on behalf of her audience allows the "good artist" to be reticent but not withholding, imbuing her work with more affective registers – "tragedy," "weirdness," "pathos," "fun" – than an explicitly "groaning" poetics would permit.

Critics have frequently related Bishop's disavowal of "heaviness" to her own representational strategies – in particular, to her distrust of confessional poetry and her reticence in her writing about her childhood traumas. "Making an aesthetic out of what may have been in part psychological strategy, in part a historically conditioned family ethos," Linda Anderson writes, Bishop "refused either to be weighed down herself or to burden her readers with undue weightiness".[4] Rather, she believed that a tacit poetics might provide a heightened form of revelation. Bishop identifies a similar quality in Marianne Moore's poetry when she praises its "steady aura of both reserve and having possibly more meanings, in reserve," transfiguring her friend's withdrawn reputation into a state of poetic self-sufficiency and expressive tact (PPL, 683). As Matthew Bevis notes, "Bishop knew that you could compel attention by declining to demand it, and that restraint could be a kind of plea".[5] Comedy is one important means by which this kind of reticent disclosure is achieved in her poetry, with "fun" frequently serving as an invitation to readers to find the poignancy "twinkling" within. Keaton's centrality to Bishop's thinking in this regard derives most obviously from the melancholic notes that critics such as Agee have discerned within his comedy. But Bishop is also drawing on the mechanics of slapstick film itself, for her choice of the word "heaviness" in this context plays on the word's physical as much as its emotional connotations. The word figures her preferred tragicomic mode as a form of equipoise akin to that embodied in Keaton's

slapstick performances, as he precariously attempts to maintain his balance amid the forces and objects of a hostile universe. Much as the poet, for Bishop, must resist the burden exerted by a subject's "heaviness," so too must the silent comedian engage in an endless dialogue with gravity's downward pull. Indeed, as "an auteur whose métier could be said to be gravity," in Noël Carroll's words, Keaton's struggles against its ineluctable force constitute the essence of his aesthetic.[6]

This analogy between "heaviness" in its material and metaphorical forms is one that Bishop renders more explicitly in "Keaton," a dramatic monologue spoken by the filmmaker which remained unpublished during her lifetime and was probably written around the time of her letter to Stevenson.[7] The "Keaton" whom she ventriloquizes casts himself as a solitary figure, fighting against his setting's physical forces and the pressure of collective opinion:

> No, it is not the way to be, they say.
> Go with the skid, turn always to leeward,
> and see what happens, I ask you, now. (PPL, 243)

Defying the anonymous "they" who rebuke his stalwart attempts to remain upright, Bishop's speaker dismisses their suggestion that he should "always" face downwind and "go with" the falls and tumbles on which he continually teeters. Struggles such as this between protagonist and environment – in which, as Robert Knopf observes, "the world appears to be aggressively antagonistic, as if it has a mind of its own" – recur throughout Keaton's films but Bishop's lines recall one in particular: the extended cyclone scene at the climax of Steamboat Bill, Jr. (1928), the most famous sequence in his oeuvre, in which storm winds ravage a Mississippi River town to hurl newspapers, crates and even buildings into Buster's path.[8] Having first been

blown through the streets in his bed, then nearly crushed by a collapsing house façade, Buster moves through the town fleeing the debris that has been seemingly enlisted against him, with his body eventually upended and borne along by the elements. Thrown from offscreen into a shot of an empty street, he recovers his footing with kinetic aplomb and walks headlong into the gale; as we see him in profile struggling to hold his position, "he leans so far into the brutalizing wind," in Jennifer Fay's words, "that he seems to defy gravity, a body suspended mid pratfall".[9] This image of ecstatic poise fleetingly realized through physical endurance serves as an apposite metaphor for how art might strain under the weight of the tragic – a weight that is redoubled by the derisive cries of those who urge Bishop's "Keaton" to submit to it – yet transcend its downward pull.

In a recent chapter on Bishop, Stephanie Burt observes that "the feeling of freedom, the sense of unboundedness" which runs throughout her poetry, "depends […] on the presence of something from which to break free".[10] This essay identifies one important source for this dialectic in the mechanics of slapstick cinema. Drawing on the growing body of scholarship on modern poetry and comedy by Matthew Bevis, Cliff Mak and others, I argue that Keaton's films provided Bishop with a mode of comic performance through which her poetry might strike a tottering equipoise between the "cheerful AND profound".[11] Her imaginative investment in Keaton's silent comedy can be most keenly felt in one scenario to which her poetry often returns, in which a singular figure exists on brinks and limits, seeking what Susan Rosenbaum calls "a precarious stability within a moving, unstable world".[12] "Keaton" is the most explicit staging of this slapstick genus which can be traced across Bishop's work, from the dandyish character of "The Gentleman of Shalott" (1936), who resides in an exhilarating state "of constant re-adjustment" unable to distinguish reality from "mirrored reflection" (PPL, 7-8), to the "finical, awkward" bird of "Sandpiper" (1962), who accepts that his "world is

bound to shake" as he runs along a roaring shoreline (PPL, 125). The first part of my article argues that what Bishop derived from Keaton in these poems was a form of stoic comedy – one that is informed in particular by Agee's film criticism – in which humor serves as an ebullient survival mode, a means of giving shape to material whose weight might otherwise prove overwhelming. Hugh Haughton notes that often in Bishop's later work "humor is a way of mastering the potentially tragic" and her engagement with Keaton offers a particularly instructive example of this, as she translates worldly tribulation into an insistently slapstick poetic style.[13] The second part of my article turns to consider how humor in these poems invites us to read more deeply. Focusing on repetition as the aspect of Keaton's performance to which Bishop is preeminently drawn, I explore how her poetry transfigures the repetitive actions of slapstick cinema into a series of reiterative phrases and uses this stylistic trait to stage its own comedy of dislocation. The "endless etceteras" of Bishop's "Keaton" evoke a singlemindedness that continually teeters on the edge of parody, undermining the speaker's aspirations in the process of announcing them (PPL, 243). In doing so, humor opens up alternative ways of reading the poem, particularly by drawing attention to the queer dimensions of the slapstick hero and inviting us to read these in relation to the poet's own identity. The multiple forms of restraint for which Keaton's character is famous – his deadpan countenance, his films' eschewal of sentimentality, the silence of his medium – become in Bishop's "Keaton" a self-referential play on her own reputation as a reticent poet, exemplifying the kind of tacit disclosure that she articulates in her correspondence with Stevenson.

I. "Stoical, unsentimental, and physically courageous"

Bishop's love of film was lifelong. Writing to her friend Frani Blough during her travels around Europe in 1935, she singled out one source of frustration amid the cultural

entertainments of Paris: "it makes me awfully mad that the movies are so expensive […] but they seem to take the cinema much more seriously, which is something".[14] The regularity with which she returns to cinema again and again throughout her correspondence underscores the extent to which she shared their seriousness about the medium as an art form. During her term as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress in 1950, for instance, she précised her routine as "I read, go to movies, & return to reading some more," while when looking back on her years in Brazil in 1969 she recalled that "I used to go to the movies almost every night, just for fun, and see really good things – foreign films, old ones, sometimes advance showings".[15] The films discussed by Bishop in her letters – which range from Battleship Potemkin (1925), Moulin Rouge (1952) and Black Orpheus (1959) to Blow-Up (1966), Bonnie and Clyde (1967) and Mon oncle Antoine (1971) – attest to an appreciation of cinema that was as eclectic as it was enduring, and her miscellaneous taste in film may in part explain the lack of scholarly attention which the subject has received.[16] J. T. Welsch's reading of "The Moose" as "a kind of screenplay in verse" is the only criticism to consider it in any detail, but his survey of the cinematic features at play in this poem assesses Bishop's relationship with cinema in the aggregate, analyzing "the deep, perhaps entirely unconscious effect all of this film viewing may have had on her poetry".[17] In this essay, I focus instead on one formative strand of her engagement with the medium.

As Welsch notes, Bishop was "acutely aware of film's shifting cultural status in the mid-twentieth century," an awareness that she fostered and maintained through one institution in particular, which provided her with access to Keaton's films long after they ceased to be widely available. Although Bishop's coming of age in the 1930s coincided with the precipitous decline of Keaton's film career and of silent cinema as a medium, she was a regular visitor from this period onwards to The Museum of Modern Art Film Library, which was instrumental in

documenting film's pre-sound history and, in doing so, helping to establish its enduring legacy in midcentury America. MoMA's Film Library, which had been founded in 1935 as the first organization in the United States dedicated to the preservation of the nation's film industry, indelibly shaped conceptions of cinema's early history through its foundational role in collecting, archiving and disseminating silent film. As David Bordwell writes, the Library "came to typify the silent cinema for generations of Americans," by curating regular seasons at MoMA's headquarters in New York and circulating 16mm prints from its collections to audiences at museums, universities and film societies.[18] It held its first major season, "A Cycle of Seventy Films, 1895-1935," from May to November 1939.[19] Bishop returned to New York from Key West in July of that year and recorded in a letter ten days after her arrival in the city that she had "almost lived" at MoMA "since I came back, seeing all the old movies".[20] One of the season's two programs on the history of film comedy culminated in Keaton's The Navigator (1924) – a print of which the Film Library had "ardently desired" to acquire when it was founded, its first curator Iris Barry recalled – and the popularity of these selections led to their expansion into first one, then two full seasons celebrating "Forty Years of American Film Comedy" in 1940 and 1941.[21] Keaton was represented in these by regular screenings of Sherlock Jr. (1924) and The General (1926) as well as The Navigator, which appeared alongside early Charlie Chaplin shorts and films by W. C. Fields, Harold Lloyd and others.[22]

Dana Polan writes that through its curated series the Film Library "set out to establish what film history was and should be," and one of the institution's most important contributions to the American cinematic canon was to establish silent comedy's centrality within it.[23] Having been accorded a foundational position in MoMA's early film seasons, the genre became a regular feature of its programming in subsequent decades. Bishop continued to attend screenings at the museum when she was in New York throughout her life. Postcards from the

Film Library recur in her correspondence, including one featuring a promotion still from Keaton's The Navigator that she sent to Marianne Moore in 1950 and to Robert Lowell in 1957 – having received this from Bishop alongside another of Chaplin's Pay Day (1922) in quick succession, Lowell congratulated her on her "wonderfully chosen postcards" in his reply.[24] The seriousness with which Bishop thought about cinema, particularly popular forms such as slapstick comedy, aligns closely with the model of spectatorship which the Film Library sought to foster. As Haidee Wasson notes, MoMA helped to imbue film with an air of cultural monumentality both by preserving works that in "their original material conditions of production" would have otherwise fallen out of circulation and by imbuing moviegoing itself "with the authority of an elite modern art institution".[25] Films were accompanied by program notes and introduced with intertitles explicating their production history, influences and legacy. Keaton, for instance, is characterized less by his acrobatic pratfalls than he is by "a quality in him which might be described as metaphysical madness," an otherworldly resolve that renders him "an imperturbably serious, inscrutable and stubborn" character beset by worldly contingencies, acting "under the impulse of an irresistible power comparable only to the mysterious urge that causes birds to migrate or avalanches to come crashing down".[26]

Among the regular visitors to the Film Library in these years was the film critic James Agee, who relied heavily on MoMA's collections when writing his Life magazine essay "Comedy's Greatest Era" (1949).[27] Highly influential in both film criticism and popular culture at the time of its publication, Agee's essay was the catalyst for the renewed attention paid to Keaton in the 1950s and 60s, the period during which Robert Knopf notes that he "re-emerged as a living icon of the silent era".[28] Agee offers an unapologetically nostalgic homage to "silent comedy in its heyday," arguing that the medium's lack of synchronized dialogue had freed filmmakers from the strictures of realism and enabled them "to be as funny as possible physically, without

the help or hindrance of words" (FWSJ, 9-10). Working within the medium's constraints, paradoxically, had liberated slapstick performers such as Keaton and Chaplin to develop their uniquely expressive visual language, which constituted "a poem, a kind of poem, moreover, that everybody understands": "they learned to show emotion through it, and comic psychology, more eloquently than most language has ever managed to" (FWSJ, 10). The advent of sound technology, by contrast, rapidly brought an end to the "beauties of comic motion" and affective resonance that had been realized through this slapstick idiom. Subsequent scholarship on silent film has productively complicated Agee's thesis but the impact of his article was significant, helping to establish what Frank Krutnik terms "the canonization of the 1920s as a period of creative exceptionalism in Hollywood comedy, a golden age of auteurs and masterpieces" that was halted prematurely by cinema's transition to sound.[29]

Bishop knew Agee in New York at the time of his article's publication and later owned the volume Agee on Film (1958) in which it was subsequently collected.[30] As this essay's outset, I suggested that the "tragedy" Bishop approvingly finds "twinkling" within Keaton's slapstick has its origins in Agee's vision of him as a tragicomic figure, and I would also argue that "Comedy's Greatest Era" provided her with a congenial example of the "kind of 'good manners'" that she sought to achieve in her poetry. For Bishop's belief in reticence as a form of disclosure corresponds strongly with the poetics of slapstick cinema that Agee delineates, in which the film medium's lack of speech created the conditions through which certain artists working within it might achieve a heightened expressiveness. It is particularly significant, moreover, that Agee finds this paradigm to be most fully embodied in Keaton's aesthetic. Keaton emerges as the exemplary case study within his thesis, the performer whom he judges to be "by his whole style and nature so much the most deeply 'silent' of the silent comedians" (FWSJ, 26). For Agee, Keaton's filmmaking realized the potential latent in the silent medium

through the kinetic energy of his body and its environments as well as the mute eloquence of his deadpan facial expression. Indeed, he figures these visual elements as intertwined, for the only source of stillness amid the freneticism of Keaton's slapstick is his own immobile physiognomy, with the two forming a potent contrast on screen: "in a way his pictures are like a transcendent juggling act in which it seems that the whole universe is in exquisite flying motion and the one point of repose is the juggler's effortless, uninterested face". As Gerard Mast remarks, "the activity of the body plays in counterpoint to the inactivity of the face," inviting the viewer to infer the depths of meaning that are contained within Keaton's seemingly vacant expression: "It knows much more than it shows".[31]

This dialogue between Keaton's face and body is one source of the "freezing whisper […] of melancholia" that Agee detects lurking "deep below" the filmmaker's silent clowning. For Agee, Keaton's "stoic head" is at once comic and plaintive, and his apparently blank face is in fact full of nuances which the discriminating viewer is invited to draw out:

> Keaton's face ranked almost with Lincoln's as an early American archetype; it was haunting, handsome, almost beautiful, yet it was irreducibly funny […] He used this great, sad, motionless face to suggest various related things: a one-track mind near the track's end of pure insanity; mulish imperturbability under the wildest of circumstances; how dead a human being can get and still be alive; an awe-inspiring sort of patience and power to endure, proper to granite but uncanny in flesh and blood. (FWSJ, 26-7)

In his article Agee popularized, if not coined, Keaton's moniker The Great Stone Face and the "various related" meanings he finds etched on the filmmaker's face present a cumulative

picture of his comedy as a mode of stoicism.[32] Emotional restraint becomes for Agee a kind of facial polysemy, one that permits him to envision Keaton both as a slapstick acrobat and as a resolute survivor amid the crisscrossing forces of a discomfortingly indifferent universe. His article represents a vital contribution to this strand of Keaton's reception history, and its impact can be seen in the emergence of The Great Stone Face as a sobriquet in popular culture and in the work of later critics who would draw on his conception of the stoical Keaton such as Hugh Kenner in Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians (1962).[33] As Kenner observed in an obituary for Keaton written in 1966, his filmmaking "erected acrobatic skill into […] a metaphysic. Man, that blank face implies, is not proper to this world, yet somehow manages."[34]

Bishop's interest in forms of stoic endurance was lifelong. In a poem written in the early 1940s which remained unpublished during her lifetime, her speaker ruefully observes about her "early nurses," the dolls of her childhood, that: "Their stoicism I never mastered / their smiling phrase for every occasion" (PPL, 235).[35] In contrast to this unsettling ideal of inert inexpression projected by the speaker onto her dolls' "glazed complexions," Keaton's slapstick provided her with an alternative example of "how to be grim without groaning" – one towards which she is drawn in her later poetry in particular – that suggested how comedic performance might serve as an ebullient survival mode. In her prose, the comic is frequently conceived as a form of fortitude. In a memoir of Flannery O'Connor written in 1964 – the same year as her correspondence with Anne Stevenson – Bishop recalled that "she lived with Christian stoicism and wonderful wit and humor," which is one of several instances in her writing where these qualities are presented as inextricably linked (PPL, 717). Prior to discussing Keaton in her letter to Stevenson, she had underlined the importance she placed on good humor and her luck at "having had, most of my life, some witty friends, – and I mean real wit, quickness, wild fancies, remarks that make one cry with laughing" (PPL, 851). She then explained – in an image that

prefigures Keaton's appearance in her correspondence – that those she prized most were "usually stoical, unsentimental, and physically courageous".

To conceive of one's dearest friends through such resonantly Keatonian characteristics is a high and intimate form of tribute to the silent comedian, and one that parallels Bishop's frequent recourse to aspects of his aesthetic in her poetry. Thomas Travisano has grouped "Keaton" within what he terms Bishop's "Abstract Self-Portraits," a constellation of poems which "explore issues central to Bishop's mental architecture while placing their heroes, allegorically, in emotional and epistemological predicaments that were native to Bishop as well".[36] Slapstick film, I argue, provided an imaginative impetus not only for "Keaton" but for a number of these works, which revolve around singular figures assailed by worldly vicissitudes. Read from this perspective, the titular bird of "Sandpiper," for example, emerges as a kind of slapstick hero, a "finical, awkward" character restlessly adjusting himself to each shift in his seemingly antagonistic environment:

> 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. (PPL, 125)

The poem opens with the first in a series of dizzying shifts in scale, as it presents us with a miniature figure moving along a shore and asks us to hold our point of view in tandem with the sandpiper's own: from his perspective, the coastline constitutes a shaking "world," akin to what Gilles Deleuze calls the "vast, changing landscapes and deformable geometric structures" within which Keaton's characters reside, "encompassed by an immense and catastrophic

milieu".[37] Bishop's sandpiper, a slapstick performer in microcosm, can only accept the "roaring" of the ocean alongside him and adapt his position with the tide's ebb and flow, barely but sufficiently holding his fears in check as "he runs, he runs" amid the crashing waves. Like his environment, he is all movement, as the immediate repetition of "he runs" within the line is followed by further occurrences of the phrase in the poem's second and third stanzas: as such repetitions accrue, the bird's purposeful mobility is continuously threatening to tip over into restless indecision, his "controlled panic" always poised to overspill its bounds.

The "state of controlled panic" in which the bird resides is also a self-reflexive description of "Sandpiper" itself, for the poem, as Mark Ford writes, is "about controlling panic in the face of elemental, indifferent, potentially overwhelming forces".[38] Comedy provided Bishop with one crucial means by which panic might be reimagined and ludically contained without being entirely repudiated. This is most apparent towards the conclusion of Bishop's poem, which turns from the sandpiper's restive movements to his "focussed" gaze:

> The tide
> is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
> His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied,
>
> looking for something, something, something.
> Poor bird, he is obsessed! (PPL, 125-6)

Recalling the "transcendent juggling act" between deadpan face and frenetic body that Agee discerns in Keaton, the sandpiper's "focussed" bill offers a single point of repose amid the poem's flux. The beak's stillness is counterpointed by the bird's restlessly mobile limbs,

suggesting the concern that really lies behind it. That concern is bolstered by "preoccupied," which carries implications of both play and panic: while the word teases the sandpiper for his myopic immersion in his task, it also admits his (and by extension the poet's) chronic anxiety at the shore's oscillations. The phase "poor bird," hovering between arch colloquialism and sympathetic identification when unvoiced on the page, permits us to read the poem's conclusion as at once comic and poignant. Indeed, its complexity of tone derives from its refusal to prioritize either interpretation.

It is often noted that the sandpiper would be in reality hunting for food amid these millions of sand grains, yet Bishop's reimagining of the bird as fixated on his own mock-heroic quest for some vivid particular imparts to him the studious absorption with which Keaton's persona is frequently associated. The Film Library's program notes characterize him by his "imperturbably serious, inscrutable and stubborn" resolve, a strand of thought which is developed by Tom Gunning when he writes that "Keaton's reputedly 'blank-faced' expression actually reflects the deadly concentration of someone trying to find his place within a system too large and too intricate for him to control".[39] It is such a blend of effortful curiosity and obsessive concentration that Bishop's "Keaton" takes up at the outset of his dramatic monologue:

> I will be good; I will be good.
> I have set my small jaw for the ages
> and nothing can distract me from
> solving the appointed emergencies
> even with my small brain (PPL, 243)

The speaker's determination in the face of the world's uncertainties, he affirms, is embodied in the rigid facial expression which he has "set" in stone for posterity. Failed intentions are central to the humor of "Keaton," and his declaration that "nothing can distract" him is repeatedly undermined as the poem progresses. The reader becomes increasingly conscious of the agitation lingering behind the blank-faced expression of Bishop's "Keaton," much like the sense of worry carried by "preoccupied" impinges on her sandpiper's "focussed" resolve. Even as the sandpiper obsessively devotes himself to what's in front of him, the poem hints at what hangs at the edge of his vision.

II. "I will be correct […] I will be correct or bust"

One scene that Agee draws attention to for the "subtle leverages of expression" that Keaton could work "against his nominal deadpan" occurs at the end of Daydreams (1922), in which Buster has hidden from the police on top of a paddle steamer's side wheel, only for it to begin rotating as the boat is cast off from the docks (FWSJ, 27). After clambering inside its accelerating frame, Buster first paces nonchalantly, then sprints, before being upended and caught up entirely in its revolutions: as the paddle wheel continues to turn, he tumbles and gyrates within it, and at last can only cling to its outer rim as he is repeatedly dunked into the water. Agee remarks (with some embellishment) that in the process of "saving himself from drowning" Buster's "only real concern was, obviously, to keep his hat on," as he tries to restore his trademark porkpie hat to his head then keeps it firmly grasped in his hand. In Agee's exegesis, such determination constitutes naivety and dignity: the sequence does not merely satirize Buster for confusing his priorities but also elicits comic sympathy, on account of Buster's refusal to relegate a punctilious demeanor below his physical survival.

Reading Agee alongside Bishop, there are clear affinities here between his analysis and her sense of Keaton's films as conjoining "fun" with "the pathos of man's trying to do the right thing," but the scene also resonates with her work for the manner in which it transforms the repetition integral to slapstick humor into a self-referential visual set piece. Cyclicality is a dominant feature of Keaton's films, both as the comedic locus of individual scenes – which frequently conform to what Walter Kerr terms "the Keaton curve," a circular gag structure in which Buster's actions lead him back to where he began – and, more broadly, in terms of the repetitive nature of the quandaries in which Buster finds himself from one film to the next.[40] As Michael North has compellingly argued, the repetitiousness which both Keaton and Chaplin place at the heart of their comedy should be understood as part of a broader response to technological modernity among modernist writers and artists, many of whom found "something potentially comic in mechanical reproduction itself".[41] Yet as well as being comical, Lisa Trahair observes, slapstick's repetitions are fundamentally stoical, as they "inscribe a reality in which the Keaton character […] is compelled to confront the same problems again and again, implying a kind of cyclical existence in which the present repeatedly poses a series of equivalences to which he must respond".[42] Indeed, Keaton's cinematography in this sequence from Daydreams alludes to popular imagery of the Rota Fortunae (Fortune's Wheel) in order to burlesque such understandings of his protagonist's narrative as a chain of oppressive outcomes: the turning paddle wheel is presented in a profile long shot, with Buster haplessly clinging to its outside edge like an allegorical figure in medieval iconography who can only endure his recurrent fate.

Repetition is a central figure in Bishop's poetry as well as Keaton's films. Deryn Rees-Jones has suggested that the "repeated sounds, patterns, repetitions" which are a prominent feature of Bishop's verse gesture towards "what is there – alive and powerful – but which is also in

some way unsayable in language," with their sonic or verbal excess "signalling a broader desire" to articulate "an unrecoverable traumatic thought or feeling".[43] In this way, the threefold repetition of "something, something, something" in the final stanza of "Sandpiper" mimics the bird's "obsessed" attentiveness but implies that the source of that fixation lies beyond words' reach. The triplet builds on the accumulating repetitions of "he runs, he runs," which teeter between purposeful mobility and spasmodic restlessness: while on one level they mirror the repetitious rhythm of the sandpiper's enterprise, as he darts back and forth across the shore in tandem with the ocean's tide, on another they evoke that sense of ineffable "panic" which is always threatening to overwhelm the bird's – and the poem's – control.

In "Keaton," the repetitiousness which is an important presence in "Sandpiper" is pushed further still, into a stylistic principle which explicitly models itself on the filmmaker's slapstick performances. The dramatic monologue opens with its speaker's assertion that "I will be good; I will be good," and he unceasingly restates his intentions in this manner, with his belabored pledges accumulating into something akin to a spiritual exercise. From this opening line, his statements gravitate towards an ideal of slapstick heroism that he yearns to embody. Repeating each promise constitutes a mode of performance through which he might realize this role, the verbal equivalent of the screen protagonist's repeated mastery of his physical environment. As words and phrases recur throughout the poem, Bishop's "Keaton" explicitly channels the notion that his oeuvre is a continual series of crises which recur within and across his films:

> If the machinery goes, I will repair it.
> If it goes again I will repair it again.
> My backbone

through these endless etceteras painful. (PPL, 243)

To refer to the stunts and catastrophes of Keaton's films – frequently, as in The Electric House (1922), staged between himself and complex mechanical apparatuses – as a sequence of "endless etceteras" draws visual and verbal repetition into close alignment, translating the repetitive actions of slapstick cinema into the sequence of clauses around which the poem is built. As they accrue, each iteration attests to the speaker's stamina in the face of his environment's vicissitudes: his "painful" backbone is figurative proof of his tested strength of character as well as the material impact of his acrobatic feats.

Yet Bishop's use of repetition should be understood, like Keaton's, not only as a localized stylistic feature of particular poems but also as extending to the way in which particular scenarios are returned to throughout her poetry. In both senses, "Keaton" might be read as the culmination of repetition as a principle in her work. The precarious equilibrium inhabited by the poem's speaker is a state that he shares with slapstick figures from across Bishop's corpus, and as such his "endless etceteras" can be interpreted as referring back to this long textual history. The similarities between silent comedy and "The Man-Moth" (1936) were first noted by Bonnie Costello, who commented that the poem's otherworldly protagonist "certainly owes a debt not only to Charlie Chaplin in his baggy black suit but to Buster Keaton in his big-brimmed hat".[44] "Nervously" compelling himself to "scale the faces of the buildings" in a moonlit city, the Man-Moth determinedly clambers to reach the moon in the mistaken belief that he can "push his small head" through it, only to find that each time "he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt" (PPL, 10-11). His repeated ascents and plummets while struggling to "investigate as high as he can climb" render him a kind of slapstick Sisyphus,

with the monochrome, soundless landscape in which his flailing character resides accentuating the poem's affinities with the worlds of silent cinema. Such affinities are also discernible in the entrapped plight of "The Gentleman of Shalott," which was composed in the same year, whose mistaken belief that "his person was / half looking-glass" draws on the absurdist logic intrinsic to slapstick film (PPL, 6-7). The Gentleman's chronically exhilarating "uncertainty" as to which side of his body is real and which is reflected (he cannot otherwise make sense of its symmetry) recalls the mirror routine popularized on screen by Chaplin's The Floorwalker (1916), in which the Tramp and another character are so astounded by their likeness that they each believe they are gazing at their own reflection and imitate one another's movements accordingly. The act of misrecognition at the heart of this routine – which became an archetype of visual comedy through its recurrence in Max Linder's Seven Years Bad Luck (1921) and the Marx Brothers' Duck Soup (1933) – plays on the clown figure's incomplete sense of selfhood, a premise which Bishop's poem echoes and exaggerates: the Gentleman's case of mistaken identity derives from him believing that half of his own body is a "mirrored reflection" rather than that the entirety of someone else's body is.

"The Man-Moth" and "The Gentleman of Shalott" are frequently cited as companion pieces on account of the identity crises faced by their liminal protagonists, who both, as Kirstin Hotelling Zona writes, "long for the ecstasy of coherent selfhood, the promise of plenitude that identification with the normative ideal confers, just as they expose the impossible and ultimately coercive nature of such representations".[45] The dilemma dramatized in these two poems has been the subject of numerous biographical and psychoanalytic readings in Bishop criticism. What has been overlooked, however, are the parallels between this indeterminate mode of being and that which is inhabited by the personae of slapstick film, whose comedy derives from the gulf that exists between their eccentric relationship to their world and their

faltering attempts to adapt to its demands. Assessing the singularity of Keaton's character, Gilberto Perez memorably describes it as that of "a bewildered equilibrist whose mind runs counter to the achievements of his body," arguing that his physical ability to unremittingly adjust himself to the demands of his environment is undermined by a deeper sense of his estrangement from society's conventions and behaviors.[46] It is Keaton's deadpan face in particular which suggests that his claims to belonging are always to some degree untenable. John Plotz pinpoints precisely this dynamic in one scene from Go West (1925), in which Buster, ordered to crack a smile, finds that he cannot use his facial muscles to break his straight-faced countenance and must instead use his fingers to forcibly raise his upper lip into a comic imitation of what him smiling might be like. For Plotz, Keaton shows Buster striving "to master publicly accepted norms and mores, not in order to conform to them strictly, but in order to play on them parodically, satirically": his outsiderly attempts to make sense of and conform to social conventions not only betray his own alienation from such worldly customs but also subversively expose the kinds of performance on which they rely.[47]

It is precisely this comedy of dislocation that is staged in the repeated pledges of Bishop's "Keaton" as he strives to embody his heroic ideal. The manner in which he affirms and reaffirms the criteria he associates with this paradigm – a combination of individual virtue, physical endurance and impassive reserve – showcases an all-consuming focus to fulfil the part, while at the same time disclosing and gradually intensifying a sense that, despite his determination, he is never able to completely measure up to the role he has assigned himself. Every statement must be duplicated, to such a degree that this idiosyncratic speech habit comically undermines his aspirations to normative standards in the process of announcing them. The role which "Keaton" attempts to fulfil is, above all, an emphatically masculine one. In the poem's second line, he declares that "I have set my small jaw for the ages," taking up a

steely and avowedly manly pose which his diminutive jawline comically belies. His desire to "be good" is proceeded by another to "be correct," in which he strives towards a stereotype of romantic masculinity with the fastidious intent that is characteristic of Buster's screen persona:

> I will be correct; I know what it is to be a man.
> I will be correct or bust.
> I will love but not impose my feelings.
> I will serve and serve
> with lute or I will not say anything.

Pledging to "serve and serve / with lute," Bishop's "Keaton" places himself in the role of courtly lover, evoking Buster's customarily hapless yet devoted pursuit of each film's romantic interest – above all, in his debut feature Three Ages (1923), which intercuts a triptych of marriage plots from the Palaeolithic, Roman and modern eras, and in Seven Chances (1925), which culminates in a twenty-minute chase sequence of Buster the aspiring suitor being pursued across town and country by a crowd of brides whom he has inadvertently spurned.

Despite Keaton's films typically concluding with marital or romantic union, Buster's naïve attempts to make sense of romance frequently constitute what Andrew Grossman terms "moments of play-acting, an outsider's parody of conventional heterosexuality".[48] This is especially the case in Sherlock Jr.'s famous closing scene, in which Buster, reunited with his beloved in the back of a movie theatre, is seemingly oblivious as to how he should behave and relies on imitating the actions of the couple in the Hollywood romance that is playing on screen. Following the example of the film's leading man, Buster kisses his partner's hand, places an engagement ring onto it and kisses her on the lips, before the film he is studiously observing

cuts forward to the couple happily married with twins. Confronted with this conventional image of domestic bliss, Buster can only perplexedly scratch his head as a flicker of anxiety passes across his stony face, "leaving him," as Grossman writes, "an improbable romantic partner and the audience suspicious of mainstream cinema's heteronormative pleasantries".[49] The manner in which Bishop's "Keaton" pursues his model of "correct" romantic behavior stages a performance of gender conventions akin to that which Buster attempts on screen. Her speaker's repetitions evoke a singlemindedness that continuously teeters on the edge of parody, not only suggesting how he falls short of the heteronormative ideal to which he aspires but also exposing the degree to which that ideal itself is reliant upon performance.

In his subversive relation to the gender conventions of early Hollywood film, the slapstick hero embodies a queer masculinity which is central to the way in which Bishop's poetry draws on the figure as an imaginative impetus. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn notes that "like Chaplin, Keaton as a performer was coded as feminine" – a reputation that both actors played on, for example, by crossdressing in films such as Chaplin's A Woman (1915) and Keaton's The Playhouse (1921) and Our Hospitality (1923).[50] Bishop's "Keaton" affirms a perspective on the world which is at once estranged from its dominant ideologies and discerning of its subtexts: "I was made at right angles to the world / and I see it so. I can only see it so." His statement chimes with what Frank Bidart terms "the drama of perception" running throughout Bishop's poetry – that is, the way in which it repeatedly calls attention to the act of looking itself and to what this might reveal about the observer as much as the observed.[51] In the case of "Keaton," his emphatically singular viewpoint conjoins the film star's lonesome, outsiderly persona with the importance of right angles to the filmmaker's visual imagination: Keaton's cinematography preeminently uses frontal or profile angles to situate Buster at the center of the frame, within which his movements are largely confined to the four cardinal directions. By

restricting the protagonist's relationship with his environment to ninety-degree angles, this geometric visual style accentuates our sense of his comedic dislocation within his filmic world. The right-angled outlook of Bishop's "Keaton" transfigures the viewpoints of character and director into a mode of perception attuned to those narratives and individuals marginalized by normative ways of looking at the world. In a landmark essay published in 1983, Adrienne Rich drew attention to the "themes of outsiderhood and marginality in [Bishop's] work, as well as its encodings and obscurities," which she argued were "closely – though not exclusively – linked with the essential outsiderhood of a lesbian identity".[52] For Rich, Bishop's "outsider's eye" instilled in her poetry an instinct towards sympathy with marginalized individuals and communities, leading her "to perceive other kinds of outsiders and to identify, or try to identify, with them". The kinship which Bishop felt with Keaton's persona might be read as a comic variant on this model of identification with otherness that will elsewhere take on more explicit political urgency: in the slapstick comedian, she discerned a figure whose idiosyncratic relationship with his filmic universe spoke to her "outsider's eye" and offered one imaginative framework through which she might shape and stage questions of identity and of the relationship between self and world.

The readerly impulse to identify affinities between the poem's speaker and the poet herself, moreover, is one that "Keaton" as a dramatic monologue at once courts and resists. A central element of the poem is its speaker's professed reticence, particularly as he vows to conduct his courtship from the position of courteous supplicant: "I will love but not impose my feelings," "I will not say anything". His declarations channel the manifold forms of silence for which Buster is famous – his stoical countenance, his films' eschewal of sentimentality, the silence of his cinematic medium – but they also knowingly play with the fact that reticence is a quality as inextricably associated with Bishop's reputation as a poet as it is with Keaton's as a

filmmaker. The poem's performance of reserve, paradoxically, signals the ways in which it might be read in relation to poet's own biography. Kamran Javadizadeh has argued that Bishop's poetry should not be read as a categorical denial of the personal but as "a unique kind of performance of modesty": her verse engages with aspects of her identity and biography but it does so obliquely, by dramatizing self-concealment rather than by openly claiming to express the self.[53] The "kind of performance of modesty" that Javadizadeh discerns at play in Bishop's poetry resonates with the "kind of 'good manners'" that she herself found embodied in Keaton's deadpan countenance, extending that principle from her 1964 letter to Anne Stevenson into the realm of biography as well as affect.

In many respects, "Keaton" should be read as a staging ground for the poetics of tacit disclosure that Bishop would articulate most extensively in her correspondence. Its speaker's pledges to "not impose my feelings" and "not say anything" actively cultivate a pretense of reserve that invites us to attend more closely to what the poem might be intimating to its readership without wanting to "impose" on them. In declaring that he knows "what it is to be a man," the speaker resolves to inhabit the role of beau, but the line also draws attention to the poet's own cross-gendered performance through the dramatic monologue; in doing so, it further troubles the ostensibly "correct" heteronormativity to which "Keaton" aspires and suggests how the poem might be read as a self-referential play on Bishop's own reserve in her poetry, particularly that regarding her sexuality.[54] Criticism has frequently drawn attention to what Gary Fountain terms the "reticence and anonymity" with which Bishop writes about lesbian experience, her poetry's "controlled surfaces that deflect an easy gaze to the emotions beneath," and in this regard she was keenly aware of what it entailed for a poet to "love but not impose" her feelings upon a reading public.[55] One method of obliquely addressing such experience was through the form of the dramatic monologue, as she acknowledged in an

interview in 1966: “I suppose it should act as a sort of release. You can say all kinds of things you couldn’t in a lyric. If you have scenery and costumes, you can get away with a lot.”[56] In “Keaton,” the liberating potential of assuming a persona is augmented by the additional mask of comedy. These lines delight in artless jokes – the pun on Buster’s name and his reputation for calamity in “correct or bust,” for example, or the obvious irony of a silent film star pledging that he “will not say anything” – whose subtext belies their apparent lack of subtlety. Humor constitutes an invitation to read more deeply. Indeed, the joke is really on those who do not probe beneath each witticism’s surface. For in subverting its speaker’s scrupulous commitment to a “correct” mode of romantic behavior, the poem is in fact saying a great deal, both by playing with the queer dimensions of Keaton’s film persona and by inviting us to read these in relation to the poet’s own sexual identity.

In this regard, the right-angled vantage on the world which “Keaton” affirms is also a mode of perception alert, as Bishop herself was, to a sense that gravity and levity are closely entwined. The tragicomic equilibrium that she found embodied in Keaton’s slapstick frame is one that her own speaker poetically enacts in his purposive repetitions, which can be read as both comically fastidious and disquietingly wistful in their commitment to elusive standards. Such affective poise is directly addressed in the poem’s concluding lines, in which Bishop’s “Keaton” dismisses those who caricature his slapstick as a series of illogical pratfalls. In a tone that shades between visionary idealism and childlike naiveté, he counters that his actions are governed by their own peculiar logic and by a conception of the world that goes deeper than the “talk” of others would often suggest:

> I do not find all this absurdity people talk about.
> Perhaps a paradise, a serious paradise where lovers hold hands

and everything works.

I am not sentimental.

Recalling the ungraspable "something, something, something" pursued by the sandpiper on his mock-heroic quest or the forms of unified self-identity yearned for by the Gentleman of Shalott and the Man-Moth, Bishop's "Keaton" is impelled by a belief that, were he to never cease in "solving the appointed emergencies" and continue to "repair" the world's "machinery," it might be so as to fix it in perfect working order. The paradisal image of mutual love which he aspires towards recalls the romantic resolutions typical of Keaton's films but there is more than an echo in it also of Adam and Eve at the conclusion of Paradise Lost (1674), walking through Eden "hand in hand with wandering steps and slow".[57] That in these lines from Milton's epic the original couple are making their "solitary way" out of a paradise that they have already forfeited adds a further irony to the speaker's unswerving idealism. Bishop's "Keaton" makes comedy out of its speaker's seriousness but the poem also uses his singlemindedness to suggest how serious comedy can be. For the speaker's ideal of belonging stands in emphatic contrast with his own singular being and the repeated I's that have punctuated the poem with a kind of rhythmic energy: that his final assertion, "I am not sentimental," returns to the first-person singular which has predominated reinscribes his social marginality and his estrangement from the imagined communion which he nonetheless continues to desire. This concluding line can be read as a statement of purpose (I am not being sentimental in my vision, and hence I have faith in it) but also as a dismissal of possibility (I am not sentimental by nature, and so I know that this will never come to pass). It is arguably Bishop's acutest tribute to Keaton's deadpan expressiveness that it is through her own straight-faced denial of sentiment that she achieves this tragicomic poise.

[1] Elizabeth Bishop to Anne Stevenson, 8 January 1964, in Poems, Prose, and Letters, ed. Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz (New York: The Library of America, 2008), 864; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated PPL.

[2] James Agee, "Comedy's Greatest Era," in Film Writing and Selected Journalism, ed. Michael Sragow (New York: The Library of America, 2005), 28; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated FWSJ.

[3] Robert Giroux, "Introduction," in One Art: Selected Letters, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), ix. For a discussion of Bishop's "definition of good manners," see also Eleanor Cook, Elizabeth Bishop at Work (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2016), 163-5.

[4] Linda Anderson, Elizabeth Bishop: Lines of Connection (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2013), 2. On this passage, see also Jonathan Ellis, Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), 14.

[5] Matthew Bevis, "The Lighthouse Stares Back," London Review of Books, 7 January 2016, 9.

[6] Noël Carroll, Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 9.

[7] The single typescript which survives of "Keaton" in Bishop's archive is undated. Giroux and Schwartz claim the poem was written in the late 1950s in their Library of America edition, but the fact that Bishop does not refer to the poem when discussing Buster Keaton in her 1964 letter suggests that it could also postdate this. Customarily in her correspondence – particularly in her exchanges with Stevenson from 1963-5 – Bishop mentions drafts of work in progress which are directly related to topics of discussion. For instance, in relation to her regard for Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins, she remarks that: "I have a poem about them comparing them to two self-caged birds, but it's unfinished" (PPL, 858).

[8] Robert Knopf, The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), 43.

[9] Jennifer Fay, Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018), 23.

[10] Stephanie Burt, "Elizabeth Bishop at the End of the Rainbow," in Reading Elizabeth Bishop: An Edinburgh Companion, ed. Jonathan Ellis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2019), 328.

[11] See Matthew Bevis, "Eliot Among the Comedians," Literary Imagination 16.2 (2014): 135-56; Cliff Mak, "On Falling Fastidiously: Marianne Moore's Slapstick Animals," ELH 83.3 (2016): 873-98; Rachel Trousdale (ed.), Humor in Modern American Poetry (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

[12] Susan Rosenbaum, "Bishop and the Natural World," in The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop, ed. Angus Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), 77.

[13] Hugh Haughton, "Poetry and Good Humor: Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop," in Humor in Modern American Poetry, 114.

[14] Bishop to Frani Blough, 20 October 1935, One Art, 36.

[15] Bishop to Robert Lowell, [?] August 1950 and 9-10 December 1969, in Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, ed. Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 104 and 659.

[16] For discussions of these six films, see Bishop, One Art, 42, 278, 381, 467, 554, and 582.

[17] J. T. Welsch, "'The Moose' as Movie: Elizabeth Bishop as Screenwriter," in Reading Elizabeth Bishop: An Edinburgh Companion, 195.

[18] David Bordwell, On the History of Film Style (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), 26.

[19] See Press Release, "A Cycle of Seventy Films to be Given in Daily Programs as Part of 'Art in Our Time' Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art," 30 April 1939. MoMA Press Release

Archives. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/490/releases/MOMA_1939_0021.pdf].

[20] Bishop to Charlotte Russell, 15 July 1939, One Art, 82.

[21] Iris Barry, "The Film Library and How It Grew," Film Quarterly 22.4 (1969): 22.

[22] See Press Release, "Forty Years of American Comedy to be Shown," 18 July 1940. MoMA. [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/623/releases/MOMA_1940_0054_1940-07-18_40718-47.pdf]. See also Press Release, "Second Series of Forty Years of American Comedy Films to be Shown," 21 December 1940. MoMA. [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/660/releases/MOMA_1940_0091_1940-12-21_401221-82.pdf].

[23] Dana Polan, Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2007), 17.

[24] Lowell to Bishop, 3 July 1957, Words in Air, 206. Eleanor Chai, the editor of Bishop and Marianne Moore's forthcoming correspondence, shared online the postcard of Keaton which Bishop sent to Moore on 3 March 1950. See Eleanor Chai (@eleanor_chai), Twitter, 15 February 2016, https://www.twitter.com/eleanor_chai/status/699339233203453952.

[25] Haidee Wasson, Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005), 22. The wider historical context of this section of my article is indebted to Wasson's study.

[26] "Film Notes Part 1: The Silent Film," The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art 16.2-3 (1949): 44-5.

[27] On Agee's use of the Film Library, see John Wranovics, Chaplin and Agee: The Untold Story of the Tramp, the Writer, and the Lost Screenplay (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 81.

[28] Knopf, The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton, 134.

[29] Frank Krutnik, "Introduction," in Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader, ed. Frank Krutnik (New York: Routledge, 2003), 6.

[30] John Ashbery recalls that when he first met Bishop in 1950 she was having drinks with Agee in New York's Greenwich Village, the year after the publication of "Comedy's Greatest Era" (Ashbery, quoted in Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography, ed. Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau [Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1994], 337). Bishop discusses Agee on Film (1958), her copy of which she loaned to Lota de Macedo Soares's nephew when he was beginning to write film reviews for his high school newspaper, in a letter from 1964 (Bishop to Lowell, 13 June 1964, Words in Air, 540).

[31] Gerald Mast, The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), 129.

[32] When Agee's article was first published in Life magazine, the section on Keaton was subtitled "The Great Stone Face"; however, that subtitle does not reappear in subsequent collected editions of Agee's film writings. Although critics frequently claim that Keaton was referred to as The Great Stone Face throughout his career, the nickname's provenance remains unknown: its earliest recorded appearance in print is in the original magazine publication of Agee's article in 1949. The phrase corresponds with Agee's reading of Keaton's films to such an extent that it is highly plausible that it was coined by him. See Agee, "Comedy's Greatest Era," Life, 5 September 1949, 82.

[33] The impact of Agee's writings about Keaton on Hugh Kenner's literary criticism in the 1960s is difficult to underestimate. His debt to Agee is most explicitly acknowledged in The Counterfeiters (1968), which situates "Buster Keaton (stoic comedian)" as the culmination of the seriocomic mode's long history, beginning with the dizzying fusion of heroic and mock-heroic in Alexander Pope's poetry (Kenner, The Counterfeiters: An Historical Comedy

[Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968], 14). As Kenner confessed when writing The Counterfeiters, at this stage he had actually "never seen a Keaton picture," an impediment that explained his "reliance on Agee's evocations" in his writing (Kenner to Guy Davenport, 25 June 1963, in Questioning Minds: The Letters of Guy Davenport and Hugh Kenner, ed. Edward M. Burns, 2 vol. [Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2018], 1:365).

[34] Kenner, "Buster Keaton: In Memoriam," in Mazes: Essays (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989), 302.

[35] On the dating of this poem, see Joelle Biele (ed.), Elizabeth Bishop and The New Yorker: The Complete Correspondence (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 6-7.

[36] Thomas Travisano, "Geography IV, or The Death of the Author Revisited: An Essay in Speculative Bibliography," in Elizabeth Bishop in the 21st Century: Reading the New Editions, ed. Angus Cleghorn, Bethany Hicok and Thomas Travisano (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2012), 234.

[37] Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement-Image, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), 177.

[38] Mark Ford, "Elizabeth Bishop at the Water's Edge," Essays in Criticism 53.3 (2003): 239.

[39] Tom Gunning, "Buster Keaton, or the work of comedy in the age of mechanical reproduction," Cineaste 21.3 (1995): 14.

[40] Walter Kerr, The Silent Clowns (New York: Knopf, 1975), 136.

[41] Michael North, Machine-Age Comedy (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 5.

[42] Lisa Trahair, "Stoicism, Causality, Divine Providence and Comedy in Buster Keaton's The General," in The Object of Comedy: Philosophies and Performances, ed. Jamila M. H. Mascat and Gregor Moder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 180.

[43] Deryn Rees-Jones, "'I am in Need of Music': Elizabeth Bishop and the Energies of Sound and Song," in Elizabeth Bishop and the Music of Literature, ed. Angus Cleghorn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 13.

[44] Bonnie Costello, Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991), 51-2.

[45] Kirstin Hotelling Zona, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson: The Feminist Poetics of Self-Restraint (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2002), 71.

[46] Gilberto Perez, The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998), 121.

[47] John Plotz, Semi-Detached: The Aesthetics of Virtual Experience since Dickens (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018), 220. This particular scene is, as Plotz observes, a playful allusion to a similar facial gesture by Lillian Gish in D. W. Griffith's Broken Blossoms (1919); however, the parodic principle which it illustrates can be extended to the entirety of Keaton's style of performance, as "for every overt rip-off, like that faux-Gish facial gesture, there are a hundred minute gestures Buster has stolen from everyday life, copying the way an awkward man enters a room or fumbles for the telephone".

[48] Andrew Grossman, "'Why Didn't You Tell Me That I Love You?': Asexuality, Polymorphous Perversity, and the Liberation of the Cinematic Clown," in Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives, ed. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 210.

[49] Grossman, 212.

[50] Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, "The Detective and the Fool: Or, The Mystery of Manhood in Sherlock Jr.," in Buster Keaton's Sherlock, Jr., ed. Andrew Horton (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 111.

[51] Frank Bidart, "On Elizabeth Bishop," in Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art, ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1983), 214. For a recent discussion of perception in Bishop's poetry, see Jason M. Baskin, *Modernism Beyond the Avant-Garde: Embodying Experience* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019), 31-67.

[52] Adrienne Rich, "The Eye of the Outsider," in Essential Essays: Culture, Politics, and the Art of Poetry, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: Norton, 2018), 218-20.

[53] Kamran Javadizadeh, "Elizabeth Bishop's Closet Drama," Arizona Quarterly 67.3 (2011): 121.

[54] Similar points have been made in relation to Bishop's other dramatic monologues. As Susan McCabe has written of "Crusoe in England," by foregrounding "the doubleness of her own voice, woman impersonating male narrator," Bishop encodes moments of homosexual desire into her poem and "comments upon the position of the lesbian writer, castaway from the mainstream tradition" (McCabe, Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss [University Park: Penn. State Univ. Press, 1994], 198).

[55] Gary Fountain, "'Closets, Closets, and More Closets!' Elizabeth Bishop's Lesbianism," in Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures, ed. Martin Duberman (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1997), 256.

[56] Bishop, Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1996), 26. While critics such as Peter Robinson have related this remark to "Crusoe in England," it is also possible that it refers to other dramatic monologues of this period such as "Keaton". See Robinson, "'The bliss of what?'," in Poetry and the Sense of Panic: Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery, ed. Lionel Kelly (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), 135.

[57] John Milton, Paradise Lost, ed. Alastair Fowler, revised second edition (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), 12.648-9.