Opening The Box
Dickey, Frances.

Essays in Criticism, Volume 57, Number 1, January 2007, pp. 73-81 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/eic/summary/v057/57.1dickey.html
OPENING THE BOX


In Elizabeth Bishop’s unfinished poem ‘Current Dreams’,

Somebody says in a scolding voice
‘Don’t be so stupid about an old alarm clock!
Don’t you know that everything is an alarm clock?
Children, houses, churches, books and pictures?
Yes, everything in the world is set,
Set, and will go off, brrrrr,
[Right to the second!]’

(pp. 69-70)

This passage demonstrates much that is both clarifying and surprising about Bishop’s poems, prose fragments, and notes now available in print for the first time. The assertion that ‘everything is an alarm clock’ seems absurd especially uttered in a ‘scolding voice’, but in her poetry, things do indeed ‘go off’ unexpectedly in ways that reveal their true nature. The question of self-revelation has claimed much of the attention to Bishop’s new book – do we have the right to read these unfinished poems (many of them personal in content) which she chose to withhold? Such a concern seems inflected by our awareness of her own resistance to the confessional style, but many of her previously unpublished poems pre-date the watershed years of 1955 and 1959, when Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ and Lowell’s Life Studies established the dominant tone for post-war American poetry. It is anachronistic to think of Bishop’s early work in those now familiar terms; furthermore, the secret lives revealed here are not literally hers but rather belong to the objects she describes. Things speak and have human characteristics, while at the same time people take on the qualities of things. The symbolic freight of these objects and their unsettling way of coming to life point clearly to Bishop’s affinity with surrealism.

Such a connection has long been apparent from her published
poems of the 1930s and 1940s, but these unfinished poems and the notebook entries that Alice Quinn has included in her annotations expose more sharply the presence of particular surrealist motifs and techniques in Bishop’s work. Among them is the very gesture of pulling back the curtains of private life that we now associate with confessional poetry but which appears here as an attribute of surrealism. *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box* documents the continuity of two movements: one European, modernist, and primarily visual; the other American, postmodern, and primarily poetic. Selected from over 3,500 pages of archival material, this collection of drafts and notes does more than any criticism to place Bishop in the century from which she springs as a unique figure.

‘Current Dreams’, based on a dream Bishop recorded in 1941, invokes surrealism in a number of ways. Since Richard Mullen’s 1982 study, critics have identified her interest in dreams as her clearest link to surrealist art, though all acknowledge her divergence from it as well – she particularly repudiated the practice of automatic composition (for more on Bishop and surrealism, see a recent series of articles by Ernesto Suarez-Toste). At least thirteen of the fifty-odd poems dated before 1951 – the year of her fateful trip to Brazil – describe or refer to sleep and dreams, and others contain well-known surrealist images. The speaker of ‘In a Room’, for example, looks at a stain on the ceiling and describes it as a rhinoceros head (this form appears in a number of Dalí paintings). The alarm clocks in ‘Current Dreams’ bring to mind several famous surrealist clocks, including the one in René Magritte’s *Time Transfixed* (1938) (sitting above a fireplace from which the front end of a steam engine protrudes), and the limp watches of Dalí’s *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) and *The Dream of Venus* (1939). These paintings suggest a disparity between measured time and time remembered or experienced. ‘Current Dreams’ also seems concerned with memory, but here the ticking of the alarm clock signifies an inexorable sequence of events internally ‘set’ to ‘go off’ at some point in the future, like fate. The symbol of the clock is specially positioned at the intersection of space (the fine detail of surrealist painting carried over into Bishop’s poetics of description) and time (as the dimension of narrative, including
autobiography). The prominence of clocks in Bishop’s new poems particularly demonstrates the continuity of surrealist and what we now call confessional styles.

Across the page from the fragment ‘Stoves and Clocks’ (c.1943), for example, Quinn has placed Bishop’s drawing of two old-fashioned coal-burning stoves adorned with the (rather Coleridgean) brand-names ‘FANCY’ and ‘IDEAL’. Over the stoves hang five different kinds of wall clock, one, with a pendulum, identified as the ‘REGULATOR’ (p. 64). This drawing constitutes a remarkable *ars poetica*: poetry issues from the regulation of heat (imagination, desire) by rhythm (heartbeat, metre, stanza length). Their conjunction is ‘mysterious’, as the last word of ‘Stoves and Clocks’ indicates. In the related fragment ‘Dicky and Sister’, Bishop more explicitly identifies the stove from her childhood as a ‘Magee Ideal’, and here it is her aunt’s Singer sewing machine that keeps the beat: ‘The Singer pedals furiously / furious, trapped, the Singer pedals . . . everything sings / in its own way’ (pp. 171-2). The Singer machine and the alarm clocks of ‘Current Dreams’ simultaneously reveal their own private lives – continuing ‘furiously’ under cover of night – while turning the speaker’s private life into a thing. Bishop is the singer, but apparently her singing (as a form of self-expression, ‘in its own way’) feels relentless, driven forward independently of conscious agency.

In ‘Stoves and Clocks’, ‘the clocks are still, the stoves are cold’, indicating ‘extinction’. Bishop’s childhood clocks are not so different from the kitschy but ominous cuckoo clock ticking away the hours of life in Robert Lowell’s ‘My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow’ (1959): ‘tockytock, tockytock / clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock, / slung with strangled, wooden game’. In Lowell’s lines the photorealism of childhood memory combines with hyperbolic symbolism to simulate an act of telling that owes more to the psychoanalyst’s couch than the priest’s confessional. The descriptive adjectives ‘strangled, wooden’ serve primarily to illustrate and intensify the emotional significance (rather than the visual appearance) of the ticking clock. Lowell’s work shares this compositional principle of deep symbolism with Baudelaire (the poet Bishop most consistently admired) and the surrealists who inherited
the mantle of nineteenth century symbolisme. Dalí’s sensational memoir *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* (1942) indicates that confession, too, is an aspect of surrealism, a necessary supplement to its otherwise illegibly private symbolism.

Bishop’s ‘Key West’ notebooks of 1937-47, from which at least half of these previously unpublished poems are drawn, suggest the same connection. Five pages before the draft of ‘Current Dreams’, Bishop has copied out extensive passages from Clifford Beers’s 1908 autobiography, *A Mind that Found Itself*, a work chronicling the author’s mental illness. In these passages Beers describes the nightly ‘phantasmagoric visions’ that he imagined were ‘produced by a magic lantern controlled by some of my myriad persecutors’:

> I began to see handwriting on the sheets of my bed staring me in the face, and not me alone, but also the spurious relatives who often stood or sat near me. On each fresh sheet placed over me I would soon begin to see words, sentences, and signatures, all in my own handwriting. Yet I could not decipher any of the words, and this fact dismayed me, for I firmly believed that those who stood about could read them all and found them to be incriminating evidence. (Vassar file Bishop 75.3a, pp. 25-6)

These passages suggest many of the themes raised in ‘Current Dreams’. The scene of dreaming is the scene of writing; but, like dreams, the writing seems dictated or ‘regulated’ from outside the speaker’s agency. More disturbing, the writing suggests a chain of events in his own life leading to or away from a crime (‘incriminating evidence’), yet he himself does not have knowledge of the crime or its consequences. As in ‘Current Dreams’, spatial and temporal dimensions intersect in a mode of symbolic autobiography. The juxtaposition of *A Mind that Found Itself* with ‘Current Dreams’ in Bishop’s notebook reveals much about her intentions, and about the generic similarities between autobiography and the surrealist dream-poem.

Unfortunately, such evidence is still available only to scholars who visit the Bishop archive at Vassar College. Though Quinn has annotated each printed poem with much valuable
information about other related drafts, notebook entries, and letters, as well as events in Bishop’s life, there is a limit to how much material such a book (organised around individual poems) can include. Taken out of their context – the notebooks in which Bishop jotted passages from her reading, ideas for poems, dreams, suggestive rhymes, as well as multiple drafts of poems – the poems printed in *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box* give one the disorienting feel of exploring under water. Hopefully this collection will not preclude the later publication of her notebooks (perhaps in an electronic format such as the Whitman Archive), which would make the record of her compositional process available to everyone. Like the notebooks of Emerson or Coleridge, hers stand independently as works of art, in which poetic fragments blend with the sources of their inspiration.

The idea that ‘everything is an alarm clock’ underlies many of the poems that deal with Bishop’s early life, here explored in previously unrevealed detail. Things and people are set to ‘go off’ in the sense that they are caught in a chain of consequences that comes to crisis at some point. Personal crisis, a prominent subject of confessional poetry, has a limited place in Bishop’s *Complete Poems*, but these drafts show that she had often tried to write about her mother’s mental illness and the shadow it cast over her life. In the unforgettable ‘A Drunkard’, Bishop links her adult alcoholism to her childhood experience of watching the 1914 Salem fire from her crib and calling out for water to her mother, who does not respond. A sense of ‘alarm’, awareness of a disaster being set to go off far in the future, also threatens ‘Swan-Boat Ride’ as well as ‘A mother made of dress goods’ and ‘Homesickness’ (‘It was too late – for what, she did not know. – / already –, remote, / irreparable’ (p. 88)). In ‘One Art’, perhaps Bishop’s most famous published poem, her mother’s watch is the first specifically autobiographical item on the list of losses leading up to the devastating loss of ‘you’. Given the significant clocks of ‘Current Dreams’ and ‘Stoves and Clocks’ (also ‘Full Moon, Key West’, ‘A short, slow life’, and ‘Three Poems’), this watch appears to be a kind of meta-symbol for Bishop. In a life of spatial displacements, chronology may be a more reliable indicator of selfhood than
place, but the self’s history turns out to be a chronicle of early losses that lead inexorably to later disasters.

‘True Confessions’ (1953) – one of eight mostly unfinished prose pieces selected from a much richer collection in the archive – also returns to this theme and demonstrates the continuity in Bishop’s work between surrealism and the autobiographical realism of confessional poetry:

I was born there, sort of in the middle but slightly to the left and rather inset – a tiny, almost invisible baby. I could see it under a magnifying glass – a tiny, almost invisible baby, a small dark haired mother upstairs in a tiny toy wooden apartment house painted gray. Years later, when it was visible to the naked eye, but still not very big, I saw it from a trolley car. Someone said, ‘That’s where you were born’ and I turned around to stare and saw briefly through its gray walls and a vague fierce picture of myself being born hanging on one of them and then it receded behind my shoulder & up a curve to the left, and vanished – (p. 192)

Here is the natal home as Cornell box (Bishop admired the American surrealist Joseph Cornell and occasionally tried her hand at his distinctive form of assemblage art, consisting of a glass-fronted box containing objects, photographs, and printed words in surprising conjunction) or as Magritte’s *The Human Condition*, in which a painting on an easel blends into the landscape that it represents. Persons and things interpenetrate in the figure of the toy (especially the doll), that stands in for all the objects that memory has turned into symbols. At the same time, ‘True Confessions’ reads like a parody of confessional poetry, with its obsessive return to childhood, as well as a bizarre account of an affair with a woman who had changed places with her own doll. The magnifying glass is Bishop’s own special touch that integrates the surreal and the ultra-real: the closer she looks, the weirder the scene. ‘It was not a story by Poe’, she cautions at the opening of her confession; yet, nonetheless, ‘All kinds of awful things happened to me there’.

‘True Confessions’ leads us to resist the sentimental idea that we can open up the manuscript box and take out Bishop’s
private life. Such is the theme of another poem from the Key West notebooks, beginning ‘We hadn’t meant to spend so much time’ (c.1938-40; Quinn has misidentified the file in which this draft appears; it should be 75.4a, not 75.4b). The speaker warns a lover (presumably Louise Crane, her partner at the time) that her ‘play’ and ‘arrangements’ under the cool lime tree are merely ‘shadow’, and ‘real dark is the truth’. But truth wears its own disguise:

The lime tree is a little booth
Outlined with leaves, one clotted heart displayed,
On the outskirts of a sad suburban fair.
Now look behind the dirty curtain where
Harlequin lies drunk in his chequered clothes . . .

(p. 41)

Harlequin may be Louise, playing irresponsibly with Bishop’s heart, but the (drunken) poet is Harlequin too. When we pull back the curtain to reveal the ‘truth’, we find a highly stylised stock character, not an individual. In a second draft Bishop has written and then crossed out ‘The clerk’ – another stock character, suggesting symbolic exchange of a financial rather than artistic kind. Apparently preferring ‘Harlequin’ (a favourite figure of symbolist writers and post-impressionist painters), she places a performer at the heart of her relationship. Truth may be ‘dark’ because unpleasant, but it is also simply obscure; where do the representations end?

What we learn about Bishop from her notes and drafts concerns the compositional process by which she transformed objects and events into meanings. The most ‘awful thing’ that unnervingly speaks up for itself in Bishop’s notebooks may be a severed arm:

The arm lay outstretched in the soft brown grass at the side of the road and spoke quietly to itself. At first all it could think of was the possibility of being quickly reunited to its body, without any more time elapsing than was absolutely necessary.
‘Oh my poor body! Oh my poor body! I cannot bear to give you up. Quick! Quick!’

Then it fell silent while a series of ideas that had never occurred to it before swept rapidly over it.

(p. 258)

On the side of the page, Bishop has added, ‘So this is what it means to be really “alone in the world”?’. The detached arm, reminiscent of images from Magritte (for example, the cut-off hand displayed alongside an apple in A Night’s Museum), derives from a traumatic accident that occurred when Bishop was travelling in France with Louise Crane and Margaret Miller, an aspiring painter. Miller lost her arm when Crane, driving too fast, crashed their car. Quinn includes this notebook entry in her annotation of a short work entitled ‘Villanelle’, which begins: ‘After receiving the messages from the / police department as to the date of the / trial, Louise had a bad dream’. The dream delivers a kind of symbolic justice to Crane by putting her in the situation of the arm: ‘She was to be executed at a certain hour – / but not formally = anyone could do it / when the right minute came – / on the train, in the station, etc., etc’ (p. 35). Bishop thus rewrites the fate of the arm as the death-sentence of the perpetrator, transforming accident into intention and the helpless thing into the person responsible for turning the living arm into a thing. The facsimile of ‘Villanelle’, which faces the printed version, shows it is not a poem at all but rather a prose description which Bishop has notated as if it were a villanelle, by dividing it into tercets marked ‘a1ba2’ and so on. ‘One Art’, the only villanelle Bishop published in her lifetime, significantly plays off the ‘b’ rhymes of ‘intent’ and ‘meant’ against the ‘a’ rhyme of ‘disaster’ (fifteen fascinating drafts of this poem are included in an appendix to the book). ‘Villanelle’ suggests that this form was always associated in her mind with the attempt to master loss with ‘intent’.

The presentation of ‘Villanelle’ exemplifies much that is both excellent and difficult about Quinn’s edition. The facsimile that tells so much about Bishop’s compositional technique is one of
about twenty reproductions, which shed valuable light on her intentions and dramatise the challenges of editing her work. For half of these facsimiles the text is printed on the facing page, and for half it is not. This inconsistency is a little disconcerting, and it would have been helpful to have Quinn’s best guess at some of the faded words on yellowed paper, which are virtually illegible. Unfortunately, neither the facsimiles nor Bishop’s illustrations are listed anywhere in the volume, making them difficult to locate there. More inconvenient is the lack of an index, especially in view of the heterogeneous references and information contained in Quinn’s annotations. Indispensable as context for the poems, they also give one the sense of being at the editor’s mercy: what did the next page after this poem in the notebook look like? Or the ‘less decipherable or less complete version of a more advanced draft’ (p. xviii)? In the case of ‘Villanelle’, Quinn’s annotations include the text of an unfinished (verse) villanelle that appears in Bishop’s notebook opposite the prose entitled ‘Villanelle’. Why is the prose placed in the body of the collection, and the unfinished verse relegated to the annotations? She also inexplicably places a finished villanelle entitled ‘Verdigris’ in the appendix of prose works rather than with the other poems. The book adds immeasurably to our understanding of Bishop’s development and her place in literary history. These inconsistencies, however, make reading Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box itself a rather surreal experience.

University of Missouri

Frances Dickey

doi: 10.1093/escrit/cgl018

Everybody’s Dear


The intentional fallacy is the New Critical tenet that has proved most enduringly cogent. That the enthusiasm for literary biography is undiminished ought to be regrettable: lives priced at over a