

Elizabeth Bishop's "The Prodigal" as a Sympathetic Parody

FRANK J. KEARFUL

Fortunately, I am not a man of the cloth and don't need to come up with a new sermon on the parable of the prodigal son each time it crops up as the appointed text for the Sunday sermon. It's a very good story in itself, and its theological import is crystal clear: God's love is infinite, and is ours no matter how undeserving of it we are according to purely human reckoning. What more needs to be said? In fact much more has been said, not only by preachers but by poets, novelists, dramatists, painters, engravers, sculptors, composers, and choreographers. Of all biblical parables, it has been the most frequently adapted for artistic purposes; one recent study devotes over four hundred pages to its uses in American literature alone.¹

Modern renderings of the parable—unlike, say, Rembrandt's—tend to be highly ironic if not downright parodic, but whether a given literary adaptation is regarded as a parody may depend as much on the critic's agility in employing the term as on the text itself. Dryden was content to define parody as "Verses patched up from great poets, and turned into another sense than the author intended them." In our post-Bakhtinian, post-Bloomian, post-postmodern latter days, parody may be sighted at a variety of points along an intertextual spectrum, sometimes under other terminological guises. One woman's misprision may be another woman's parody.

If we insist on stylistic mimicry as a *sine qua non* of parody, Elizabeth Bishop's "The Prodigal" will hardly qualify, nor can it readily be said to ridicule, or make simply innocent fun of, the biblical parable. Bishop's rewriting of a religious text for secular purposes may be read, however, as a secular parody on analogy to sacred parody,

which transforms a secular text for quite different religious purposes.²

The Prodigal

The brown enormous odor he lived by
was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,
for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty
was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.
Light-lashed, self-righteous, above moving snouts,
the pigs' eyes followed him, a cheerful stare—
even to the sow that always ate her young—
till, sickening, he leaned to scratch her head.
But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts
(he hid the pints behind a two-by-four),
the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red;
the burning puddles seemed to reassure.
And then he thought he almost might endure
his exile yet another year or more.

But evenings the first star came to warn.
The farmer whom he worked for came at dark
to shut the cows and horses in the barn
beneath their overhanging clouds of hay,
with pitchforks, faint forked lightnings, catching light,
safe and companionable as in the Ark.
The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored.
The lantern—like the sun, going away—
laid on the mud a pacing aureole.
Carrying a bucket along a slimy board,
he felt the bats' uncertain staggering flight,
his shuddering insights, beyond his control,
touching him. But it took him a long time
finally to make his mind up to go home.³

Bishop suspends the theological agency of the parable and focuses on a limited portion of the biblical story, which she freely elaborates upon. The parable's theological agency is "suspended" not merely through a temporary cessation of its determining presence in the narrative but also in so far as it remains "suspended" above the narrative. No transvaluation of orders or levels of value, sacred and secular, occurs in Bishop's secular parody, which might be classified perhaps

more tellingly as a sympathetic parody in two closely related senses. Bishop's text is not an adversarial countertext and thus might be said to be "sympathetic" toward its source text, the suspension of whose theological aegis in turn engenders an emotional responsiveness to the prodigal in all his abject fecklessness.

The prodigal son's prodigality, his spendthrift waste of his inheritance, we hear nothing of, nor do we hear anything of his elder brother, that villain of the piece in countless modern sermons. Even their loving father is excluded from the poem and the homecoming is not described.⁴ The biblical prodigal son, we may surmise, indulges himself while his wealth lasts in the pleasures provided by wine, women, and song; put more succinctly by Luke, "he wasted his substance in riotous living" (King James Version, 15:13). After his return, the incensed elder brother complains to their father that the prodigal son "hath devoured thy living with harlots" (15:30). Whatever drinking career he may have behind him we read nothing of, explicitly, in Luke. Bishop's wretched swineherd is restricted, as far as any dregs of riotous living go, to the dubious pleasures of a drinker who hides his bottles "behind a two-by-four." What her secular parody offers us in place of a theological parable on God's unqualified love for us is a psychological portrayal of an alcoholic's entrapment in his addiction.

Bishop's parody is sympathetic in yet a third sense, in so far as Bishop herself could readily identify with his plight. Her own alcoholism and repeated attempts to escape from it are discussed extensively by her biographer Brett C. Millier, who notes that "The Prodigal" "speaks painfully and eloquently to her own experience with alcoholism in 1950."⁵ Bishop had been working on an initial draft of the poem as early as 1948—in a letter to Robert Lowell written September 9 she tells him "I want to see what you'll think of my 'Prodigal Son'"—and in a letter written on July 31, 1949 to Loren MacIver she again refers to working on the poem, this time in conjunction with her alcoholism:

One of the men guests got terribly drunk two nights ago and was put in jail. Mrs. Ames went and bailed him out. This is all a very good example for me and let's hope I profit by it. I worked on "The Prodigal Son" all morning and shall give up this other sequence for a while. I've had enough of it & drink-

ing and all forms of trouble and I think it is most due to you that I have pulled myself together again. If I can just stay together—but things do seem MUCH better and I find myself looking forward to Washington. I want to get in such good shape that I can go see Dr. Anny without a tremor. Well, I've just been out blowing bubbles on my balcony, my chief diversion. Now I'll give you a rest, Loren dear [...]

Years later, writing to U. T. and Joseph Summers on October 19, 1967, Bishop, after remarking that many of her poems were based on dream material, lets fall that "'The Prodigal' was suggested to me when one of my aunt's stepsons offered me a drink of rum, in the pigsties, at about nine in the morning, when I was visiting her in Nova Scotia."⁶

My purpose in this essay is to show how Bishop's formal high jinks and her secular parody of the biblical parable join forces to fashion an askew, unsentimental representation of herself as an alcoholic. Her drinker's tale of a drinker—and pigsty denizen—is related in two quatorzains which enact off-kilter versions of Shakespearean sonnet form. In her tipsy double sonnet, all end-words ultimately find a perfect rhyme except, tellingly, "warn" and the very last word of the poem, "home." A drinker trying to find his way home is one way of describing the poem, written by an alcoholic for whom home and homelessness were central preoccupations. Bishop's father died when she was eight months old and her mother, after a series of mental breakdowns, was permanently institutionalised when Bishop was five. "The Village," a memoir in the form of a short story, recalls the traumatic event of her mother being taken away, nevermore to be seen. Her childhood, during which she was shunted about among relatives in Nova Scotia and Massachusetts, was marked by several illnesses probably of a psychosomatic origin, including the severe asthma which afflicted her during her entire adult life.⁷ Bishop hated self-pity, and exhibitionism of any sort she found distasteful. Her poems which draw upon her own personal distresses do so, always, indirectly and ironically, telling the truth but telling it slant.

The initial quatrain sets in motion Bishop's wayward rhyming progress "home."

The brown enormous odor he lived by	a
was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,	b
for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty	a
was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.	C

The first three lines, rhyming *a b a*, induce us to expect a Shakespearean *b* rhyme to conclude the quatrain. *Hair* is not a hard word to rhyme on, and Shakespeare's sonnets might suggest his favorite all-purpose *fair*. In Bishop's text, *air* would seem to be a natural candidate, pervaded as it is by the enormous odor. Instead Bishop's line ends, resoundingly, in *dung*. Glass-smooth dung, but *dung* nevertheless.

Echoes of Bishop's favorite poet, George Herbert, recur in her poetry and one might detect in the first quatrain of "The Prodigal" a distant befouled whiff of Herbert's "The Odour."⁸ The discombobulating lines of "The Prodigal," in which a hairy odor breathes, might also be read as a profanation of Genesis 2:7 "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." The "brown enormous odor" whose breathing the prodigal, a creature at home in mud and dung, breathes in is no breath of life. In the odoriferous ecosystem of which he, an alcoholic, is a part, his own foul breath contributes to the stench which he inhales. In simple rhetorical terms, odor is transformed from a kind of metonymy (substituting the odor for the pigs and their dung) into a synecdoche (a hirsute pig's skin used for the pig as a whole); but as a breathing personification it takes on a life of its own as a kind of genie out of the bottle. A surreal compound of smells emanating from the pigs and their dung but also from the prodigal himself constitutes the brown enormous odor which envelops and assimilates the prodigal and his brethren.

"Breathing" is itself both a process of inhaling and of exhaling, extending to the poetic sense, to emit an odor of, as in Pope's "All Arabia breathes from yonder box" (*Rape of the Lock*, Canto I, l. 134) or Gray's "To breathe a second spring" ("Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College," l. 20), or "the breezy call of incense-breathing morn" in

Gray's "Elegy written in a Country Church-Yard" (l. 17). But the particular use of "breathing" in the sense 'to emit an odor' which Bishop might be said virtually to parody in "The Prodigal" is Herbert's in "The Odour," lines 25 and 26-28, "That call is but the breathing of the sweet" and "This breathing would with gains by sweetning me / [...] Return to thee." In Herbert's poem, whose full title "The Odour. 2 Cor. 2" provides the necessary biblical and theological context, breathing, sweetness, and savoring all serve to amplify the essential theme. Man ought to be a sweet odor for God, who Himself, however, breathes this sweet odor into him. There is, in Herbert's poem, as in the parable of the prodigal, a returning and a meeting, a "commerce" of man and God, expressed in "The Odour" in the Pauline conceit of sweet odors breathed—exhaled, inhaled, and breathed out again. Interestingly enough, the same basic "breathing" conceit is employed by Hopkins, in "To R. B.," with the further play on expiration and inspiration.

Also working both ways, "lived by" functions as a locative but also as an expression of means, as in Matthew 4:4 "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." It is the breath of God which, biblically speaking, animates the living soul and it is the word of God, also proceeding from his mouth, by which the soul lives. For the prodigal, both forms of divine "inspiration" have been usurped by the brown enormous odor. That the odor he lived by was "too close [...] for him to judge" suggests additional wordplay on "close," both as proximity and as confinement, as when air in a tightly sealed room becomes "close." The prodigal can no longer judge how "close," in both senses, the odor is. As for the pigsty, its being plastered half-way up with "glass-smooth dung" injects a tactile element both delicate and repulsive into the synesthesia permeating the quatrain.⁹ The dung's being to the touch "glass-smooth" also infiltrates an association with another kind of glass which the prodigal, in the process of becoming plastered, is wont to touch.

As a reader becomes attuned to the poem's alcoholic references and allusions, some covert, the entire text becomes laden with the breath of the alcoholic, allowing "plastered," for example, to emit its colloquial meaning, "drunken." Hidden more deeply in the text until one begins to read it as an account of an alcoholic's drinking habits is another colloquial expression, "to wake up with the hair of the dog," i.e., to down a drink in order to cope with the shakes one wakes up with. But in so far as it is the odor which does the breathing, the prodigal son has been transformed into the odor he lives by, the alcohol on his breath, in a redolent metamorphosis worse than that undergone by Gregor Samsa. The locative sense of 'lives by,' activated once we begin reading the poem's second sentence, suggests rather a Circean transformation, the prodigal becoming reduced to a porcine existence, his proximity to the pigsty too close for him any longer to judge. The doubleness of "lived by" is, ultimately, a distinction without a difference, its two senses fusing, the drinker transformed into a smelly pig as he also lives by the odor he breathes.

The first quatrain came close to fulfilling Shakespearean rhyming expectations only to leave us with *dung* in our ears, but the second fails to deliver on any rhyme whatsoever.

Light-lashed, self-righteous, above moving snouts,	<i>d</i>
the pigs' eyes followed him, a cheerful stare—	<i>b</i>
even to the sow that always ate her young—	<i>c</i>
till, sickening, he leaned to scratch her head.	<i>E</i>

The quatrain—a self-contained syntactic unit—fails entirely to rhyme but there is method in its *d b c e* madness, in so far as *cheerful stare* supplies, in plonking fashion, a *b*-rhyme for the preceding quatrain's *and thick hair*. As the sonnet progresses, it will continue to sound its out-of-sync rhymes in similar tum-te-tum cadences, as if Bishop were parodying a hapless but determined versifier who succeeds, better late than never, in nailing down his rhymes.¹⁰

Bishop's second quatrain, following upon the surreal rendition of a drinker's disorientation in the first quatrain, relates a humorously

ghastly vignette, whose initial line, "Light-lashed, self-righteous, above moving snouts," begins like a sprung-rhythm line in Hopkins, one hyphenated epithet following another. "Light-lashed" might initiate a line in Hopkins's "Pied Beauty," or become along with "shining like shook foil" part of "God's Grandeur."¹¹ But what, then, of "self-righteous"? What is light-lashed *and* self-righteous? A novice self-flagellant tentatively going about his business? A third clue containing the answer reduces the line, at its close, to bathos, "above moving snouts." An errant reader who had been assuming the line refers to the prodigal may still be tempted to take "above" as referring to him: as the prodigal walks by the moving snouts (synecdoche = pigs) he not only literally looks down on them as he returns their gaze, he feels himself above, superior to them—and thus, given his own degradation, is indeed self-righteous. The answer to the teasing riddle, perhaps obvious enough by the end of the line, is revealed unambiguously at the outset of the next: the eyes, with their light eyelashes, of a drift of pigs.

As the prodigal walks by them, they all train their self-righteous eyes upon him in a cheerful stare. Man's best friend may be his dog but the prodigal, in response to such swinish loyal affection, scratches the head of his apparent favorite. Sows, it would seem, all sows, are in the habit of eating their young from time to time; but this one "always" did so. Although the causality linking the pigs' cheerful stare and his sickening and scratching her head is not made explicit, this heartfelt episode conveys something of the nausea, isolation, and attenuated emotional life of the prodigal, and as he pets his favorite sow, who always ate her young, perhaps a disguised death wish.¹² That the pigs remain insouciantly self-righteous while bestowing on him a cheerful stare suggests that eating one's young may not be, in their eyes, such a heinous activity.

Thus the pigs and the prodigal perform their roles, one sow starring, in a barnyard parody of classical tragedy or myth (Saturn, Atreus and Thyestes, et al.). The "But" initiating line 9 would seem, however, to signal a volta after Shakespeare's own manner of structurally embed-

ding traces of a Petrarchan/Italian sonnet within a Shakespearean/English sonnet.¹³

But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts	<i>d</i>
(he hid the pints behind a two-by-four),	<i>f</i>
the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red;	<i>e</i>
the burning puddles seemed to reassure.	<i>G</i>

The ensuing rhymeless quatrain—the syntactically self-contained sentence induces us to read the lines as a quatrain—divulges only more fully the emotional and psychological condition of a drinker who has become habituated to breathing the “brown enormous odor” he lives by. “Hiding” one’s bottles is a frequent enough dodge among self-deluding alcoholics: no one will ever know. Tenths (“pints” in American over-the-counter parlance) are the standard purchase of down-and-outers and are thus suggestive of the level to which the prodigal has fallen; no “respectable” person would be likely to buy one. In addition to being cheaper and handier for direct-from-the-bottle drinking purposes, they are, of course, easier to “hide” than a fifth would be. How the prodigal hides *his* pints behind, of all things, a two-by-four remains his secret. Unless, of course, in a stupor he merely *thinks* he is hiding his bottles. The poem at this point has become an insider’s amused excursus on an alcoholic’s determined efforts to hide his bottles and thus “hide” his drinking from unsuspecting others.¹⁴

The volta fails to usher in a turn for the better “after drinking bouts.” A queasy aestheticism continues to coat surfaces: whereas the sty was decorated with “glass-smooth dung,” the barnyard mud at sunrise is “glazed [...] with red.” Another barnyard scene, in which a red wheelbarrow is “glazed with rain / water,” is momentarily summoned up; Williams’s “rain water” has now become, whether rain-water or simply urine, “burning puddles.” As the morning sun turns the barnyard into a hellish quagmire, the puddles in which it is burning seem to proffer the prodigal’s downcast eyes a sun-also-rises assurance. Bishop is in effect parodying the topos Shakespeare makes

use of in Sonnet 33, in which the morning sun—"Kissing with golden face the meadows green, / Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy," (ll. 3-4)—offers an assurance soon to be threatened. Bishop's *d f e g* quatrain may also "seem" to propose a *two-by-four / reassure* rhyme, leaving the reader momentarily unsure whether to credit it as a near-miss rhyme or not. In any event, the pigs' *moving snouts* can now, thanks to a delayed-action rhyme, join in on the prodigal's *drinking bouts*. A more childlike cadence is sounded when *scratch her head* is given a pat rhyme, *mud with red*.

A terminal couplet seems to strive to confer on the entire sonnet a would-be jauntiness:

And then he thought he almost might endure	g
his exile yet another year or more.	F

But one qualifier followed by another—"sometimes [...] seemed" and now "almost might"—undermines any things-aren't-really-all-that-bad self-conning. The amplifying *or more* brings to a climax a phonic sequence: *enormous / mornings* (*m* and *n* reversing places) / *or more*; the following sonnet will proffer its seriocomic coda *snored / board*, implanting a "bored" pun to accompany *snored*. Listened to closely, "thought he almost might endure" is a muted cry of despair, to which the couplet replies *endure / more*.

If the sonnet had only ended with line 13 we would at least have been left with a faultlessly rhyming Shakespearean *gg* couplet, and closure would have been attained by means of a stalwart *reassure / endure* rhyme:

the burning puddles seemed to reassure.	g
And then he thought he almost might endure	g

Bishop's quatorzain still needs, however, to complete its staggered rhyming progress "home," in the fourteenth line. The only way this can be done is by concocting a *gf* "failed" couplet, which will provide true rhymes for the slurred off-rhymes left behind in the notional third quatrain. In this terminal rescue operation, *a year or more* sub-

sumes a *two-by-four* while *endure* calls out staunchly to *reassure*. The specious off-rhymes now join in the formation of a chiasitic aural sequence, *four / reassure / endure / more*.

As the morning of the first sonnet turns to the evening of the second, another "But" signals a sonnet-spanning volta, as in Shakespeare's linked sonnets 15-16, 73-74, 91-92. An abrupt full stop at the end of the first line sounds a warning.

But evenings the first star came to warn.	a
The farmer whom he worked for came at dark	b
to shut the cows and horses in the barn	a
beneath their overhanging clouds of hay,	c
[...].	

The second quatorzain begins in the same *a b a c* defective rhyming fashion as the first did, *a b a* signalling the formation of a Shakespearean initial quatrain, which again goes on the blink when *came to warn* is abandoned in *clouds of hay*. The putative *a* rhymes in this case, *came to warn/ in the barn*, sound a familiar put-one-syllable-in-front-of-another tread and are perfect eye rhymes. In their vowel match-up they are, however, slightly amiss, as if the warning were not quite registered. This time, no perfect rhymes will be supplied after-the-fact in a succeeding quatrain or couplet.

The first line, a complete sentence in itself, is followed by three lines which could also be a complete sentence; but a comma allows the potential sentence to amble into succeeding lines. Any quatrain contours we might look for become blurred and syntactical relations unexpectedly complicated. Verse form and syntax in Bishop's second notional quatrain now go their separate ways, are always way out-of-sync, as sentences of 1, 5, 1, 2, 3½, and 1½ lines make their stop-and-go way through the quatorzain. Rhymes meanwhile strive as best they can to conjure up a simulacrum of a three quatrain plus couplet *abab cdcd efef gg* Shakespearean sonnet.

Bishop assumes at the outset of the quatorzain the voice and prosodic manner of a Robert Frost, her prodigal taking on the role of the

hired hand as the biblical "far country" (Luke 15:13) is transformed into a veritable New England. Whether Frost would have indulged in a metaphor like "their overhanging clouds of hay" is, admittedly, debatable. Bishop's barn, at any rate, threatens to become the venue of a two-tier nativity scene, the hayloft of the barn above and—to use Bishop's turn of phrase for her nativity scene in "Over Two Thousand Illustrations and a Complete Concordance"—"a family with pets" below. Such two-level nativity scenes as Tintoretto's, in the Scuola San Rocco in Venice, are common in the visual arts. Bishop's fourth line might have terminated her second sentence, giving some sense of closure to a quatrain. Bishop is not finished, though, either with her georgic *ekphrasis* or with her sentence, which wanders over into the purely notional domain of a second quatrain:

with pitchforks, faint forked lightnings, catching light,	<i>d</i>
safe and companionable as in the Ark.	<i>b</i>
The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored.	<i>e</i>
The lantern—like the sun, going away—	<i>c</i>

The disorienting syntax of Bishop's suspended sentence suggests a kind of barely controlled tipsiness, with *companionable* stretching out its feet safe and sound to form, at its close, a hypermetrical pentameter. As in the first quatorzain, belated rhymes do begin to fall into place. At the end of line 6, *in the Ark* supplies a belated *b* rhyme home for *came at dark* at the end of line 2; for its part, *the son going away*, ringing a punning change on "the sun, going away," leaves behind the *clouds of hay*.

Until we infer the naturalistic source of the light, the lantern about to be taken away, it is almost as if the first star itself were shining down on the barn and on its inhabitants, its light reflecting off the pitchforks stuck in "clouds of hay" in the hayloft above the "family with pets." Such loose imagistic associations to the visual arts, and to Bishop's set-piece nativity scene in "Over Two Thousand Illustrations," with its sudden shaft of light, might become problematic if one recalls that the first star is also Lucifer—the "light bearer"—and that

the pitchfork is the devil's plaything. That the pigs are not only the proud bearers of light-colored eyelashes but are also perhaps "light-lashed" by the light of the lantern reflected off the pitchforks further complicates Bishop's enigmatic phantasmagoria. She mixes overt religious allusions more explicitly, as well as her metaphors, when the farmer, another "light bearer," suddenly assumes the role of a Noah who shuts his animals in the barn at night for safekeeping. Noah, one recalls, having left the Ark indulges in his own drinking bout.

When pigs stick out their little feet and snore they awaken another incongruous literary, and religious, association, noted by Bishop scholars, to the doomed spider which stretches out its feet in stanza 4 of Robert Lowell's dramatic monologue "Mr. Edwards and the Spider":

On Windsor Marsh, I saw the spider die
 When thrown into the bowels of fierce fire:
 There's no long struggle, no desire
 To get up on its feet and fly—
 It stretches out its feet
 And dies. This is the sinner's last retreat;
 Yes, and no strength exerted on the heat
 Then sinews the abolished will, when sick
 And full of burning, it will whistle on a brick.¹⁵

The poem's congeries of religious, literary, and visual allusions and associations, sounded to the tune of a wonky sonnet, help establish an askew psychological dwelling place for Bishop's drinker. With the assistance of alcoholic binges, he has found a certain coziness and homey comfort in his servitude. Servitude is, after all, itself addictive. In the prodigal's case, it affords him, as David Kalstone puts it, a "parodied family intimacy" (129), one of whose habitual delights is infanticide.

Held in the farmer's hand as, swinging his arm, he walks away from the barn, the lantern going away carries with it glimmerings of Hopkins's "The Lantern out of doors." Casting on the mud, no longer glazed red by the morning sun, an aureole, it confers upon Bishop's narrative a receding religious light. Her notional quatrain—it is in

want of a proper *e f e f* "two-by-four"—espies in a captured moment
the mid-swing of the lantern as it

laid on the mud a pacing aureole.	<i>f</i>
Carrying a bucket along a slimy board,	<i>e</i>
he felt the bats' uncertain staggering flight,	<i>d</i>
his shuddering insights, beyond his control,	<i>f</i>

The disjointed syntax of a new sentence, following *pacing*, meanders participially forward *Carrying*, *staggering*, *shuddering*. Left behind by the farmer, the prodigal carries no lantern, only a bucket as he makes his way along a slimy board—a two-by-four?—perhaps made "slimy" by "glass-smooth dung." In the darkness, space and spatial relations become murky as he performs his nightly rounds. The pigsty and the barn proper to which it may be directly connected are no longer readily distinguishable, and whether the prodigal himself has been shut up in the barn to discharge night duties is left unclear. He cannot see the bats but can feel their "uncertain staggering flight," with word-play struck on "flight," presumably his greatest wish but one he fails to act upon.¹⁶ As a drinker he would not be unused to staggering, and to shuddering brought on by the kind of involuntary tremors Bishop reports on in her letter to Loren MacIver. The prodigal's "shuddering insights," if understood as a physiological and mental symptom of delirium tremens, are in a real sense "beyond his control." Nevertheless they may also cause him to see the frightening consequences of his addiction, and are thus in a double sense "shuddering." His shuddering insights indeed seem to imply that his cozy adjustment to addictive servitude is momentarily shattered, when he actually "feels" the bats' "uncertain staggering flight." The three words taken singly or as a single collocation—uncertain, staggering, flight—are distinctly loaded. "Flight," too, can be taken two ways particularly in the context of alcoholic pathology: alcohol may itself be a would-be escape, a "flight" from a reality which the alcoholic cannot face, much less master or control. Overlaying this sense is, in the poem, the prodigal's would-be flight as an escape from servitude—which in Bishop's ver-

sion of the parable is his alcoholic addiction. Neither applied sense of "flight" as escape into addiction or would-be escape from addiction, both deriving from the bats' flight, fully subdues the other.

Formally, Bishop's third notional quatrain with its meager *f e d f* rhyme scheme provides, as if providentially, perfect preconditions for an orthodox *gg* Shakespearean couplet to follow. All's well that ends well. All other requisite rhymes, *a* through *f*, have now been battered down, however belatedly. The *aureole / his control* rhyme ensures that, unlike what happened in the first quatorzain, an *f* rhyme is not left wanting until the couplet. But a radically enjambed final active participial phrase, "touching him," first is called upon to complete the sequence *padding, staggering, shuddering, touching*, with *touching* in both a physical and an emotional sense bringing home to the prodigal the true wretchedness of his condition.¹⁷

touching him. But it took him a long time	<i>g</i>
finally to make his mind up to go home.	(<i>x</i>)

The prodigal's insights "touch" him no doubt and thus at least temporarily jolt him out of his paralyzing apathy; but his "shuddering insights," and the bats' flight he feels "touching" him, are also, in my reading of the poem, by-products of an alcoholic's *noche oscura*. In delirium tremens the "shuddering" drinker may be faced with "shuddering insights" into his condition as he hallucinates all manners of unlovely creatures—bugs, spiders, lizards, bats, you name it—touching or crawling over him, as he undergoes worse tortures than those of St. Anthony, patron of swineherds.¹⁸

A mid-line "But"—the poem's third adversative "but"—might seem to herald a Shakespearean reversal couplet and a rhetorically clinching rhyme. But "home" paired off with "time" succeeds only in sounding *m* consonantal reverberation, which is intensified by the *h-m* consonantal rhyming sequence *him, him, home*, as if the *h* and *m* consonant sounds were striving to attain a true rhyme but failing. The assonantal *i* sequence sounded by *time, finally, mind* tells its own insistent aural and semantic story, while supplementary *t* and *m* allitera-

tive sequences—*touching, took, time* and *make, mind*—add to the aural chorus. "Home" even against such pressure resists rhyming.

The biblical prodigal wasted no time, once "he came to himself" (Luke 15:13), in setting out homewards and he is met even before he gets there by his father, who comes running towards him. Bishop's prodigal resists any sudden impulse to desert his home away from home. Why should he? The farmer, whom he obeys, takes on the role of a father toward whom he is a dutiful son, and the sow, to whom he shows affection, is a sufficiently voracious mother. In view of this family idyll, is it really surprising that the get-away couplet falls metrically flat? Shuddering insights are one thing, but finally making up one's mind is, under the circumstances, quite another. And after all, an alcoholic can make his mind up quite often, "never again."

Bishop's drinker has the good fortune to be cast in the role of the biblical prodigal, and thus at some indeterminate future point has a happy ending in store for him, that of the "reformed drinker," or in more up-to-date ex-boozing nomenclature, the "recovering alcoholic." That consummation devoutly to be wished, from time to time, is recorded in the past tense as if in anticipation of its achievement. The force of the couplet's adversative "But" is rather on "a long time" still stretching out before the prodigal in his taking even the first step—of twelve or more—homewards. As an anti-type of the biblical prodigal he "must" go home; but there is little sign that he is eager to play out his appointed typological role, despite occasional shuddering insights, themselves perhaps a product of his drinking. The impersonal "it took him" phrasing, rather than "he took," may suggest how such finally making of his mind up goes against the grain, grain alcohol if you will. The minimally stressed lines of Bishop's couplet, which read as if air were going out of a tire, mimic the prodigal's post-insight torpor. Scanning them as would-be pentameters would be a painful undertaking.

Bishop was eager to have Lowell, no mean drinker himself, read her new poem and to Loren MacIver she wrote of having made her mind up she had "had enough [...] of drinking and all forms of trouble." As

a binge drinker forever falling off the wagon, forever making new resolutions, again and again she indeed sought to act upon her shuddering insights. "I want to get myself in such good shape," she tells McIver after working hard one morning on "The Prodigal." As an alcoholic who has made her mind up "never again," in her new poem Bishop projected herself ingeniously, humorously, self-critically in the biblical parable's prodigal. The ache of homelessness she could also displace into her sympathetic parody of the quintessential biblical homecoming story.

A homecoming in which all shame and misery are instantly dispelled is the biblical prodigal's for the asking, indeed even before the asking, as his father comes to meet him. In theological terms, he is a recipient of prevenient grace, a grace which "comes before" and which is not dependent on our "finally" making up our mind. A long time is not required. For Bishop, addictive servitude was not so easy to escape, and for her a long time became a lifetime. When she completed "The Prodigal" during her stay at Yaddo from October 1950 to January 1951, it was nevertheless for her, as Ilse Barker recalls, "a breakthrough. It was the first poem she had written for a long time. One of the lovely things about Elizabeth was that she was unself-consciously pleased with her poetry when it worked well. She showed us the poem with obvious pleasure."¹⁹

In her first poem for "a long time" Bishop could not directly draw upon the sort of faith which animated Luke's telling of the parable of the prodigal son. Yet she was a devoted reader of Herbert and of Hopkins and her poems abound with religious allusions. Richard Wilbur, himself a professing Christian, observes that "[t]hrough she had no orthodox convictions, and wondered at such in others, Elizabeth Bishop had religious concerns and habits of feeling."²⁰ "The Prodigal" displaces—"hides" but also reveals—her feelings of mortified self-degradation in a biblical figure for whom release from the cycle of drinking bouts and shuddering insights followed by yet another drinking bout was divinely assured. She felt herself unable to claim that divine assurance for herself, but her sympathetic parody

enabled her to fashion a healing fiction which afforded her, one is glad to hear, obvious pleasure.

Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität
Bonn

NOTES

¹Manfred Siebald, *Der verlorene Sohn in der amerikanischen Literatur* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2003) devotes a chapter to uses of the parable in American poetry (259-83), including, from the second half of the twentieth century in addition to Bishop's "The Prodigal" (268-73), four poems all titled "The Prodigal Son" by W. S. Merwin, David Ignatow, Robert Bly, and David Jaffins.

²On sacred parody, particularly as employed by Herbert, see Inge Leimberg's commentary on Herbert's "A Parodie" in *The Temple*, with a German verse translation by Inge Leimberg (Münster: Waxmann, 2002) 455-56, and Matthias Bauer's discussion of "A Parodie" in his *Mystical Linguistics: George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughan* (*Habilitationsschrift*, Universität Münster, 1999) 70-75. *The Temple* is quoted from the 1633 ed. reproduced in Leimberg.

³I cite the text as reprinted in Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983) 71.

⁴Bonnie Costello, "Narrative Secrets, Lyric Openings: Stevens and Bishop," *Wallace Stevens Journal* 19.2 (1995): 180-200 observes that description delays the plot and argues that "[r]ather than emphasizing the traditional in the prodigal story from exile to home, Bishop reconceives her idea of home through her description of exile" (188).

⁵Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) 230.

⁶I quote from the letters as published in Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994): Lowell, 171; MacIver, 192-93; U. T. and Joseph Summers, 478-79. Several of Bishop's correspondents (including U. T. and Joseph Summers) relate their first-hand knowledge of Bishop's drinking bouts, if that is not a too light-hearted euphemism for her recurrent binges, in Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau, eds., *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1994).

⁷In addition to Millier, the most detailed source on Bishop's childhood, see Thomas Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999) 83-97, who

observes that "Bishop's self-loathing, quite unmerited, of course, but characteristic of a child's tendency to assume responsibility for what goes wrong, followed her throughout her life, as did a characteristic self-deprecation and an understandable yearning for sympathy and acceptance" (94). One might read into "odor" in "The Prodigal" a kind of pun on Latin *odi*, "I hate" (the self-hatred of the addict). Read as a sympathetic parody, "The Prodigal" confers on Bishop's *alter ego* sympathy she herself yearned for.

⁸In several interviews and conversations over the years now collected in George Montiero, ed., *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996) Bishop voiced her admiration of Herbert's poetry and its primary influence on her own; in the 1978 interview with Sheila Hale, a year before her death, she declares that "George Herbert [...] has been the most important and most lasting influence on me" (112). Thomas Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1988) points out that "The Prodigal" "alludes to Herbert, of course, in its (somewhat freer) use of one of his favorite forms, the double sonnet" (112).

⁹Thomas Travisano, "'The Flicker of Impudence': Delicacy and Indelicacy in the Art of Elizabeth Bishop," *The Geography of Gender*, ed. Marilyn May Lombardi (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1993), who regards "The Prodigal" as a poem "central to Bishop's achievement," observes that "sordid details are indispensable and point toward profound psychological and teleological disturbance" (121). Travisano notes how often in Bishop's poetry delicacy and indelicacy coexist and are sometimes "hard to separate" (122).

¹⁰The sonnet in which the poet parodies a poetaster desperately trying to nail down his rhymes is an amusing sub-branch of the sonnet with a long tradition; for examples from several national literatures, see L. E. Kastner, "Concerning the Sonnet of the Sonnet," *Modern Language Review* 9 (1916): 205-11. Irregularly rhymed sonnets which "fail" to deliver on the formal expectations they apparently posit may have, I grant, other rhetorical purposes in mind—on Shelley's "Ozymandias," probably the most familiar "defective" sonnet in English poetry; see Christoph Bode's discerning commentary in his *Einführung in die Lyrikanalyse* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001) 139-40. Bishop may possibly have found in Robert Lowell's early irregular sonnets—themselves influenced perhaps by Allen Tate's—a catalyst for her double sonnet; but neither Lowell's sort of rhetorical forcefulness, nor Tate's, is what Bishop's use of imitative form is after. As for nailing down rhymes better late than never, Herbert's "The Collar" also readily comes to mind, but again for different rhetorical purposes.

¹¹After Herbert, Hopkins was the poet Bishop most frequently spoke of as a central influence on her development as a poet. In the 1966 interview with Ashley Brown, she spoke of having begun to read poetry at age eight and early on of "coming across Harriet Monroe's quotations from Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur' for one. I quickly memorized these, and I thought, 'I must get this man's work.' In 1927 I saw the first edition of Hopkins" (Monteiro 20-21). Bishop's "Gerard

Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry," which she wrote for the *Vassar Review* (February 1934): 5-7, later reprinted in Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, eds., *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983) 273-75, is wonderfully acute and suggestive.

¹²David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989) observes, "The frightening part of Bishop's poem is its air of sanity [...] its ease and attractiveness only just keeping down panic and fear" (128).

¹³See Shakespeare's sonnets 7, 14, 44, 54, 62, 93, 138, 141, 151, and 153, in which a "But" initiates a turn. In several other sonnets Shakespeare employs "Yes," "O," or "And" to signal a Petrarchan volta at line 9. Siebald notes that in Bishop's quatorzains "zwei Teile stellen in zwei Kontrasten eine Wellenbewegung der Gefühlslage dar, wobei die Emotionen zunächst jeweils durch *objective correlatives* angedeutet und erst am Ende der Strophen in einer Art gedanklicher Schlussfolgerung thematisiert werden" (269).

¹⁴A two-by-four, for European readers who may be unfamiliar with the term, is "a piece of lumber approximately 2 by 4 inches as sawed and 1 5/8 inches by 3 5/8 inches if dressed" (*Merriam-Webster OnLine Dictionary*), which is used all the time in carpentering and for construction purposes, such as in building a barn according to the so-called two-by-four construction method developed in the United States and Canada. Two-by-fours are used as a central frame to which plywood panels or the like are attached to form floors and walls (see Jetro entry on two-by-four construction method at <http://www.dec.ctu.edu.vn/ebooks/jetro/footnote.html>). Two-by-fours might also be lying about for various odd jobs which the prodigal might be expected to do in addition to discharging his swineherd's obligations. British "pints" (based on imperial measure), drunk from glasses, have pub-centered associations unlike those of the handy bottles of hard liquor which the prodigal hides and presumably drinks straight drinks from. The German *Flachmann*, smaller than a pint, would be roughly equivalent to an American "twentieth." But the hip flask of choice in America is the "tenth," commonly referred to as a pint.

¹⁵Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

¹⁶Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop*, notes that "voluntary incarceration" was "a central theme in [Bishop's] early fables" (112) and proposes a different interpretation from mine of the prodigal's apparent resistance to going home (112-14).

¹⁷"Touching" might also be said to bring to an end a proliferation of participles and ing-nouns initiated by the gerund *breathing* followed by *moving*, *sickening*, *burning* of "mornings" after, and resumed "evenings" with its own "lightnings" by *overhanging*, *going*, *pacing* before all comes to an end *Carrying*, *staggering*, *shuddering* and, finally, *touching*.

¹⁸In Billy Wilder's multiple Oscars-winning film of 1945, *The Lost Weekend*, which I have not been able to determine whether Bishop saw, the protagonist, a would-be writer and like Bishop a binge drinker, in a delirium tremens hallucination sees vultures flying overhead and a rat on the wall. Earlier in the film, Don, memorably played by Ray Milland, climbs on a table in order to hide a bottle (a fifth, not a pint) in a kind of chandelier, so no one can see it who might enter the room. For a distinctly non-alcoholic vision of a bat's flight employed as a conceit for "Mind in its purest play," turn to Richard Wilbur's "Mind," in his *Things of this World* (1956), reprinted in *New and Collected Poems* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988) 240.

¹⁹Barker's recollection is included in *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop* 123-24.

²⁰Richard Wilbur, "Elizabeth Bishop," *Ploughshares* 6 (1980): 10-14, repr. in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* 263-66, here 265. Wilbur briefly cites several poems, although not "The Prodigal," as moving instances of Bishop's "religious concerns and habits of feeling." He also notes that "when she was asked to make a selection of someone's poems for a newsletter, she came up with an anthology of hymns. (Her favorite hymn, by the way, was the Easter one which begins, 'Come ye faithful, raise the strain / Of triumphant gladness.')" (266). In a 1966 interview with Ashley Brown, the subject having turned to Lowell, Eliot, Auden and twentieth-century religious poetry, Bishop remarked, "I don't like modern religiosity; it always seems to lead to a tone of moral superiority. [...] As for religious poetry and this general subject, well, times have changed since Herbert's day. I'm not religious, but I read Herbert and Hopkins with the greatest pleasure" (in Monteiro 23).