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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Where there is great love," says Willa Cather's Jean Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, "there are always miracles. . . . The Miracles of the Church . . . rest not so much upon power coming suddenly . . . from far off, but on our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always" (50). In this modern view, a miracle bespeaks the sudden perception or recognition of a power immanent in the world rather than one thrust into ordinary affairs—an idea closer to the showing forth of the Greek "epiphany" than the wonder or marvel of the Latin "miraculum." The modernity of Cather's definition lies also, I believe, in its emphasis on human perception, directing us more toward the experience of the miraculous rather than the underlying nature of the miracle itself. Accordingly, Cather's Latour, priest though he is, leaves richly ambiguous whether the "great love" required by the miracle is God's or our own, and while the divinity of the "power . . . about us always" is clearly implied, it is never explicitly named."

FACULTY ESSAY



**Elizabeth Bishop and the Modern Miraculous:
"Filling Station" and Some Sources**

David Sanders, Ph.D.

"Where there is great love," says Willa Cather's Jean Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, "there are always miracles. . . . The Miracles of the Church . . . rest not so much upon power coming suddenly . . . from far off, but on our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always" (50). In this modern view, a miracle bespeaks the sudden perception or recognition of a power immanent in the world rather than one thrust into ordinary affairs—an idea closer to the showing forth of the Greek "epiphany" than the wonder or marvel of the Latin "miraculum." The modernity of Cather's definition lies also, I believe, in its emphasis on human perception, directing us more toward the experience of the miraculous rather than the underlying nature of the miracle itself. Accordingly, Cather's Latour, priest though he is, leaves richly ambiguous whether the "great love" required by the miracle is God's or our own, and while the divinity of the "power . . . about us always" is clearly implied, it is never explicitly named.

I have taken this passage from Cather as my point of reference because it defines so well an aspect of Bishop's verse that I wish to discuss here: namely, the sense of something wondrous, even miraculous, breaking out from otherwise ordinary experience and operating by means of human perception rather than by altering the world of material objects and operations. By calling such perceptions "miracles," Cather's text also points to another feature central to Bishop: the way in which a modernist vision of experience, highly personal and subjective in nature, is nonetheless shaped by traditional, theological models. [creating a "moral universe" that is, as William Logan describes it, "agnostically divined."] It is perhaps less surprising to find such vestiges of traditional theology in a poet who, for all her skeptical and agnostic modernity, nonetheless identified George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins, both Christian devotional poets, as two of her strongest formative influences. In this essay I focus mainly on "Filling Station," from *Questions of Travel*, because the experience transformed poem there is made ordinary to a comic degree, and because, more pointedly than most of Bishop's poems, this one exposes two of the literary and theological roots of her secularized miracles.

As the title "Filling Station" suggests, the poem's action is anchored solidly in a visible and palpable world. Yet, through the narrator's observations and language, it moves deftly into a world immaterial and unseen: from commerce and labor to love. The setting is vivid and, though there are characters, there are no actions. Or, rather, as the present-tense narration of the poem suggests, there is no ongoing, developing action. What acts there are—the acts that interest the poem's speaker—are not those going on as she observes, acts we might easily imagine at a filling station in operation. Those that capture her are those underlying the observed scene, acts that explain the arrangement of things before her eyes, and behind those the deeper arrangement of forces in the world itself.

For this speaker, so down-to-earth and wry in tone as she is, this ordinary scene is an emblematic tableau, whose own implicit narrative is its connection to a larger, encompassing plot of suffering and redemption which measures the scope of earthly experience. Her description of this mid-20th-century filling station shows life with its full portion of dirt and toil—a grubby life which, for the speaker, is relieved and by touches of beauty, even uplifted and redeemed by the care and love that put them there:

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

Father wears a dirty,
oil-soaked monkey suit
that cuts him under the arms,
and several quick and saucy
and greasy sons assist him
(it's a family filling station),
all quite thoroughly dirty.

Do they live in the station?
It has a cement porch
behind the pumps, and on it
a set of crushed and grease-
impregnated wickerwork;
and on the wicker sofa
a dirty dog, quite comfy.

Some comic books provide
the only note of color--
of certain color. They lie
upon a big dim doily
draping a taboret
(part of the set), beside
a big hirsute begonia.

Why the extraneous plant?
Why the taboret?
Why, oh why, the doily?
(Embroidered in daisy stitch
with marguerites, I think,
and heavy with gray crochet.)

These are five of the poem's six stanzas, and up to this point the speaker has given us a sketch of human life steeped in dirt and grease, including the naive efforts to beautify it seen in the plant and doily on the taboret. Just what the speaker thinks or feels about these "extraneous" details isn't at once clear. But they, daring to be useless, compel her attention, as we hear in the acceleration of stanza five: "Why the . . . plant? / Why the taboret? / Why, oh why, the doily?"

Then, in a final stanza, the repeated "Somebody's" trace a dawning realization:

Somebody embroidered the doily.

Somebody waters the plant,

or oils it, maybe. Somebody

arranges the rows of cans

so that they softly say:

Esso--so--so--so

to high-strung automobiles.

Somebody loves us all.

Without directly addressing the question "why," the actions behind these facts provide an answer. For, these efforts to beautify, small as they are, express a part of our that humanity that refuses to be wholly obscured by all the dirt and oil, fulfilling the "translucency" of that "overall black[ness]." Naively resisting the utility that has cast its film over every filling-station feature that the speaker can see, these facts reveal a love visible only in its effects. And as these caring actions are registered as present and ongoing—not only has "Somebody embroidered" but "Somebody waters" and "Somebody / arranges"—we feel a continuing concern for other creatures and for beauty itself that reaches even to the realm of toil, stacking cans of motor oil in a way that might soothe esthetic sensibilities as the "so-so-so" once calmed literal horsepower.ⁱ

In the final line—"Somebody loves us all"—this mundane, grimy scene, made somewhat comic to this very point, subtly breaks open. What emerges from all these caring actions, as if finding recognition and touching a ready earnestness in the speaker herself, gains its proper name: "Somebody **loves** us all." Seeing that power in such small things here makes it visible in each of our lives. At the same time, no matter who the various somebodies loving each of us may be, Bishop's grammar also allows for, even pushes us toward a "Somebody" able to love "us all"—a single source behind the countless acts of **caritas** that humanize a world.

Such moments of vision uplifting a world of pain and sorrow recur throughout Bishop. In "The Fish," for example, the speaker's exacting observations, at first rather detached, slowly change the fish—with "his brown skin hung in strips / like ancient wallpaper" and "the irises" of his eyes "backed . . . / with tarnished tin-foil"—from an alien oddity to a fellow survivor of life's ordeals, with "a five-haired beard of wisdom," made from "five big hooks" and "five old pieces of fish-line," "trailing from his aching jaw." With an obliqueness characteristic of Bishop, it may almost seem that the fish, which has not struggled, may have allowed itself to

be caught for the sake of this revelation—as if, like the idea it engenders in the speaker’s imagination, it was waiting to be found. Certainly the poem keeps its focus explicitly on the act of seeing that has driven the narrative, as it concludes:

I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where the oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels--until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

One does not eat one's angels of insight..

"The Moose" describes a bus trip westward from day into night--symbolically, our common human journey toward sunset. Here, as darkness enfolds the passengers, their talk becomes quieter, more intimate, involving memories of all the varied ills that flesh is heir to:

deaths, deaths and sicknesses;
the year he remarried;
the year (something) happened.
She died in childbirth.
That was the song lost
when the schooner foundered.

He took to drink. Yes.

She went to the bad.

When Amos began to pray
even in the store and
finally the family had
to put him away.

“Yes . . .” that peculiar
affirmative. “Yes . . .”

A sharp, indrawn breath
half groan, half acceptance,
that means “Life’s like that.

We know *it* (also death).”

And into the litany of suffering, heartache, and death, recalled and recited, grown familiar and accepted, comes the moose, standing in the road. Not only her sheer bulk, but her innocence and trust, her apparent curiosity and her curious-ness, have the power, it seems, to arrest this journey and renew freshness, wonder, spontaneity among the travelers; even more, to convert the commonality of their suffering into a moment of communal joy. And so, just as the passengers on the bus are settling into sleep, as if in acceptance of their suffering and loss, it happens:

--Suddenly the bus driver
stops with a jolt,
turns off his lights.

A moose has come out of
the impenetrable wood
and stands there, looms rather,
in the middle of the road.
It approaches; it sniffs at
the bus's hot hood.

Towering, antlerless,
high as a church,
homely as a house
(or, safe as houses).
A man's voice assures us
"Perfectly harmless. . . ."

Some of the passengers
exclaim in whispers,
childishly, softly,
"Sure are big creatures."
"It's awful plain."
"Look! It's a she!"

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

"Curious creatures,"
says our driver,
rolling his r's.
"Look at that, would you."
Then he shifts gears.
For a moment longer,

by craning backward,
the moose can be seen
on the moonlit macadam;
then there's a dim
smell of moose, an acrid
smell of gasoline.

The shifting of gears, the smell of musk and gasoline, the need to turn backward for a last glimpse of the moose in moonlight, all confirm the readiness of the mundane to close over such moments of illumination.

But, however fleeting, its effect was felt, changing their various recognitions of life as a vale of tears into this shared moment of dumbfounded joy. Nor does the blandness of the passengers' observations contradict the power of that moment, for, just as the bus is stopped in its trip through the night, they are arrested from their reveries and sleep, their attention wholly taken by this creature large, alive, and innocent, unaware of its own mortality, spared the burden of their knowledge and memories. Like "The Fish," "The Moose" describes an opening in ordinary experience through which we feel a more-than-ordinary power working within and through it. Suggestively, the creature that interrupts this mundane journey is "Towering . . . /high as a church," "otherworldly." In "The Fish," the oilslick prism in the rowboat shouts "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!"—that dramatic emblem of God's continuing love in the Book of Genesis.

For those at the right angle to the light, "Filling Station" also takes us back to Genesis and the curse of labor that so largely defines our relation to earth. There, after Eve and Adam's disobedience in the Garden, the dust from which God had "fashioned a human" being (2.7) becomes our end as well as our beginning, and the place of pain. "Cursed be the soil for your sake," says the Lord. "With pangs shall you eat of it all the days of your life/ . . . /till you return to the soil/ . . . / For dust you are/ and to dust shall you return" (3.17-19) Earth, in effect, becomes dirt, and we become dirty, an inheritance passed from generation to generation as, in Bishop's poem, the filling station's grease and dirt covers father and sons. But Genesis also shows the ongoing love and care that mitigate this suffering with the continuing possibility of joy. Not only are we still sustained as living creatures; we have still the gift of love and desire--of finding beauty in each other. Adam's original joy in his new companion, Eve--"Bone of my bones/ and flesh of my flesh" (3.17)--is never cancelled, but survives from the Creation to the present, as the narrator reminds his readers and hearers: "And so a man leaves his father and

mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh" (2.24). In the Hebrew myth, the blessings of Creation do not cease with the entry of pain and death, but remain in the beauty and wonder we continue to find in each other and the world itself.ⁱⁱ

There is a long tradition of American writing derived from the English Romantics that asserts the power of wonder and beauty to redeem ordinary experience, even treating these sensations as a sign of the heightened responsiveness that "see[s] into the life of things," as if to restore the world's original "glory and freshness."ⁱⁱⁱ Wordsworth's fully empowered man is one whose "heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky" (*Norton* 137, 189, 187).^{iv} Keats has perhaps come closest to formulating this faith in the experience of beauty as a touchstone for life's fullness when he says, "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth," comparing "The Imagination . . . to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth" (*Norton* 829).^v While anticipating Bishop's secularized miracles, both these poets also divulge the mythic source of their shared vision. For, just as Wordsworth uses the sign by which Noah found assurance of God's love, so Keats uses Adam's desire for Eve as paradigm for the experience of wonder and beauty—for the attraction and connection to other creatures without which we are unfulfilled, the world barren, and the Creation incomplete.^{vi}

For Bishop, however, Gerard Manley Hopkins offers a still more immediate connection. When we understand the pull that Hopkins exerted on Bishop's poetic sensibility, especially as it emerged during her undergraduate years at Vassar College, it is difficult not to notice parallels in their poetic strategies and even verbal echoes in particular poems. For Hopkins, unlike Bishop, the revelations are doctrinally Christian: the plunging and soaring windhover is the crucified and risen Jesus, even the Christ militant of the Jesuit order. But in Hopkins, such emblematic equivalents are overshadowed by the process of perception and discovery. In "The Windhover," for example, the images of "plow down sillion" turning the soil and of "blue-bleak embers" that "gash gold-vermillion" do reflect such traditional Christian paradoxes as glory in humility and dying into life. But more immediately, they dramatize the very experience of things breaking open to reveal something marvelous beneath familiar surfaces.

Indirectly, at least, Bishop confesses the importance of Hopkins as a model in her *Vassar Review* article of 1934, "Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in his Poetry." She does so more directly in a letter to Donald Stanford the year before, where she offers the remarks of a contemporary critic, M.W. Croll, on

Baroque prose writers as "perfectly describ[ing] the sort of poetic convention I should like to make for myself (and which explains, I think, some of Hopkins)." In the passage Bishop quotes, Croll describes writers who "portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking . . . They knew that an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the idea that was experienced. The ardor of its conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth" (*One Art* 12).

In his sonnet, "God's Grandeur," Hopkins not only displays that ardor of conception Bishop so admires; he expends it on the very thematic elements from which Bishop would craft "Filling Station"—though, as we have seen, she would complicate that passion with subtle forms of detachment, irony, and whimsy. In the sonnet, Hopkins argues that God's grandeur rests largely in the capacity for renewal felt throughout nature, which demonstrates God's refusal to abandon a fallen world and the inexhaustible love always ready to refresh our dulled spirits with the sensation of beauty:

GOD'S GRANDEUR

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell; the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with wawn breast and with ah! bright wings.

Hopkins takes us back to Genesis in two ways. His final image has the Holy Ghost hovering over the dark world as Christian myth places it over the original void at the Creation. More centrally, his poem makes the curse of labor the evident badge of our fallen natures. As Hopkins retraces the same plot of curse and redemption plot, one can easily imagine his language becoming part of Bishop's poetic alchemy. There is of course something about Hopkins' generality ("Generations have trod"; "Nature is never spent") that links his world of trade more with his own 19th-century industrial landscapes than with Bishop's homier workplace. So too, the verbal idiom and concrete detail of Bishop's filling station--its "cement porch," "pumps," and Esso cans--all belong to the 20th century. At the same time, its "overall black translucency," with Father's "dirty / oil-soaked monkey suit" and "greasy sons . . . / all quite thoroughly dirty," declare its place in Hopkins' fallen world "bleared, smeared with toil"—a world that "wears man's smudge and share's man's smell." And do not Hopkin's "oil/soil/toil" rhymes ring, both in spirit and in fact, through Bishop's "oil-soaked, oil-permeated" scene?

But such details only confirm what is more central and essential in this overlap of poetic sensibilities. Bishop's "Somebody loves us all" hints at a divine presence that stands behind and informs the human caring that can lighten the burdens of toil. In typically modern fashion, a divine "presence" seems to enter and hover, changing the light. But it remains ambiguous, suspected, at most obliquely identified. Yet, his own modernity anticipating Bishop's, Hopkins also merges this experience of divine power so closely with his perception of natural events that, in the language of his mentor Wordsworth, the two become "deeply interfused."^{vii} In "God's Grandeur," it is not simply that the grandeur of God manifests itself in the wondrous richness of a physical world. That is an old idea in Christian theology and Hebrew scripture. What is more original and modern in Hopkins is that his language the perceived truth as shaped by the act of perception. In this sonnet, the climactic recognition of the Holy Ghost follows the eye which detects the first rays of dawn:

And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Notice here how the immediacy of feeling and perception overtakes the logic of revealed truth. As Hopkins already knows, the light returns after the darkness "because" of the Holy Ghost; and what a wondrous thing that is, his interjected "Oh" insists. But that is not all. As he completes the conventional idea of divine spirit as brooding dove with "warm breast," the first light of day seems to enter the moment of utterance, and the dove unfurls its wings, the thought finding form—"ah!"—just as the speaker sees the rays of dawn, whether in his actual or his mind's eye. Not only has thought become narrative, unfolding in the real time of utterance—something Elizabeth Bishop had admired in Hopkins; thought is also prompted directly by observation and completes itself as it could have done only by following the eye.

Bishop's "Filling Station" may be more a departure from Hopkins' sonnet than an imitation or tribute. Such is the way of poets. Yet I find myself fancying that Bishop's opening line—"Oh, but it is dirty!"—picks up where Hopkins' poem leaves off, not only by sounding the note of a soiled world, but by alerting the eye, telling us that what we need to know will take some seeing. She wrestles with the same problems of our human condition that Hopkins does, though only when she names a "Somebody" who "loves us all" do we begin to consider a divine power behind the redemptive actions here. And if that power remains uncertainly divine, something has been glimpsed that she calls love, that lightens the burden of mortality, that touches and connects us all, and warrants our gratitude and wonder. Bishop does not affirm this redemptive power by turning away from a materialist culture toward the natural world, as Hopkins does in "God's Grandeur." She shows it working within that culture, inhabiting the same 20th-century workplace that she renders with unflinching, even hyperbolic, fidelity. But, as with Hopkins, this redemptive force, though always at work, is at suddenly felt anew, a moment of illumination rising from that "overall black translucency"—a heightened perception accompanied by excitement or joy. It is hardly surprising that the poet, in opening to such moments, should find other poems flowing in as well.

Notes

ⁱ In a letter to John Frederick Nims, who was reprinting some of her poems in an anthology, Bishop explains that “so-so-so was—perhaps still is in some places—the phrase people use to calm and soothe horses” (*One Art* 638).

ⁱⁱ Aptly, this sequence—the love between parents and child, followed by the love of man and woman who in turn become parents—reveals love as a natural and primary consolation for mortal pain and loss, though at this point in Eden death exists only in God’s warning to Adam. In addition, while Chapter 2 emphasizes the man’s desire, Chapter 3 explicitly extends it to the woman, where God’s curse makes it both a compensation and a source for the pain of labor in the now complicated Creation: “in pain shall you bear your children. And for your man shall be your longing . . .” (3.16).

ⁱⁱⁱ Wordsworth’s most explicit and discursive expression of this idea is found in his “Prospectus to *The Recluse*” (42-71) (*Norton* 204).

^{iv} These quotations come from “Tintern Abbey,” the “Intimations Ode,” and “My Heart Leaps Up.”

^v Keats says this in a letter (November 22, 1817) to his friend, Benjamin Bailey.

^{vi} Other English Romantics also claim the mind’s own capacity to restore an original luster to the world. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Plate 14), Blake says, “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite” (*Norton* 60). In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley clearly alludes to God’s original Creation in describing what poetry can accomplish: “poetry defeats the curse which binds us . . . It makes us inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos” (*Norton* 763). Keats, we should note, is thinking of Milton’s version of the Eden story (*Paradise Lost* 8.452-90), which adds a dream to Adam’s “deep slumber” and longing for a companion found in Genesis.

^{vii} This phrase is from l. 96 of “Tintern Abbey” (*Norton* 138). In many specific ways, Hopkins’ poem is modeled on another Wordsworth poem—a sonnet, “The World is Too Much With Us”—adhering closely not only to its theme and structure, but to many features of poetic strategy and technique.

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