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Wisława Szymborska

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Representing the Other: A Conversation among Mikhail Bakhtin, Elizabeth Bishop, and Wisława Szymborska

All characterizations and determination of present-on-hand being that set it into dramatic motion blaze with the borrowed axiological light of *otherness*.

—Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”

The monument’s an object, yet those decorations,
carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all,
give it away as having life, and wishing;
wanting to be a monument, to cherish something.

—Bishop, “The Monument”

The master rejects with distaste the absurd thought
that a table lost from view must remain a table,
that the chair behind his back stays within the boundaries of a chair
without even trying to take advantage of the situation.

—Szymborska, “Interview with a Child”

IN THE LAST STANZA OF “The Silence of Plants,” Wisława Szymborska writes, addressing the plants, “A conversation with you is necessary and impossible, / urgent in a hurried life / and postponed for never.”¹ With Szymborska, we ask, how are conversations with objects possible? What is the possibility for the representation of things as interlocutors rather than either grounds for colonization or silent bystanders?

Our knowledge, Elizabeth Bishop writes in “At the Fishhouses,” is always historical and “flowing and flown”—constantly changing and constantly changed by a context outside our immediate perception. She refers to her poetry as the poetry of motion, and her figure for the act of perception is the “Sandpiper,” who is obsessed with noticing every grain of sand between his toes. As with

¹ *Miracle Fair: Selected Poems of Wisława Szymborska*, trans. Joanna Trzeciak, 76-77. Unless otherwise noted, I will be citing Szymborska’s poetry from *View With a Grain of Sand*, trans. Baranczak and Cavanagh.

Szyborska, conversation with things is both necessary and difficult. But what is the nature of this difficulty and what is its creative value?

In Bakhtin's later writings the chronotope is the grounds for representability. Our acts are depicted against varying contexts and assumptions regarding history and place, and the more profoundly chronotopic the context, the more meaningful our acts. But before Bakhtin defined the chronotope, he developed in his early writing the concept of architectonics as the I-Other relation that is the basic unit of meaning and that is at once both a temporal event and the concrete relation of the unique I to the unique Other. Insofar as the only productive representation for Bakhtin is of the Other, architectonics as a world view offers a possible way to represent objects as truly Other—that is, as always implicated in a creative relation with a self rather than merely as objects that stand against a subject.² For the Bakhtin of "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (early 1920s), the aesthetic act is a particular aspect of architectonics. As such, it provides the basis for a theory both of the creative process and of the ethical I-Other relation. It is through and with Bakhtin's discussion of the aesthetic act in this early essay, then, that I want to turn to Bishop's and Szyborska's questions regarding the representability of objects and, by means of this three-way conversation, illuminate both Bakhtin's theory of the aesthetic act and the practice of this act in the poetry of Bishop and Szyborska.³

For Bakhtin, the category of the Other is primarily and paradigmatically the human other, the hero in a work of art set over and against the author or subject. As a result, Bakhtin rarely addresses the problem of object-perception where the object is a thing in the world. However, Bakhtin's understanding of the category of the Other is also extremely flexible, in part because the phenomenological terminology he borrowed from Kant, Husserl, and neo-Kantian philosophers and applied to his notion of the hero extended to objects as well as humans.⁴ Moreover, Bakhtin designates the hero as both an actual character in a work of art and the potential for the existence of the Other. Whenever the perceiver is confronted with "only" objects, he must make them human by imbuing them with an emotional-volitional capacity ("Author and Hero" 4-256, 66; "From Notes Made in 1970-71" 132-58, 137). The Other, human or object, always possesses a voice, since to deny the Other its own active self-determination is for Bakhtin to efface the Other as other. When language and dialogue become the dominant themes in Bakhtin's later thought, the idea of voice resolves itself into a purely

² In this essay I will be using "Other" to denote primarily the objects of address, investigation, and perception in the poetry of Szyborska and Bishop, and as a term for Bakhtin's hero in the author-hero relation. Since this discussion asks Bakhtin to expand his category of the Other to include objects, my use of the term for both object-others and human-others is itself a query and a challenge.

³ My approach will sidestep a discussion of poetics versus prosaics, monologism versus dialogism, and focus instead on Bakhtin's earlier—and broader—concern with aesthetic and ethical form, as well as on the essays in *Speech Genres*, where Bakhtin returns to some of his early questions. For other discussions of poetry and poetics vis-à-vis the early Bakhtin, see Bialostosky, Ciepiela, Davidson, Emerson, Eskin, Levin, and Wesling. These studies pose the sometimes more difficult question of the status of poetry in Bakhtin's thought not by way of genre distinctions, but rather through Bakhtin's discussions of the aesthetic act as it occurs in poetry, prose, or even life (*Speech Genres* especially allows for this broader application of "genres").

⁴ See Liapunov's Notes to *Art and Answerability* for a translation of Bakhtin's terminology back to their German models.

human use of language. But in his early writings, it is simply the irreducible difference of the Other that makes the Other other.

From the standpoint of Bakhtin's definition of the Other as hero or hero-potential, conversations with objects of the sort in which both Szymborska and Bishop engage are the creation of hero-potential in the world. In fact, it is the anthropomorphic necessity of such a conversation (anthropomorphism being the enabling factor of conversations with objects) that raises various ethical dilemmas for Bishop and Szymborska. For Bakhtin, the problem of anthropomorphism does not arise, since the Other as predominantly hero possesses a voice as an a priori quality. Thus, the question of distortion is by and large irrelevant for Bakhtin, since the Other can always answer for himself. When Bakhtin does address the Other as a thing, he gives it a soul instead of a voice, a move in part made possible by Bakhtin's presupposition of supra-existence or the super-addressee ("Notes 1970-71" 137). Bishop's notion of the Other, if any such notion can be "deduced" from her poetry, is closer to Bakhtin's than is Szymborska's. For Bishop, as we shall see, the world is an a priori socialized space and thus always anthropomorphized "before" the individual act of perception takes place. Szymborska's objects, on the other hand, retain a thingliness that is set over against culture. However, her poems put into question the objects' separation from the cultural sphere, so that their independent life is sometimes the product of the speaker's fantasy (as in "Interview with a Child"), and sometimes a claim made for or by objects themselves but simultaneously undermined in the poem.

In different ways and with different levels of ethical anxiety, Szymborska's and Bishop's poetry asks: Does the world remain Other if to maintain its otherness I must invest it with a voice which renders it pseudo-human? The poets' creative engagement with object-Others also poses a challenge to Bakhtin's understanding of the category of the Other or hero—a challenge Bakhtin himself demanded from the literary works with which he entered into dialogue.

I. Architectonics: Meeting the Other

The aesthetic act in Bakhtin's early essays is the ideal instance of the I-Other relation. While the cognitive relation to the Other fails to take into consideration the Other's uniqueness and the ethical relation fails to make an adequate distinction between self and Other, since the ethical act is characterized by empathy, the aesthetic act imbues both self and Other with specificity and sets the self outside the Other:

What makes a reaction specifically aesthetic is precisely the fact that it is a reaction to the *whole* of the hero as a human being, a reaction that assembles all of the cognitive-ethical determinations and valuations of the hero and consummates them in the form of a unitary and unique whole that is a concrete, intuited whole, but also a whole of meaning. ("Author and Hero" 5)

This finalization of the Other, Bakhtin goes on to write, is a creative act: only by viewing the objects of our world as closed can we see them in relation to ourselves and not as arbitrary, foreign, and contingent. There is nothing necessarily meaningful in a lived life. When objects and experiences fulfill the tasks we assign them, we see them without form. From the openness of our task-directed lives,

we see things as percepts without structure; when we engage in the aesthetic act of perception, on the other hand, the world is creatively engaged and embodied. Determination, it must be noted, as well as objectification and finalizability, is for Bakhtin the enabling condition of creativity rather than a reification that arrests the creative process. Thus the creativity inherent in consummation is something other than closure as stasis: it is, as Bakhtin conceives it, an architectonic closure within the unique creative event—an event, insofar as it is an architectonic act, which is always subject to renewal. That is, the architectonic act is my particular point of view at a specific chronotopic point and therefore one possible point of view among many. If the I is unique, it is also one optional position that has no permanence or priority. If “only I—the one-and-only I—occupy in a given set of circumstances this particular place at this particular time” (“Author and Hero” 23), then the reverse of this claim must be that my aesthetic act—and with it its finalizability—is also contingent.

The contingency of the wholeness bestowed upon the Other in the aesthetic act is not so much a challenge to Bakhtin’s notion of finalizability as it is both a boundary between closure and openness and an attribute of both—a characteristic that helps us to see the shift in his thought from closedness to openness as a transition rather than a reversal. The uniqueness of the self and Other in a particular aesthetic relation bestows closure on the aesthetic act. At the same time, its temporary nature renders it repeatable although never identical, with the repeatability constituting for Bakhtin the potentiality always present in the aesthetic act. What is important to note here is that the slippage between the terms *closure* and *potentiality*, while ostensibly a linear reorientation for Bakhtin from the early to the middle period in his career, is for Szyborska and Bishop a constant shuttling back and forth between a finished image of an object and the knowledge that the object is inexhaustible, between the desire that objects be absolutely other and the knowledge that objects are always already socialized, between the absence of fullness in memory and experience and the knowledge that a momentary glimpse of a thing, however contingent, is a miracle.⁵ This is the co-presence of absence and fullness in all perception that is articulated by Szyborska’s traveler in “Travel Elegy,”

Salutation and farewell
In a single glance.
For surplus and absence alike,
A single motion of the neck (18)

and by Bishop’s speaker in “One Art,”

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster. (178)

⁵ In fact, many critics have described Bishop’s and Szyborska’s poetics in terms of an oscillation between two terms that resists totalization or closure, whether in regard to poetic form, poetic voice, or the object of perception. On Bishop, see Costello, Laurans, Pinsky, and Vendler; on Szyborska, see Bojanowska, Freedman, Karasek, and Scribner. Although these critics do not explicitly invoke Bakhtin, their discussions of the resistance to system and closure, ethical humility, mobility of perception, and cognitive skepticism in the poetry of Bishop and Szyborska bear a strong kinship with Bakhtin’s ethical-aesthetic thought.

Both poets understand possession in the aesthetic act as a moment laced with loss and absence. This gives much of their poetry its elegiac key; but it also gives it a stoic playfulness and perpetual curiosity about the world, a curiosity that stands to be renewed only because no possession is possible. As the sandpiper figures this obsessive curiosity in Bishop's poetry, so the acrobat stands as an analogous figure in Szyborska's poem of the same name:

Solo. Or even less than solo,
less, because he's crippled, missing
missing wings, missing them so much
that he can't miss the chance
to soar on shamefully unfeathered
naked vigilance alone. (57)

The need for vigilance has frequently been used to describe the poet's task, especially as it pertains to the problematically named "object poetry" of Jean Follain and René Char, or Robert Frost and Marianne Moore. It is an especially apt term for Szyborska's and Bishop's poetry of minute observation and precarious relations to objects that threaten to retreat from the poet's rapt focus. "Vigilance" captures the fleeting temporality of the aesthetic act while implicitly suggesting its meager but precious reward: "A little poem, a sigh, at the cost of indescribable losses" (Szyborska, "A Large Number" 95). The point is that vigilance, with its concomitant acknowledgment of loss, is never an admission of impoverishment for Bakhtin, Bishop, or Szyborska, nor for that matter for the so-called object-poets who use this term. Thus, although "One Art" is often read as an elegy, it is very much a twentieth-century elegy in the tradition of Wallace Stevens—that is, an elegy that does not try to subsume loss but figures it as an enabling quality of experience. Bishop's mastery of loss, then, is less a paradoxical formulation or a consolatory gesture than a nutshell definition of experience, and especially the experience of the aesthetic act, as such.

Theory can and must afford the luxury of decisiveness and precision; every poem, on the other hand, draws up its own volatile definitions only to dissolve them. In Bakhtin's thought, the necessity and contingency of the architectonic moment hinges on the ambivalence between a closed spatio-temporality of perception and the inexhaustibility of the Other. But while Bakhtin must choose a side, poetry is free to enact both. It is in seeing objects as open and simultaneously closed that Bishop's and Szyborska's speakers explore the vicissitudes of Bakhtin's aesthetic act; and it is through their exploration that we reach a revised and refined understanding of Bakhtin's ethical aesthetics or aestheticized ethics.

II. Necessary Conversations

I now want to turn to two poems by Szyborska and Bishop, both of which depict a face-to-face encounter with an object: Szyborska's "Conversation with a Stone" and Bishop's "The Monument."

“Conversation with a Stone”

I knock at the stone’s front door.
 “It’s only me, let me come in.
 I want to enter your insides,
 have a look round,
 breathe my fill of you.”

“Go away,” says the stone.
 “I’m shut tight.
 Even if you break me to pieces,
 we’ll all still be closed.
 You can grind us to sand,
 we still won’t let you in.”

[. . .]

I knock at the stone’s front door.
 “It’s only me, let me come in.
 I hear you have great empty halls inside you,
 unseen, their beauty in vain,
 soundless, not echoing anyone’s steps.
 Admit you don’t know them well yourself.”

“Great and empty, true enough,” says the stone,
 “but there isn’t any room.
 Beautiful, perhaps, but not to the taste
 of your poor senses.
 You may get to know me, but you’ll never know me
 through.
 My whole surface is turned toward you,
 all my insides turned away.”

[. . .]

I knock at the stone’s front door.
 “It’s only me, let me come in.

[. . .]

And my proof I was there
 will be only words, which no one will believe.”

“You shall not enter,” says the stone.
 “You lack the sense of taking part.
 No other sense can make up for your missing sense of
 taking part.
 Even sight heightened to become all-seeing
 will do you no good without a sense of taking part.
 You shall not enter, you have only a sense of what that
 sense should be,
 only its seed, imagination.”

[. . .]

I knock at the stone’s front door.
 “It’s only me, let me come in.”
 “I don’t have a door,” says the stone. (30)

"The Monument"

Now can you see the monument? It is of wood
built somewhat like a box. No. Built
like several boxes in descending sizes
one above the other.

[. . .]

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

[. . .]

"Why does that strange sea make no sound?
Is it because we're far away?
Where are we? Are we in Asia Minor,
or in Mongolia?"

An ancient promontory,
an ancient principality whose artist-prince
might have wanted to build a monument
to mark a tomb or boundary, or make
a melancholy or romantic scene of it . . .
"But that queer sea looks made of wood,
half-shining, like a driftwood sea.
And the sky looks wooden, grained with cloud.
It's like a stage-set; it is all so flat!
Those clouds are full of glistening splinters!
What is that?"

It is the monument.

[. . .]

"Why did you bring me here to see it?"

It is an artifact
of wood. Wood holds together better
than sea or cloud or sand could by itself,
much better than real sea or sand or cloud.
It chose that way to grow and not to move.
The monument's an object, yet those decorations,
carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all,
give it away as having life, and wishing;
wanting to be a monument, to cherish something.

[. . .]

It may be solid, may be hollow.
The bones of the artist-prince may be inside
or far away on even drier soil.
But roughly but adequately it can shelter
what is within (which after all
cannot have been intended to be seen).
It is the beginning of a painting,
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,
and all of wood. Watch it closely. (23)

The stone is an object in the world and the monument is a work of art—yet, it is the stone that speaks “for itself,” while the monument is spoken for by the speaker-presenter whose voice, in its undeviating exactitude and relentless refusal to explicate, is hardly more human than the monument for which it speaks. Szyborska’s speaker, as Czesław Miłosz writes in his foreword to *Miracle Fair*, “is an ascetic ‘I,’ cleansed not only of the desire to confess, but of any individuating features, and yet it is linked to the ‘I’ of all others who share in the human condition and thus deserve pity and compassion” (1). It is the embodiment of the epistemological desire to empty out content, of the refusal to settle for “mere” appearance. The stone in Szyborska’s poem levels the same accusations at the speaker that Bakhtin brings to bear upon nineteenth-century epistemology—namely, that by modeling the world as an object of cognition the speaker abstracts the particular events of being from their context. The problem with a cognitive approach, Bakhtin argues, is that it treats the object as a completed event and therefore subject to our theoretical understanding. As a result, the self becomes a pure consciousness that loses its relation to the object: “the *subiectum* who was a participant in the event itself is transformed into the *subiectum* of a nonparticipant, purely theoretical cognition of the work” (“Author and Hero” 88). Likewise, Szyborska’s stone insists that instead of a sense of partaking, which would allow us to relate to objects in what is comparable to Bakhtin’s notion of “living-into” (*vzhivanie*), we have only our physical senses and the desire to know, which establish neither relations to nor knowledge of the world. Bishop’s speaker-observer is also eager to avoid a more challenging relation to the monument and demands instead an easy theoretical understanding. The speakers in both poems thus would operate in the cognitive mode, hoping to gain understanding through the revelation of the object’s inside.

Like the illusory interiors of Bishop’s landscapes in poems such as “Cape Breton” and “Arrival at Santos,” the inside of the monument is teasingly suggested by the speaker-presenter at the same time that Bishop makes it clear that the contents are irrelevant and lie outside her intentions as the artist of the monument-poem. While the speaker-observer tries to get at the meaning of the monument with questions such as “Where are we,” “What is that,” “Why did you bring me here to see it,” the speaker-presenter urges the restless observer to return to the surface and to the act of observation and the restless reader to focus on the reading of the poem rather than its exegesis. Just as after the last line of “Arrival at Santos” “we are driving to the interior,” here we are left at the beginning of another journey, watching closely and devising an alternative to the inside, an alternative based on surface and the phenomenal aspect of the thing. The last sentence, “Watch it closely,” at once ends the poem and brings us back to the beginning, both of the act of observation and the poem itself: “Now can you see the monument?” The poem moves us back on itself, and we are forced to become a version of Bishop’s obsessed “Sandpiper,” enacting the encoded repetition-compulsion of the poem. Because the monument moves, our task is to accept the difficulty of keeping it in motion through tireless perception.⁶

⁶ Surface and perpetual motion are often paired as key aspects of Bishop’s poetics. Costello summarizes this connection: “In an age of psychological submersion, Bishop celebrates surface. But

If the repetition-compulsion of Bishop's speaker-presenter makes her poem a kind of seeing primer for the exegetically-minded reader, Szyborska's speaker is unable to see the stone as an object, apparently dooming the pursuit to see entirely. The speaker represents the stone not by describing its surface appearance, but by imagining its interior: "I hear you have great empty halls inside you,/unseen, their beauty in vain,/soundless, not echoing anyone's steps." But imagination, the stone suggests, is almost as inadequate as sensory perception. Partaking, on the other hand, does not attempt to empty form of content. It is comparable to what Bakhtin calls the transgredient approach to the other, an approach that allows the self to coexist with, rather than in or over, the object of perception. Indeed, the stone's caveat would sound particularly apt were it addressed by the hero to the author as Bakhtin conceives that paradigmatic aesthetic pair. That is, if the heroes of Tolstoy's works could escape determination by their author and speak as the Other in the aesthetic act, one imagines that their charge would resemble the stone's.

Whatever the "outcome" of the encounter between this particular author/hero, or self and object pair, a conversation with an object, by Szyborska's definition, is "necessary and impossible," monologic from the start and fated to receive no response. What, then, is the status of knowledge gained from this dialogue, or from any object whose "voice" must be penetrated with—if not ventriloquized by—our own? Yet things are not as hopelessly one-sided as they may at first seem. For, if the voice in "Conversation with a Stone" belongs entirely to the speaker, then the realization in the last line that the stone lacks a front door is after all an acquired understanding that supercedes the speaker's earlier naïve fantasy of access to the stone's interior. This understanding is the result of prolonged attention to the stone, of a Bakhtinian lingering over the object, which is attributed to love. Such an understanding, acquired in the presence of the Other, cannot be monologic, although the response must belong to us rather than to objects. What constitutes the aesthetic act within this conversation is that both the speaker and the stone are transformed. The stone defines its boundaries against the speaker and the speaker senses her own corporality in the imposition of the world's boundaries. The corporeal meeting place of stone and speaker affects both, coaxing the speaker into a position of cognitive skepticism.⁷ Here, then, is an example and an elaboration of the definition of author-hero relations in Bakhtin's early work. While such a poem would inevitably strike the later Bakhtin as monologic,

that surface is not sublime, and the eye itself is a limited instrument. What can be seen stimulates the imagination's hunger" (369). The hunger of the imagination draws the speakers—both Bishop's and Szyborska's—to the kind of multi-perspectival and reiterated perception that Bakhtin's aesthetic act demands.

⁷ The "cognitive skepticism" typical of Szyborska's work (see Bojanowska, Carpenter, and Karasek) also sheds light on the apparent contradiction between finalizability and unfinalizability in Bakhtin's thought. Szyborska's speakers help us to understand these terms as "yes and no" rather than "either/or" in both the aesthetic act and Bakhtin's work as a whole. Finalizability is the act of bestowing form upon the Other in the aesthetic act; unfinalizability is the contingent quality of that act and the potentiality inherent therein. Or, in the terms of "Conversation with a Stone" and "The Monument," the attentive speaker/poet tests her position vis-à-vis the object, giving the object a position in the process—a position that the speaker/poet both cannot and refuses to make one of knowledge. Thus, if the unfinalizability of the Other is arguably the central concept of Bakhtin's later work, it is already implicit in his early understanding of finalizability.

as indeed it is insofar as language is concerned, the Bakhtin of the early 1920s would see a mutual bestowal of form in the relationship between the speaker and the stone.

In “Notes 1970-71” Bakhtin describes the appearance of consciousness in the world and the resulting transformation of objects into *in-itself*, *for-itself*, and *for-other*. Bakhtin specifies that this division is not simply a reflection of things as they exist in consciousness, in which case we would be transformed but the world would remain identical and solitary. Rather, the change worked by the appearance of consciousness, or the witness and the judge, encompasses both subject and object: that is, consciousness forges relations between entities while the objects themselves retain their essential nature:

A stone is still stony and the sun still sunny, but the event of existence as a whole (unfinalized) becomes completely different . . . And the sun, while remaining physically the same, has changed because it has begun to be cognized by the witness and the judge. (137)

If for Bakhtin “authenticity and truth inhere not in existence itself, but only in an existence that is acknowledged and uttered” (138), then for Szyborska the question of truth is bracketed: whether existent or not, truth is simply unavailable to us. The stand-in for truth is a meeting with an object. In “Water,” this relation is historical: a meditation on the nature of water must take into account the element’s historicity—where the drop of water has been before reaching the speaker. In “View with a Grain of Sand,” the view and the objects in it must be emptied of all human content and the fictions of rhetoric. And in “Conversations with a Stone,” the speaker is taught a lesson in phenomenological observation. Despite the sustained effort of these poems to acknowledge and utter an essential experience of the object, none of them attain or even aspire to truth; rather, they constitute a self-reserved lingering over the objects of observation that recognizes both the richness and the limits of the endeavor.

Bakhtin also consistently emphasizes that the mere fact of a relation does not necessarily guarantee truth or meaning. The self’s relation with the Other is optional and subject to failure, a delicate balance between distance and fusion. Just as Bakhtin’s later writings on the novel are full of models of failed author-hero relations, so the I-Other relation is a difficult ideal that is never a given, as it is, for example, in the radical ethics of Lévinas. Bishop’s and Szyborska’s poetry also provides many examples of the failure or inadequacy of perception—or, perhaps more accurately, of success through inadequacy, as when the city beyond the window reveals itself to one of its awakening inhabitants in Bishop’s “Love Lies Sleeping”:

[. . .] the image of
the city grows down into his open eyes
inverted and distorted. No. I mean
distorted and revealed,
if he sees it at all. (17)

In a world where objects do not reveal themselves but, like the body in Szyborska’s “Torture,” are and are and are, distortion is the only kind of revelation we may hope for—a distortion that is a necessary condition of representation rather than the product of artistic defamiliarization within a Formalist or Surrealist aesthetic. For Szyborska, our distorting and revelatory relation to the world is evident in

the anthropomorphized objects for whom the very fact of a relation is transformative; for Bishop, it is revealed in the inherently chronotopic objects with which we engage in predatory but necessary relations. But, at the same time, if the speaker gives the monument his full attention and suspends the desire to know, it retains something like its essence, as is the case at the end of Bishop's "The Fish":

I stared and stared
And victory filled up
The little rented boat . . .
 . . . —until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go. (42)

Likewise, the speaker in "Conversations with a Stone" can claim victory if he can still maintain a relation to the stone while acknowledging the fact that it has no front door.

This is the difficulty in Bishop's and Szyborska's poetry: the world is a task for which both speaker and reader are by definition inadequate. The figured reader in "The Monument" is restless, stubborn, rebellious. The difficulty here is one of attention, of being quiet and still enough to see the object rather than one's reaction to it. Patience is difficult, as is silence of the self. The simpler the object, the more difficult the prolonged vigilance.⁸ Vigilance also describes the task that Bishop's poetry demands of the reader. Left face to face with the monument at the end of the poem, we must, Bishop cautions us, watch it closely. The difficulty is not discovering the best, or correct, interpretation; rather, it is declining to interpret at all. We may tell stories about objects or people, which may or may not be accurate, but only as empirical observations within an aesthetic act. And in this act of deference, of speaking only through and with, not over, objects, is the vision of care for the world that the works of Bishop, Szyborska, and Bakhtin create.

"Deferences and vigilances" characterize the position of Bishop's and Szyborska's speakers as one that is fully engaged but un-empathetic in Bakhtin's sense of the term—empathy being a fusion with the Other without subsequent retreat to outsidedness. The speakers' engagement with objects takes place on the level of observation, in the unrelenting act of perception. But in addition to a self-restraint vis-à-vis the objects of observation, the speakers practice self-restraint towards themselves. This is a quality that Moore attributed to Bishop, but which likewise describes Szyborska's objectivity as noted by Miłosz. Bishop also characterizes her own poetry as objective. In a letter to May Swenson, she wrote,

I think myself that my best poems seem rather distant, and sometimes I wish I could be as objective about everything else as I seem to be in and about them. I don't think I'm very successful when I get personal,—rather, sound personal—one always is personal, of course, one way or another. (Harrison 29)

⁸ Marianne Moore notes the "deferences and vigilances" of Bishop's poetry (qtd. in Harrison 11), a description that might also be applied to the "propriety"—"a tuned reticence with rigor/from strength at the source" ("Propriety" 265-66)—typical of the speaker in her poems. Although a discussion of Moore's poetry is beyond the scope of this paper, one would have no trouble placing a poem such as "The Pangolin" or "Old Tiger" alongside "The Monument" and "Conversations with a Stone." Indeed, it would be interesting to trace how Bishop pushed Moore's "propriety" to its ethical limits. Bishop's speakers have more to lose from a failed aesthetic act because they allow themselves a greater openness and vulnerability than Moore's speakers. Whereas the potential of losing the Other lurks just beneath the surface of Bakhtin's thought and Moore's poetry, it is everywhere visible in the poetry of Bishop and Szyborska.

For Bishop, objectivity is an attitude toward herself and toward her objects and, most significantly, it is a relation between self and world that is based on distance and epistemological self-restraint. Likewise, for Bakhtin, objectivity is an essential attribute of the author and a quality of the author-hero relation. According to Bakhtin, objectivity is non-self-reflexivity:

An author reflects the hero's emotional-volitional position, but not his own position in relation to the hero; his own position is something he actualizes—it is objective, that is, actualized in an object, but does not itself become an object of examination and reflective experience. ("Author and Hero" 6)

Like Bakhtin's author, Bishop's speakers can be located in a position of outsideness with respect to the hero—both human and object.⁹ And like Bakhtin's author, Szyborska's and Bishop's speakers are not deprived of the power to imagine an interiority for their objects and heroes. Bakhtin's authors—real and idealized—create rich inner lives for their characters. And Szyborska and Bishop practice live-entering into their chosen objects, acknowledging the boundary between self and Other but freely crossing it nevertheless, since to refuse to cross is for all three writers a cowardly, self-absorbed non-relation to the world, neglectful of the dynamism and the event-quality of being. Objectivity that purports to maintain strict subject-object demarcation, Bakhtin argues and Bishop and Szyborska demonstrate, risks reducing one to silence—a fatal condition for poetry, not to mention for an existence in a world of objects. Objectivity as both intense vigilance and self-restraint is thus the only relation to the world that preserves both self and Other and forms a relation between them. To practice epistemological self-restraint is to adopt an architectonic world view.¹⁰

III. Contingent Conquests

In "The Monument" the speaker-presenter's description takes place on the boundary between careful observation and epistemologically minded explication. The speaker suggests a possible motivation for the monument's existence in the story of the artist-prince; she proposes that the monument does indeed have an inside, "which after all/cannot have been intended to be seen." In each act of representation, the speaker ventures beyond the apparent into conjecture, which as a possibility, the monument's potential, lingers on the brink of interpretation. Bakhtin's concept of the self-other relation is likewise a delicate balance between the aesthetic act which treats the Other as other and the failed aesthetic act in which the author and hero merge or fail to meet.

In "Author and Hero" and in "Notes 1970-71," Bakhtin treats the transformation of the Other as a salvific activity, the bestowal of grace and form from without.

⁹ For Bishop's representation of the human hero, in Bakhtin's sense of the term, see "Songs for a Colored Singer," "The Burglar of Babylon," "The Riverman," "Manuelzinho," "Crusoe in England," "Pink Dog," and others.

¹⁰ For a discussion of a poetics of restraint in terms of prosody, see Laurans on Bishop, as well as Ciepiela and Wesling on Tsvetaeva. A discussion of prosody would complement my examination of form as an ethical-aesthetic category, as Bakhtin understood it in "Author and Hero." For such a discussion, Bakhtin's "The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art" (in *Art and Answerability*) would be the key point of departure.

Like grace, which in the Christian sense accepts the individual's acts as they are, filling in the horizon of the Other is the role of the supra-existence. For Bakhtin this is the author, or God in his more theological thought.¹¹ For Szyborska, this completion of the Other might be the name of the thing, which in poems such as "Water," "View with a Grain of Sand," or "The Silence of Plants" is both a misnomer and the paradigmatic gesture of our co-presence with things. We might say that, as for Rilke, in Szyborska's poetry it is our task to name things.¹²

But in addition to the theological overtones of the author-hero relation, Bakhtin turns to military notions of conquest to describe the aesthetic act: "The author's position of being situated outside the hero is gained by conquest, and the struggle for it is often a struggle for life" ("Author and Hero" 15). Later in the essay, Bakhtin again emphasizes that the object does not accept form as a given condition of its existence but must be molded by the author as a passive, form-receiving object. Form is imposed as a task of the author: "it must be fought for and won by conquest within the work of art by both the author and the beholder, neither of whom invariably comes out of the struggle as the winner" (84). Not only is the self unable to bestow form from lived life, but also the objects themselves cannot receive it until they are abstracted from their lived-life utility. But neither for Bakhtin, nor for Bishop or Szyborska, is this a struggle for power. Bakhtin's architectonics is a temporary, contingent vantage point not lending itself to systematization, and thus the victory is temporary as well. This is in part why we are advised by Bishop's speaker in "The Monument" to "Watch it closely"—as soon as the aesthetic act of perception ceases, the thing regains its lived life.

Of course, when the aesthetic act produces an aesthetic object, the object does gain some degree of permanence in a monument or a poem. Contrary to the claim of the master in Szyborska's "Interview with a Child," who believes that objects lead their own lives when we are not watching, the components of a painting, a poem, a monument, will not rearrange themselves when we un-obsess and look away, although our reaction most likely will change. However, Bakhtin's early thought supports the view of Szyborska's master and thus leaves us free to interpret the aesthetic act as constitutive of both art and life. But even the artwork, made up as it is of aesthetic acts, may dissolve and rearrange itself into lived life when its author loses the struggle for outsideness or when the act is over and has become a past architectonic event. Bakhtin's conquest-salvation of the Other is refreshingly nonfastidious about leaving the Other as is. The Other in Bakhtin's thought is more durable than we think—it can still remain Other even while we live into it. And the distance taken by the author in living-into as opposed to empathy ensures that a contingent conquest does not turn into an occupation. Bakhtin's point is that aesthetics indeed involves violence both to the medium

¹¹ See "Author and Hero," 56: "God is now the heavenly father who is *over me* and can be merciful to me and justify me where I, from within myself, cannot be merciful to myself and cannot justify myself in principle, as long as I remain pure before myself. What I must be for the other, God is for me."

¹² See, for instance, "The Ninth Elegy:" "[. . .] Perhaps we are *here* in order to say: house,/bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window—/at most: column, tower. . . . But to—say them, you must understand,/oh to say them *more* intensely than the Things themselves/ever dreamed of existing" (199-201).

and to objects of perception, but this is violence only to us, and thus does not have to be unethical.

When Bakhtin replaces the Self-Other relation with one's own word and the word of the Other, thus dealing with language rather than ontological categories, the resilience of the Other becomes more assured insofar as the Other is now able to freely answer for himself (provided that the author is not absolutely monologic). While according to Bakhtin a neutral word is by definition impossible, a nonlinguistic, strictly ontological being-in-itself is always a possibility. Bakhtin's early thought on the self-other relation, then, may be seen as an attempt to theorize his way out of this ethical and aesthetic impasse posed by a solitary and silent being. That is, if Bakhtin's thought deals primarily with relations, it is in a sense a single elaborate project to overcome the unproductive, isolating, and self-contained being, the *Ding an Sich* of Kantian thought that Bakhtin sets out to revise. His turn to language beginning with the Dostoevsky work may then be seen as an act analogous to Bishop's and Szyborska's bestowal of language upon their objects, or to Moore's turning the word over to the tiger and the elephant ("Old Tiger," "Melanchthon"). None of these writers are concerned with delineating subject-object relations, the sharply divided polarity of which Bakhtin relegates to naïve idealism (38). Rather, what all four writers are interested in is "the concrete lived experience of our subjectivity and the impossibility of its—of our—being exhaustively present in an object, in contrast to the object-status of any other human being" (38-39). This is again what makes the aesthetic act always collapse back into the ethical, insofar as its function is to allow the subject to manifest herself as unique and irreplaceable. Moreover, the aesthetic deed of outsideness is always optional in "Author and Hero," a mode of seeing that can be denied (and is denied, Bakhtin argues, by world views such as Romanticism and Neoplatonism). Insofar as Bakhtin historicizes the aesthetic act, it must remain not as an a priori, pre-ontological quality of being but as an optional and fragile method of approach.

The contingency of the architectonic moment, whether it is a moment of experience or an aesthetic act that creates a poem, is perhaps most explicitly and movingly illustrated in Szyborska's "Travel Elegy." Here the speaker attempts to amass the memories and souvenirs of travel and comes up with just that—neatly packaged souvenirs which no longer tie the speaker to the world in any meaningful way:

Everything's mine but just on loan
nothing for the memory to hold
though mine as long as I look. (18)

The speaker of Szyborska's poem posits a moment of plenitude in which the subject possesses the world. But as soon as the moment of perception ceases, the object of perception collapses back into its thingliness and the world takes itself back, as it were. Indeed, in both Szyborska's and Bishop's poetry, things are always on the verge of taking themselves back, like Bakhtin's unstable hero on whom form is imposed as the author's task. Objects lend themselves to the speaker's perception in a hard-won struggle, never won because perception is possible only in the present, thus rendering the project of travel—in Szyborska's "Travel

Elegy” as well as in Bishop’s travel poems—the most deluded of all projects to possess and understand.

For Bakhtin, a thinker of boundaries and relations, the most essential feature of being in the world is being with others in a profoundly engaged relation of contemplation, dialogue, and creation. Just as the architectonic relation intensifies the potential for dialogue—as communication or simply as communion—it simultaneously renders the dialogue more volatile, as no theory or conceptual framework can be deduced from these moments of perception. This is the potential in Bakhtin’s architectonics as a world view—its emphasis on individual uniqueness and the salvation of form that the I-Other relation imposes on both human and object, enriching both. The poems of Bishop and Szymborska are profoundly architectonic moments of interaction with the world. That is, the two poets practice epistemological self-restraint while intensely living-into the world. And whatever the indifference of objects or the speakers’ inadequacies, the very fact of their architectonic relation proves that conversation with objects is both necessary and possible.

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