

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

## Elegies of Form in Bishop, Plath, Stevenson

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After great pain, a formal feeling comes—  
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—<sup>1</sup>

EMILY DICKINSON'S 'formal feeling' is a curious construction. The lines ought to mean that 'After great pain' there is an end, a numbness, a death. And indeed there is a kind of death in the poem. But 'a formal feeling' out-lives that death, to become the monumental feeling form of the second line: 'Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs'. Like much Victorian women's poetry, Dickinson's posthumous moment, 'After great pain', lets feeling get free of its usual subject, the personal pronoun 'I' or 'she', and freewheel into wit. Out of time and place, even out of their own body, those 'Nerves sit' all the more alertly, all the more on edge. Exactly who or what this sitting attends on is not quite clear. 'Nerves . . . like Tombs' leave an empty space where there should be an object *of* feeling—a body of some kind. In the end, 'a formal feeling' is a tomb almost to nothing.

I have called this lecture 'Elegies of Form'. This is not a misprint for 'Forms of Elegy', though sometimes I wished it was. Nor does it signify an elegy *for* form. In other words, I am not about to discuss metre and stanza form in elegiac verse, nor am I about to engage in a polemic for or against traditional forms in poetry. The trouble with the word 'form' is that its meanings are so multiform, and so contradictory, that definitions are hard to fix. Etymologically, form spans the whole spectrum of meanings from

Read at the Academy 6 November 2002.

<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London, 1970), No. 341, p. 162.

body to soul, from thing to figure, poem to parts: it means shape, mould, beauty, outline, model, idea, style, principle. It may mean the formal parts or the informing spirit, the thing or the idea, the essential or the inessential. It runs the gamut, as Raymond Williams observes, from 'the external and superficial to the inherent and determining'.<sup>2</sup> As a word, it puns liberally.

When it comes to literary criticism, form brings the added complication of its aestheticist legacy. Wilde and Pater enjoy its promiscuous effects of being something and nothing, tangible and intangible, body and soul. Form, in their hands, becomes a sly challenge to the bourgeois, as well as, therefore, to content, narrative, morality, use. It aligns itself with style, technique, music, while also sneaking into view the seductive possibility that form, like style, is the man. In art, writes Pater, '*form*, in the full signification of that word, is everything, and the mere matter is nothing'.<sup>3</sup> That nervous qualification, 'in the full signification', is already plumping out '*form*' into something more than a stylistic device. The lost body of form is always waiting in the wings to slip back into the picture, as it does, literally, in *Dorian Gray*: 'the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skilfully mirrored in his art.'<sup>4</sup> Like Pater, Wilde relishes one of the half-forgotten dictionary definitions of 'form' as precisely 'beauty, comeliness' (*OED*, 1e). Through form, art becomes the body, spirit becomes flesh, and one more resourceful double-entendre plies its rough trade through Victorian aestheticism.

By the time form becomes one of the defining features of twentieth-century critical formalism, much of this scandal-value has been lost. Clive Bell's 'Significant Form',<sup>5</sup> like Eliot's '*significant emotion*',<sup>6</sup> is dull by comparison, its significance sanitised. Formalism generally tends to denude form of its racier meanings, turning it into style pure and simple, or pure and well-wrought. 'The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful', writes Bell, 'always it is irrelevant.'<sup>7</sup> By the time the challenge comes from Marxist and feminist theory, form has become attached to a formalism which, in rejecting representation,

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976, London, 1983), p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures* (1893, London, 1910), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891, Harmondsworth, 1949), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Clive Bell, *Art* (London, 1914), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London, 1975), p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Bell, *Art*, p. 25. Bell does, however, make the point that literature 'is never pure art' being 'concerned, to some extent, with facts and ideas', p. 153.

relevance, purpose, might seem itself to have become irrelevant. Terry Eagleton's 'Ideology and Literary Form', which defined 'form' as the deceptively smooth face of 'historical contradictions',<sup>8</sup> announced an opposition between form and politics which still resonates in feminist criticism, as well as in recent discussions of Northern Irish poetry, for example.

Yet 'form' remains a word which criticism catches at, sometimes for want of a better. The recent revival of interest in form and formalisms, in the work of Susan Wolfson particularly, but also Tim Kendall, Matthew Campbell, Peter McDonald,<sup>9</sup> is a reminder that form, generally, although back in fashion with a vengeance, also never quite went away. The forms which critics have examined have ranged from Ricks's<sup>10</sup> undaunted attention to punctuation to Armstrong's 'living form'<sup>11</sup> of nineteenth-century poetry. Particularly when it comes to poetry, this four-letter word has never been entirely supplanted by 'text'. The reason may have to do with the very shape of poetry, its sense of an outline. Form may be formal, but in poetry it is also a body, a shaped object, set in relief to the eye and the ear.

Arguments about form have always tended, however, to entail arguments about use, purpose, relevance. Eliot's complaint about Arnold, for instance, that 'he was so conscious of what, for him, poetry was *for*, that he could not altogether see it for what it is',<sup>12</sup> probes a recurrent debate. The idea of being '*for*' (by implication also politically for or against), is fended off by a tautology which leaves almost, but not quite, nothing more to say. Poetry is 'what it is'. Eliot thus half-echoes the most famous tautology of all in the story of 'what for': that is, art for art's sake. His own uneasy debt to that legacy is another story. Certainly Tom Paulin's attack on Eliot is, at least in part, an attack on formalism's trivial pursuits. 'Poetry', he mocks, 'is not sacral or ethical or civic, it's just

<sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'Ideology and Literary Form', in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976, London, 1978), p. 114.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, 1997), Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London, 2001), Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge, 1999), Peter McDonald, *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority From Yeats to Hill*, (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Ricks, 'Geoffrey Hill 1' and 'Geoffrey Hill 2', in *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 285–355.

<sup>11</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Language As Living Form in Nineteenth-Century Poetry*, (Sussex, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Matthew Arnold', in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933, London, 1964), p. 118.

a higher form of limerick'<sup>13</sup>—the limerick being, evidently, bottom of the formal heap. Peter McDonald's riposte, in his book on *Form and Authority*, is that, on the contrary, 'form is the serious heart of a poem'.<sup>14</sup> Knowing this, he claims, 'real poets know, as they have always known, that poetry cannot work to extra-poetic agendas'.<sup>15</sup> So 'form' remains contentious still, setting the poetic against the 'extra-poetic', the 'limerick' against 'the civic', the workings of the hyphen against relevance and meaningfulness. What the poem is, and what the poem is for, also keeps criticism awake, perhaps, to the possibilities and limits of its *own* 'use'. 'When we write literary criticism', Paul Fry suggests, in a richly relevant, throwaway sentence, 'we still do not know what we are talking about.'<sup>16</sup>

Let me set against that cautionary proposition some lines from one of the 'real poets'. Heather McHugh's '20–200 on 747' is the first poem of her 1988 collection, *Shades*:

There is rain on the glass but it all disappears  
when I look toward the curve on the world.  
(The here and now is clear, I mean, so we  
can't see it.) In an airplane, chance

encounters always ask, So what  
are your poems about? They're about  
their business, and their father's business and their  
monkey's uncle, they're about  
how nothing is about, they're not  
about about. This answer drives them  
back to the snack tray every time.<sup>17</sup>

This defence of poetry against 'about about' leaves the idiot questioner understandably dumbfounded. Not for or about, the special intransitive-ness of poetry drives this poet into rigmaroles of 'not', and the baffled fellow-traveller 'back to the snack tray'. The poem wittily enacts an answer which is no answer at all, while also being the thing in question: that is, a poem. The mis-communication hinges, as so often, on a tagging

<sup>13</sup> Tom Paulin, 'T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism', in *Writing to the Moment* (London, 1996), pp. 149–60, p. 156.

<sup>14</sup> McDonald, *Serious Poetry*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> McDonald, *Serious Poetry*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Paul H. Fry, 'The Hum of Literature: Ostension in Language', in *A Defense of Poetry: Reflections on the Occasion of Writing* (Stanford 1995), pp. 50–69, pp. 53–4.

<sup>17</sup> Heather McHugh, '20–200 on 747', in *Hinge & Sign: Poems, 1968–1993* (Hanover and London, 1994), pp. 184–5.

preposition. Being not ‘about about’ sounds like an attempt to cancel ‘about’ altogether, by turning it into nearly nonsense. But in fact the misunderstanding between poet and traveller is not total. In response to the question ‘what / are your poems about?’ the poet also gives a rather eloquent answer: ‘They’re about / their business, and their father’s business and their / monkey’s uncle . . .’ So they *are*, also, ‘about’. On the one hand, these poems are formally minding their own business; but on the other, they are Christs with a mission and jokers out for a laugh. They mix God-the-‘father’s business’ with the whim of a ‘monkey’s uncle’. The business of poetry turns out to be everything’s business, high and low, sacred and profane, significant and insignificant. The question of being ‘about’ is not, then, entirely irrelevant. Poetry, it seems, at least for McHugh, is ‘about’ *not quite* ‘nothing’. If wanting it to be ‘about’ is criticism’s shortsightedness, wanting wholly not to be ‘about’ may be poetry’s. Conversations between the two, however ill-tempered and high-flown, are still those of fellow travellers.

And so: ‘Elegies of Form’. The slight strain and awkwardness of my title is meant to signal a difficulty. The possessive ‘*of* Form’ is countered by something fugitive about ‘Elegies’. Indeed, there is a trouble of prepositions running through this lecture, as if the idea of form provokes a kind of grammatical fussing. A lecture about form is also, in some ways, a lecture ‘about about’—as well as about for, and after, and of. I am reminded at this point of an unpublished poem by Elizabeth Bishop, recalling a nightmare scene of writer’s block:

. . . sometime during the night  
 the poem I was trying to write  
 has turned into prepositions:  
 ins and aboves and upons . . .<sup>18</sup>

Lectures about form have a similar propensity to fly off into oddly detachable prepositions. ‘Elegies of Form’, then, hints at something taken away from form, as well as possessed by it. ‘Elegy’, writes Coleridge, ‘presents every thing as lost and gone, or absent and future.’<sup>19</sup> The relationship of ‘form’ to ‘everything’ may be, similarly, elegiac. At least in the work of the three poets I want to look at today, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Stevenson, the sense of form is present, not simply as a

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, ‘A Letter to Two Friends’, Vassar College, Box 66. 14. Quoted in Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (London, 1993), p. 314.

<sup>19</sup> S. T. Coleridge, ‘Table Talk’, in *The Collected Works*, 16 vols., ed. Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer (London, Routledge, 1971–2001), 14, ed. Carl Woodring, 226.

matter of formal technique, but as an object, too, in a tradition which goes back to Victorian aestheticism's playful commodifications of its own formal pleasures. The sense of elegiac quality, a regret for what has gone, both gone from and gone into, a poem, seems to run through the work of these three poets. Their formal seriousness, as poets, is neither an accidental extra nor an ideological flag-waving. It is, rather, part of the losing game of being *for*, which is what their poems are also about. 'The art of losing', as Elizabeth Bishop insists, is a loss that poetry especially knows how to say.

Thus her famous villanelle, 'One Art', turns the fate of 'losing' into a practised ambition, with a joke at its heart: 'Lose something every day.' The sheer pressure of the villanelle form (almost as trying as the limerick), is part of its drama of lost objects. Each one, from 'door keys' to the loved 'you', is briefly inventoried before the iron rule of the refrain throws it out. The poem toys with the formal control that might make losing, not just a way of life, but also a way of art. What happens, however, is that the two things come apart. By the last stanza, the form, with its hammered rhyme, loses everything except itself:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.<sup>20</sup>

So writing it makes what it is about, happen. Stevenson has pointed out that: 'The personal losses written *of* in "One Art" are simultaneously, almost cheerily, written *off*.'<sup>21</sup> From '*of*' to '*off*' neatly catches the double game of the poem: it is *about* losing, and it is also, simultaneously, a losing through its own writing. The form, which is so prominently audible, finally wedges an 'it' between the poet's voice and the beloved, addressed 'you'. That 'it' is no use, in any sense. The sheer concentration of '(*Write it!*)' substitutes the poem for all the lost objects. It also, however, lets us hear the personal disaster zone of its informal aside. Brilliantly, those brackets put '(*Write it!*)' both inside and outside the poem. The phrase is, in miniature, both poetic and 'extra-poetic', the one being the art of losing the other.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, 'One Art', in *Complete Poems* (London, 1983), p. 178.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'The Iceberg and the Ship' in *Between the Iceberg and the Ship: Selected Essays* (Ann Arbor, 1998), p. 53.

It is just possible that Bishop was recalling a passage from Robert Hitchens' delicious send-up of Victorian aestheticism, published in 1894: *The Green Carnation*. Mr Amaranth, recognisably Oscar Wilde, declares at one point: 'My temper and my heart are the only two things I never lose! Everything else vanishes. I think the art of losing things is a very subtle art. So few people can lose anything really beautifully.'<sup>22</sup> Aestheticism exploits and parades just this outrageous, provocative, but also guilty distance between art and life. Form for form's sake, as well as for good form, leaves, one can hear it, a great deal to be desired. Bishop's villanelle, with its mastering form, and its sense, therefore, that form matters more than feeling, carries something of the same spirit of aestheticist self-containment as Mr Amaranth's beautiful losing. It too 'beautifully' writes *off* the disasters of *of*, while letting us hear the cost of writing 'it'.

Lorrie Goldensohn has pointed out how often Bishop's 'pictures are the just-evacuated containers of human activity'.<sup>23</sup> The sense of something lost to the picture, something 'runaway',<sup>24</sup> as Jonathan Ellis nicely puts it, is what makes Bishop's poetry elegiac at heart. Her poetry's form misses something, to which it therefore becomes a readable memorial. Her own poem, 'The Monument', reproduces exactly that aesthetic double-bind of being about not being about:

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.  
The crudest scroll-work says 'commemorate' . . .<sup>25</sup>

'The Monument' is Bishop's 'Grecian Urn'. It is a poem about the art object which is also the art object itself. Like Keats's 'silent form', it stands alone, without context or condition, and it bears some more or less significant inscription about itself. But unlike Keats's urn, which

<sup>22</sup> Robert Hitchens, *The Green Carnation*, ed. Stanley Weintraub (1894, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1970), p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> Lorrie Goldensohn, 'Elizabeth Bishop's Written Pictures, Painted Poems', in *In Worcester Massachusetts: Essays on Elizabeth Bishop from the 1997 Elizabeth Bishop Conference* (New York, 1999), pp. 167–75, p. 172.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Ellis, 'Elizabeth Bishop: North & South', in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 457–68, p. 459.

<sup>25</sup> Bishop, 'The Monument', in *Complete Poems*, pp. 23–5, p. 24.

announces its dictum of beauty and truth, Bishop's inscription is unreadably worn. 'The monument's an object', we are told, and its 'scroll-work says "commemorate"'. A museum, a ruin, a tomb, it ought to be a monument to or for something. The instruction, "'commemorate'", directs us to an object within, or without: something missing but remembered, and likely to be dead.

However, Bishop's monumental form seems not to know what it should commemorate or mourn. Moreover, its construction, of wood not stone, has an uncanny life of its own which undermines its monumental status: 'having a life, and wishing; / wanting to be a monument'. The description starts to go into reverse, backtracking from what it is, a poetic form returning to note-form. This undoing also exposes the conventions of monument-making which the poetic tradition so often invokes. 'The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves',<sup>26</sup> Eliot declares of the whole literary tradition. 'A Sonnet is a moment's monument',<sup>27</sup> writes Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Bishop's monument, however, seems less assured than theirs, less orderly and important. Partly, it looks 'like nothing at all'—that 'nothing' quietly balancing the yearning for 'something' two lines later. Such something-or-nothing leaves a restless sort of commotion at the heart of this monument's silent form.

Nor do the last lines offer any resolution:

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.<sup>28</sup>

The monument's indeterminate form, as irregular as its metre, yearns, even at the end, to hold something, even if it 'cannot have been intended to be seen'. Not seeing it may even be the point. That way we learn to see better what is without (in both senses of 'without'), which is a 'poem, or

<sup>26</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> D. G. Rossetti, *Poems*, ed. Oswald Doughty (London, 1961), p. 212. For a fine discussion of some monumental nineteenth-century poems, see Herbert F. Tucker, 'Of Monuments and Moments: Spacetime in Nineteenth-Century Poetry', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 58 (1997), 269–7.

<sup>28</sup> Bishop, p. 25.



monument'. 'Watch it closely' is this poet's last word on her oddly ramshackle form which shelters, 'roughly but adequately', the idea, however 'far away', of what it might be for. Being *for* may point to an 'extra-poetic' quantity, 'far away' or forgotten, but it is a quantity this poem cannot quite give up. When Kristeva, in *Black Sun*, defines 'the so-called poetic form' as 'the sole "container" seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing',<sup>29</sup> she seems to be invoking the same figure of gesturing approximation. 'But roughly, but adequately' is Bishop's idiosyncratic contribution to the aestheticist problem of form, and how it might or might not 'shelter' something: the 'bones of the artist-prince', for instance.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—  
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—

Bishop's monument, like Dickinson's, is a nervous sort of tomb. The body which it should contain becomes the body which it is. The transaction between tomb and body is one which, for some reason, continues to be especially congenial to women poets. 'Now I am dead',<sup>30</sup> writes Stevenson, in the last poem of her latest collection, *Granny Scarecrow*. 'When I was dead',<sup>31</sup> Christina Rossetti recalls, in an opening gambit which characteristically un-times the personal pronoun. 'I died for Beauty—but was scarce / Adjusted in the Tomb',<sup>32</sup> Dickinson recalls. Dying for 'Beauty' rather than 'Truth', she enters her own 'Grecian Urn' and brilliantly gets herself 'Adjusted' in it. That fit takes a moment's work, as woman and tomb become accommodated to each other. Whatever the social or ideological reasons why so many women poets speak from the dead, there is certainly an aestheticist formality about it, as the human form becomes the form of the poem, and 'I' speaks from a resourceful nowhere. Bishop's poem 'The Weed', which reproduces the same pose, recalls a dream recorded in her notebooks: 'Dreamed I was dead, or at least in some other form of existence, and arranged on a card, like buttons.'<sup>33</sup> That 'arranged' is exactly Dickinson's 'Adjusted'. It takes

<sup>29</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (1987, New York, 1989), p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> Stevenson, 'Postscriptum', in *Granny Scarecrow* (Newcastle, 2000), p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> Christina Rossetti, 'At Home', in *The Complete Poems*, 3 vols., ed. R. W. Crump (Baton Rouge and London, 1979–90), I, 28.

<sup>32</sup> Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, No. 449, p. 216.

<sup>33</sup> Bishop, Vassar Archives, Box 75. 4, p. 38. Quoted in Barbara Page, 'Elizabeth Bishop: Stops, Starts and Dreamy Divagations', in *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*, ed. Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (Newcastle, 2002), p. 16.

a moment to happen, so that the difference can be felt. The surrealism of the poem, in which a live weed grows out of the poet's cold heart, lets 'some other form' take the place of the speaker's human form. This, like Rossetti's, Dickinson's, and Stevenson's, is not a sentimental trope; it is witty and disengaged. It allows the personal pronoun to loosen its hold on the person; to be not I, but 'it'—'like buttons', 'like Tombs', or poems.

This is not an attempt to enlist Bishop in a female tradition. She herself was notoriously antipathetic to such classifications, refusing 'to act as Sex Appeal',<sup>34</sup> as she once put it, when invited to be the female representative of a joint volume. However, it does perhaps point to some intertextual haunting, as women poets find in the 'formal feeling' of being dead a way of tricking the personal pronoun out of its biographical authority. The risky transactions of aestheticism, between body and form, life and art, are adapted by women poets into a witty figure for speaking at all. To turn to Plath at this point is logical, but unnerving. Hers are poems in which the 'I' has had to carry an extra, and extra-poetic, haunting from the burdensome facts of her suicide. It is tempting to read her poems as reverse elegies, elegies to herself in advance. But this is to miss the extent to which Plath's sense of form plays on a trope of aesthetic self-sufficiency which is highly comic as well as regretful. 'I lean very strongly toward forms that are, I suppose, quite rigid',<sup>35</sup> she once declared, the word 'rigid', instead of 'strict', just hinting at her characteristic mortuary imagery. The rigour of form, which is also a rigor mortis, makes it congenial to a poet who so obsessively dramatised the difficult relation between 'I' and its dead other.

'Ted says he never read poems by a woman like mine . . . they are working, sweating, heaving poems born out of the way words should be said.'<sup>36</sup> So Plath wrote in one of her exhilarated letters home in 1956. It is interesting how the sentence swerves from 'poems by a woman', through a birth metaphor of 'sweating, heaving', to a conclusion which rounds into a near effortless tautology. Poems are born, not from a poet, a woman, a body, but ultimately from 'the way words should be said'. The fine surprise of that passive construction leaves people, both poet and reader, finally out of account. The rightness comes from rightness, poems from words. At the same time, the way 'they should be said' also leaves the

<sup>34</sup> Bishop, 'One Art', in *Collected Poems*, p. 86.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Stevenson, 'Sylvia Plath's Word Games', in *Between the Iceberg and the Ship*, pp. 39–51, p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963*, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (London, 1976), p. 244.

words open to all comers. Plath thus audibly rehearses the act of getting out of the way and letting poetry work on its own birth. She also, however, lets us hear exactly how much has to be got out of the way: 'working, sweating, heaving', a body work which, in her case, is also explicitly measured against the work of other women.

As a poet, Plath returns again and again, not to the art work's beauty or truth, or even to its surreal, uncertain adequacy, but to the perfect horror of it:

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:  
This absolutely white person and the old yellow one,  
And the white person is certainly the superior one.

'In Plaster' is indeed about a 'rigid' form. It is also, typically, the form of a woman. The two awkward bedfellows, one white, one yellow, seem bound for life in a fretful bond of love and hate, desire and disgust. The 'absolutely white' plaster one, who encases the yellow, is cold, unbreakable, clean, and probably 'immortal'. She might be the 'soul', 'I gave her a soul'; she might be a tomb: 'Living with her was like living with my own coffin'. But this speaker is less 'Adjusted in the Tomb' of her plaster-cast than Dickinson. Although the two persons look alike, 'she was shaped just the way I was',<sup>37</sup> they are not identical. The difference, the uncomfortable gap between them, leaves scope for unrest, quarrelsomeness, drama. Between the form and its content, the tomb and its body, there is a comic mismatch. Plaster casts, like other monuments, recall restless, living occupants.

Plath's lifelong interest in effigies, dummies, casts and heads, the 'some other form' of her inhuman alter egos, is the source of her power as well as her scandal. Her sense of the inhuman can be almost triumphalist, as she repeatedly resurrects 'it' out of her speakers' unnerving deaths. 'The affinity of all art with death', writes Adorno, 'is most noticeable in the idea of pure form imposed by art on the living manifold, which is thus snuffed out.'<sup>38</sup> But this is just a bit too serious. Art as a snuff movie, 'form' as a killer, suggests a *Dorian Gray* story accepted literally, and without the humour. The point about Plath, for all the horror of her 'rigid forms', is that their 'affinity . . . with death' is figurative, verbal, witty. Life is not 'snuffed out' by them (especially not her own), but it is, in the comparison, regretted, commemorated. Plath's poems about dead

<sup>37</sup> Plath, 'In Plaster', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London, 1981), pp. 158–60.

<sup>38</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (1970, London, 1984), p. 77.

women, like Rossetti's and Dickinson's before her, are not forms of elegy, especially not self-elegy, but elegies, rather, of perfect form.

The woman is perfected.  
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,  
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:  
We have come so far, it is over.<sup>39</sup>

Fenton rightly warns against reading 'Edge' as Plath's 'signing off' poem. A dead daughter, a mother moon, and two children is also, he points out, the story of the 'Greek' Medea.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, this is a poem about the horror of perfection. It too is 'In Plaster'. But it is also about an art object, classical, sculptured, Keats-haunted, scrolled in its drapery as if holding the promise of an inscription, somewhere. 'The crudest scroll-work says "commemorate"', Bishop writes. Plath too yearns for an inscription; yearns to read the aesthetic object, as if to find what it might be 'about'. The nearest she comes to finding a message, however, is in the feet. They 'seem to be saying: / We have come so far, it is over.' This is wild wit. Being 'over' is a bit too literally somewhere the feet might have gone—and 'Edge' is lurking for the connection. Even in its superb, perfected form, 'Edge' contains the slightly uncomfortable adjustment of stone and flesh, monument and body. The 'scrolls', the 'toga', the 'Greek necessity' of it all suggest a statue. The 'body', the 'smile', the 'feet' suggest a woman. Like the word 'accomplishment', with its distant recall of female, subartistic activities, the very accomplished perfection of the form recalls the woman before she was 'perfected'.

The brilliance of the title is that it does something similar. 'Edge', which sounds so neutral, non-human, also discloses its silent, human variations: on edge, at the edge, over the edge. Those absent prepositions would, if present, make the poem more 'about about'. By leaving them out, Plath lets us hear their absence, but also insists that this is none of them; it is just 'Edge', clean-cut, indefinite. 'has it breasts, has it edges?'<sup>41</sup> she asks in 'A Birthday Present', turning another 'she' to 'it'. 'Edge' sug-

<sup>39</sup> Plath, 'Edge', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 272–3.

<sup>40</sup> James Fenton, *The Strength of Poetry* (Oxford, 2001), p. 153.

<sup>41</sup> Plath, 'A Birthday Present', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 206–8, p. 206.

gests the hard outline of a thing—in particular the way that a poem is a shape, a set of lines, a frontier on what is not said. But it is also a ‘woman’, rounding into those ‘Flows in the scrolls of her toga’. Like the word form, which etymologically contains both the idea of outline and the idea of a physical body, so ‘Edge’ signals the very edge of formality to which a poem might go.

All these poems, then, reflect in different ways on a legacy of aestheticist self-containment. They are about objects which have been taken out of context, and museumed or monumentalised as art. At the same time, they are restless, commemorative, elegiac. ‘The woman is perfected. / Her dead / Body . . .’ Plath quietly rhymes ‘perfected’ and ‘dead’, as if to nerve her statue from life, or from a memory of life. If form is the woman here, then, as in Pater and Wilde, there is also no ‘pure form’. Human meaning troubles the art work, edging its perfection, giving ‘it away as having life, and wishing . . .’ Form does not kill life; it borders, relationally, on it.

Thus form, which looks two ways, inwards and outwards, still seems to offer a way of understanding what poems are about, and not about. It is a limit, as well as a self-sufficiency; an edge as well as an object. ‘No poem worthy of the name can be formless, whether it is written according to metrical rules or in free verse’, writes Anne Stevenson. ‘The sounds, rhythms, pitch, and intensity of the lines ARE the poem. Every poem IS its form.’<sup>42</sup> As with Bishop and Plath, the aestheticist legacy haunts her own serious play with form. Form is the poem, the poem its form. It is not an accident that the formal conundrum of Henry James’s short story, ‘The Figure in the Carpet’, should give Stevenson the title of one of her own poems:

Might be human,  
 might be design:  
 a diamond face, half mouth,  
 half upright hair;  
 two square-rimmed eyes  
 that stare  
 in a sad direction.  
 He—or is it she?—  
 wipes the clear  
 left eye  
 with a wrist  
 more paw than hand.

<sup>42</sup> Stevenson, ‘The Trouble with a Word like Formalism’, in *Between the Iceberg*, pp. 105–11, p. 107.

The other arm,  
crippled, perhaps,  
(it will not bend)  
holds a cross  
which is part  
of the interlocking risk  
of pattern  
or of art.<sup>43</sup>

In James's story, the figure in the carpet is a figure for art. In Stevenson, it is literally a pattern in a carpet. But both texts also set that figure against some 'extra-poetic' explanation, which it also nonetheless invokes. In James's story, the detective critic hunts for clues to the meaning of art. "I see—it's some idea *about* life, some sort of philosophy"<sup>44</sup> he innocently hopes. But of course the more he asks '*about*', the less likely he is to find it. The figure cannot thus be figured out. Neither can Stevenson's—at least not out of the carpet. Within the carpet, it 'Might be human, / might be design'. This grotesque crossbreed, half-finished, half animal, half cripple, will not come humanly right. The cross is the point. The 'interlocking risk / of pattern / or of art' is irresolvably cruciform, and the resulting, crosspatched creature is fixed in it for good.

However, like so many of these poems about the art object, something troubles the plan. The 'design' recalls a human form, and the cross recalls something suffered. Stevenson's rewriting of James's story conveys a sense of wistful regret, of maimed hurt—for instance, the paw hand that wipes the all too 'clear / left eye' of tears it cannot weep. The poem's aestheticist sense of its own form takes the pressure of the alternative: of something that lies outside, 'in a sad direction'.

Stevenson, then, like Plath and Bishop, sees form, not just as a matter of technique, though that is part of it, but also as a matter of resistance. It is the thing that cuts the poem off, from meaningful duties, civic or ethical, in order to be a thing in itself, in its own carpet of design and plan. The figure may cry out for human purpose, for human feeling; but in the end it is what it is, and that is only a poem. In one of her essays, about the process of writing a poem, Stevenson touches on the unpredictable autonomy of form: 'I couldn't, of course, have predicted any of

<sup>43</sup> Stevenson, 'The Figure in the Carpet', in *The Collected Poems of Anne Stevenson: 1955–1995* (1996, Newcastle, 2000), p. 88.

<sup>44</sup> Henry James, 'The Figure in the Carpet', in *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories*, ed. Frank Kermode (Harmondsworth, 1986), pp. 357–400, p. 368.

the formal features of the poem before it began to sing of itself.<sup>45</sup> That ‘of itself’ means both about, and by. In a prepositional nutshell, the poem sings about what it sings about. The tautology of ‘sing of itself’, like Plath’s ‘the way words should be said’, lets the poem round back into saying almost nothing. ‘Tautology’, writes Barthes, ‘is a faint at the right moment, a saving aphasia, it is a death, or perhaps a comedy, the indignant “representation” of the *rights* of reality over and above language.’<sup>46</sup> In other words, tautology, while rounding up against reality, also regrets reality, with its superior rights. Art for art, then, the form for form’s sake, says nothing, for the sake of what it cannot say, and cannot help. It is ‘a death, or perhaps a comedy’.

How habitable is perfected form? . . .

What’s the use of a held note or held line  
That cannot be assailed for reassurance?<sup>47</sup>

So Seamus Heaney, in ‘Squarings’, reflects on aestheticist tropes of perfection and formality. Rejecting, by implication, aestheticism’s ‘condition of music’, he calls for poetry’s ‘use’ and ‘reassurance’. Form and use pull in opposite directions. His question about form’s habitableness might also be recalling Stevenson’s own question in ‘Making Poetry’: ‘And why inhabit, make, inherit poetry?’ Her answer in that poem insists, not on a perfect form, but on an imperfect shelter, roomy, if empty, a habitation which is not indeed ‘habitable’, but which must, in all its contradictions, be inhabited, and, what is more, ‘shared’ with others. Poetry, she concludes, is:

the shared comedy of the worst  
blessed; the sound leading the hand;  
a wordlife running from mind to mind  
through the washed rooms of the simple senses;  
one of those haunted, undefendible, unpoetic  
crosses we have to find.<sup>48</sup>

To find the cross—‘find’, not bear—is to discover the place where the poem comes across its own ‘undefendible, unpoetic’ opposite. This heavenly mansion of art is, finally, empty of the poet, and full only of the ‘crosses’ which are its various figures in the carpet. To be at cross-purposes, between

<sup>45</sup> Stevenson, ‘A Chev’ril Glove’, in *Between the Iceberg*, pp. 120–31, p. 124.

<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘Myth Today’, in *Mythologies*, sel. and trans. Annette Lavers (1957; London, 1973) pp. 109–59, pp. 152–3.

<sup>47</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Squarings, xxii’, in *Seeing Things* (London, 1991), pp. 51–108, p. 78.

<sup>48</sup> Stevenson, ‘Making Poetry’, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 101–2.

figure and fact, design and human, form and pain, is the insight which Stevenson draws from the old mottos and provocations of art for art's sake.

Form, then, recalls what it shuts out, and partly takes the shape of what it throws into relief: reality, outside. The poem is a habitable room only in the sense that it lets something go through it, and out. It is, like Bishop's, a shoddy monument, open to the weather. But it is also at odds with the outside, and this, in a poem like Stevenson's 'From the Men of Letters', is a source of guilt:

How lucky we are  
to have a room in language. We  
who are known take pride in our hotel.

From this perfectly habitable 'room in language', the speakers look to the ones outside, 'whose / disasters encourage our art.' Other people's sorrows are this poem's cross-purpose. They press on its embarrassed form, so that the literati, the poets, the academicians, high and dry in their language rooms, end up hopelessly asking: 'How will their experience / forgive our tall books?'<sup>49</sup> The poem's 'room in language' is a place inhabited to their, and our, increasing and unforgiven embarrassment. The 'tall books', 'tall' as all literary towers, can neither redress nor ignore the 'disasters' outside.

To hear the formality of form, then, is to hear, not only its figurative self-containment, but also its modesty tropes, its elegies and guilts. Art, writes Levinas, 'essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion.'<sup>50</sup> The more self-contained in its form, the more poetry might register its guilt at only being able to '(write it!)'—in brackets. That bracketing off which form visibly is, and which it audibly expresses in different ways, is the subject of one last poem by Stevenson:

The worm in the spine,  
the word on the tongue—  
not the same.  
We speak of 'pain'.  
The sufferer won't suffer it  
to be tamed.

<sup>49</sup> Stevenson, 'From the Men of Letters', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 85–6.

<sup>50</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford, 1989), pp. 129–43, p. 141.



'*To witness pain is a different form of pain*' does, very simply, what all poems do: it lets words tell the difference. Precisely by being formal, arranged and adjusted on the page, it announces its own 'evasion'. The slight note of complacency in the title, which is italicised as direct speech, is belied by the words which follow. Between 'worm' and 'word', the difference sounds. Between 'suffer it' and 'suffer it' two meanings diverge. The '*different form*' of what a poem is, rounds back into itself, into a helpless, guilty, finished thing. Then, in two lines set apart from the others, like an aside within an aside, the poet acknowledges the utter apartness of words:

Outside, we pace in guilt  
Ah, 'guilt', another name.<sup>51</sup>

For a moment we are conned into hearing what is not said: that guilt is 'another name' *for* something: that is, for 'pain'. But this is precisely *not* what is said. The name is not *for* anything. Stevenson lets the fore-shortened phrase bring us back to words, to names, poems, "'guilt'" in inverted commas, which is not the same as guilt unnamed. 'Ah, "guilt", another name' lets us hear how this is also just 'another name', and therefore removed, privileged, lucky. 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes.'

Form, then, the sense of the poem's self-contained distance, its safety in names, its brackets and inverted commas, might be the very thing which, far from resolving contradiction, keeps it visible, and audible—part of a cross 'we have to find.' Between poems and the world there is a world of difference. But that is exactly the point of contact too, the point of 'relief'. Poems edge on what they are not, on the thing they come 'After', evasively, guiltily, elegiacally—'pain' for instance. Form is the poem's body, an object of almost tangible attention: 'sounds, rhythms, pitch, and intensity'. But form is also a design, an outline, a habitable room, an empty shelter. It is something and nothing, and both of those matter. Flaubert once famously declared that he dreamed of writing a book about nothing—'un livre sur rien'.<sup>52</sup> Being 'about / how nothing is about' is 'something'—and something that poetry can do better than prose, perhaps because its formal arrangements on the page constantly break on their own margins, edges, limits. Texts for something, then, and 'Texts for Nothing',<sup>53</sup> in Beckett's

<sup>51</sup> Stevenson, '*To witness pain is a different form of pain*', in *Collected Poems*, p. 184.

<sup>52</sup> Gustave Flaubert, Letter to Louise Colet, 16 Jan. 1852, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Gustave Flaubert*, 16 vols., ed. Société des Études littéraires françaises (Paris, 1970–5), II, 158.

<sup>53</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Texts for Nothing', in *The Complete Short Prose: 1929–1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, 1995), pp. 100–54.

characteristically aestheticist title, poetry's form is a constantly readjusting, unsatisfied 'what for'.

This is the point, and also the no point, of one last poem. Heather McHugh's 'What Poems Are For', with its angling preposition, recalling so many problems of 'for', is a final reminder that being not 'about about' might also, still, be 'for something'—even if, as the last line tells, what 'that' is, is a quite small, even wittily empty-handed gift:

They aren't for everything.  
 I better swallow this, or else  
 wind up shut up by openness so utter.  
 Nip and tuck, poems are for  
  
 a bit, a patch, a mended  
 hem, carnation's cage—and then  
 the heart may bloom, the sex may roar, the moment  
 widen to be the well the child  
  
 fell in forever—yes—but not until  
 I've checked the pinafore  
 and laced the meat,  
 puttied the stones, and pinched  
  
 the flowers back. I can't give you  
 a word to hold the dead. I can't give you a name  
 to hold a god, a big enough denomination. Find yourself  
  
 a church instead, where roofs are all allusions  
 to the sky, and words are all  
 incorrigible. Timelessness, and time,  
  
 they are not mine to give. I have  
 a spoon, a bed,  
 a pen, a hat.  
 The poem  
 is for something,  
 and the world is small.  
  
 I'll give you that.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> McHugh, 'What Poems Are For', in *Hinge & Sign*, p. 179.

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