

The Art of Writing Badly

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THE EFFECT I have in mind is initially easier to describe in music or film, arts that inhabit their temporal processes more viscerally than poetry does. I'm thinking of the lovers' long and tediously dispassionate kiss beside the railroad tracks in Antonioni's *L'Avventura*. Or the moment near the conclusion of the Thirty-first Piano Sonata, opus 110, when Beethoven slowly repeats a G-major chord ten times in a row. Such moments feel weirdly flat, prolix, or dilatory. Inhabiting them, we become aware of the mundanity of the artistic medium, rather than feeling that the simplest means have been raised to a higher power. We feel as if the work of art has not just slowed down but abandoned its own temporal realm in order to inhabit for a moment the world of real time, the time in which we're watching or listening or reading.

Renaissance rhetoricians spoke of the virtues of *dilation* or *amplification*, by which they meant to describe the strategic elaboration of a simple effect. This is what Othello means when, asked how he wooed Desdemona, he says that he "would all my pilgrimage dilate" in order to "draw from her a prayer of earnest heart." Andrew Marvell makes the eroticism of such prolonged attention explicit in "To His Coy Mistress."

An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze.
Two hundred to adore each breast:
But thirty thousand to the rest.

In "The Eve of St. Agnes" Keats offers the dilation Marvell promises. He shifts our gaze from the beloved's body to the sensual world arranged to seduce her, quickening our investment in narrative and erotic fulfillment by delaying it.

And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,
 In blanch'd linen, smooth, and lavender'd,
 While he from forth the closet brought a heap
 Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
 With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
 And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;
 Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
 From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
 From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

Marvell would dilate in order to lure his beloved more quickly toward consummation; Keats dilates in order to involve his reader in the act of seduction that his poem recounts. But in contrast to these moments, the moments I describe in Beethoven and Antonioni muddle any narrative or erotic economy in which delay increases the pleasure of closure or gratification. The longer they last, the more such moments cease to promise fullness and instead feel provocatively like emptiness—as if the artist had dozed off, forgetting to move the camera or shift his hands.

Wary of such effects, rhetoricians warned against the danger of dilation veering into an excess of mere loquaciousness, a lack of tension, and a poverty of diction. But by avoiding this admonition, Shakespeare created great characters; think of Polonius in *Hamlet*, whose moralism feels amusingly ineffectual, or Goneril in *King Lear*, whose expression of love for her father feels vapid.

Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter;
 Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;
 Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;
 No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;
 As much as child e're loved, or father found.

Listening to this protracted utterance, we learn to distrust the character before we know anything about her. We hear the dilation as mere strategy, the lack of interiority. We feel an overpowering motivation but a paucity of means.

For what reasons would an artist court such lack in a lyric poem, embracing verbal tedium, as Elizabeth Bishop does in the opening stanza of “Brazil, January 1, 1502”? It’s one thing to dwell on “candied apple, quince, and plum,” as Keats does, but another to linger over leaves, any sort of leaves, that might be little, big, or maybe even bigger than that.

Januaries, Nature greets our eyes
 exactly as she must have greeted theirs:
 every square inch filling in with foliage—
 big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,
 blue, blue-green, and olive,
 with occasional lighter veins and edges,
 or a satin underleaf turned over;
 monster ferns
 in silver-gray relief,
 and flowers, too, like giant water lilies
 up in the air—up, rather, in the leaves—
 purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,
 rust red and greenish white.

How could you tell, outside of the context of this poem, that the lines “purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,/rust red and greenish white” are any good? The poem wants to get something right; there isn’t just one yellow here, there are two yellows. But the precision feels unmotivated, elaborated to the brink of boredom. Why should we care that there are two yellows? Why should we be interested in the unspecified generality of “Nature” at all? Lacking the compressed intensity we usually associate with poetic language, Bishop’s words feel like stretch socks, one size fits all. They invite us to think of dilation not as an opening into plenitude but as a flattening, a movement to the merely dilatory. They make us wonder if dalliance or dilution would be a better word than dilation.

But like the moments in *L’Avventura* or opus 110, this passage in “Brazil, January 1, 1502” also feels inexplicably enticing—not because we can intuit an underlying motive for the dilation, but

because we cannot; not because we are relieved from the tedium, but because we are subjected to it for so very long, so long that the moment disrupts our sense of narrative proportion or dramatic necessity. Such moments feel ancillary to what we would describe as the central events of the works of art containing them, and yet the power of these works of art would be greatly diminished if such moments were simply jettisoned. Reading poems, we expect the language to hold our attention, because the syllables create dense patterns of sound, reinforcing a similar density of meaning. Writing poems, we listen for those lines that lack such density, and we either cut them or revise them. How then do we recognize the work of lines that may seem to us indistinguishable from what we might otherwise call bland writing? How do we describe that work? How can we say with any certainty that the slow repetition of a G-major chord is brilliant or boring? It's easy to say that the phrase "candied apple, quince, and plum" is more compelling than "big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves," but should it be?

Necessary at this stage of my argument is a long account of a certain kind of modernist taste. But don't worry, I'm not going to offer it; you can do it yourself. Think intensity, elision, juxtaposition. Think of Ezra Pound proclaiming that a good poem contains "absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation." Compare this highly compressed passage from the final movement of *The Waste Land*—

What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal

—with one of the passages Pound encouraged Eliot to cut from *The Waste Land* while they were working together on the manuscript.

Kingfisher weather, with a light fair breeze,
Full canvas, and the eight sails drawing well.

We beat around the cape and laid our course
 From the Dry Salvages to the eastern banks.
 A porpoise snored upon the phosphorescent swell,
 A triton rang the final warning bell
 Astern, and the sea rolled, asleep.
 Three knots, four knots, at dawn; at eight o'clock
 And through the forenoon watch, the wind declined;
 Thereafter everything went wrong,
 A water-cask was opened, smelt of oil,
 Another brackish. Then the main gaffjaws
 Jammed. A spar split for nothing, bought
 And paid for as good Norwegian pine. Fished.
 And then the garboard strake began to leak.

In contrast to the lines from *The Waste Land*, this passage about the Dry Salvages, a rock formation off the coast of Nantucket, is not just writing of a lesser intensity, it is writing of a different kind. The passage unfolds with leisure, establishing narrative links between incidents and people. The line “We beat around the cape and laid our course” is easily scannable as a pentameter, as is the line “Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air,” which appears in *The Waste Land*. But the latter line feels emphatic, every word contributing to the presentation, because the stresses land consistently on the most semantically charged syllables (“cracks and reforms and bursts”). The lines cut from *The Waste Land* don’t work this way: the meter asks us to throw a heavy stress on the second syllable of “around” (“We beat around the cape”), but to do so is to feel the relative lack of density in a line that couldn’t meet Pound’s standards. The deleted passage sounds more like speech than incantation—not “Alexandria/Vienna London/Unreal” but “everything went wrong.” One might easily expect a compressed, elliptical poem to forgo the possibility of dilation, but in *The Waste Land* Eliot discovered a way to exclude such amplification from the very place one might most expect to discover it: the long poem. Had the canceled passage been retained, *The Waste Land* would have been a completely different poem, and the literary history of the last hundred years would have followed a very different course. What would that poem have looked like?

This question haunted Eliot. Twenty years after completing *The Waste Land*, Eliot published “The Dry Salvages,” the third of the *Four Quartets*. The quartets contain moments of high intensity, but such moments are set against passages of rhythmically flaccid and imagistically imprecise writing—passages that, in the context of the *Quartets*, ultimately feel more unsettling than the intensities.

It seems, as one becomes older,
 That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence—
 Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy,
 Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
 Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.
 The moments of happiness—not the sense of well-being,
 Fruition, fulfillment, security or affection,
 Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination—
 We had the experience but missed the meaning,
 And approach to the meaning restores the experience
 In a different form, beyond any meaning
 We can assign to happiness. I have said before
 That the past experience revived in the meaning
 Is not the experience of one life only
 But of many generations.

One can imagine how quickly Pound’s blue pencil would have excised this passage from *The Waste Land*, the phrase “even a very good dinner” pushing him probably into despair. Many of Eliot’s readers, schooled in the unmitigated intensities of *The Waste Land* itself, did despair, for like the repetition of the G-major chord in Beethoven’s opus 110 or the attenuated kiss in *L’Avventura*, this passage from “The Dry Salvages” is unprovocatively dull, unacceptably leisurely. The diction is imprecise, the lines larded with unstressed syllables, the tone egregiously reassuring—the tone of an adult speaking to a child whose acumen the adult may not recognize: “It seems, as one becomes older,/That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence—/Or even development.” To begin the passage with “it seems” is to announce an inability to describe

how it is or even what it is. The words “sequence” and “development” don’t seem different enough to justify the elaboration of the former by the latter, so the passage feels unmotivated. It moves forward by equivocation, dulling rather than sharpening the distinctions for which it gropes: “I have said before.”

Even before Eliot’s speaker tells us he’s repeating himself, we recognize that the passage glosses lines from “East Coker,” the quartet preceding “The Dry Salvages.”

Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.

Compared to the dilatory lines from “The Dry Salvages,” these lines possess a more immediately recognizable authority: the tone is oracular, the diction concretely imagistic rather than generalized, the lineation marked by enjambment (“intense moment/Isolated”) that energizes the syntax. Rather than meandering through a loose accumulation of appositions (“not the sense of well-being./Fruition, fulfillment, security or affection”), this sentence feels driven by an argument (“Not the intense moment/Isolated, with no before and after,/But a lifetime”), and the sentence reinforces the argument by repeating its syntactical pattern (“not the lifetime of one man only/But of old stones”).

The design of the quartets embodies this argument, for if *The Waste Land* is a poem of intense moments with no before and after, then *Four Quartets* is a poem that aspires to occupy the temporal space of ordinary human behavior, reserving the occupation of the timeless moment for the saint. Each of the quartets begins with an account of a moment of heightened spiritual awareness; each moment is associated with a particular place, and the work of the poem is to recognize the necessity of what may initially seem like the “waste sad time” that human beings inevitably inhabit between their rare experiences of such timeless moments.

But while the passage I've quoted from "East Coker" describes the need for something other than the timeless moment, the passage from "The Dry Salvages" embodies that need in language that repeats a now familiar point in strategically familiar language. Rather than feeling uniquely central to the poem, the passage feels as though it were standing beside the poem, explicating it, repeating its more self-consciously inevitable gestures in a language of generality—a language we associate not with the aesthetic space created by great poems but with the space surrounding poems, the space in which we speak and breathe, the space in which we're free to repeat ourselves, foraging for alternatives, rather than mustering the singularity we associate with art. Taken out of context, the passage may sound weirdly flat: in context, we experience the passage as an eschewal of artifice—an unexpected recovery of a world we thought we had to abandon in order to purchase the pleasure of art.

Context is all. Crucial to the effect of the repeated G-major chord in Beethoven's opus 110 is the fact that this sonata is written in the key of A-flat major: G major is as far from home as the tonal system allows Beethoven to venture, yet he dwells there, seemingly uninterested in resolution. Crucial to the effect of the dispassionate kiss in *L'Avventura* is that its embarrassingly tedious duration does not lead to consummation but is finally interrupted by a speeding train. And crucial to the effect of Eliot's passages of flaccid writing is their relationship to other kinds of writing within the quartets. The passages are not, like this line from elsewhere in "The Dry Salvages," epigrammatically precise and therefore charismatic.

Time is no healer; the patient is no longer here.

Neither are they, like these lines, imagistically concrete, therefore oracular.

The salt is on the briar rose,
The fog is in the fir trees.

When the writing turns charismatic or oracular—when suddenly the train speeds past, when the key of A-flat major is quickly reestablished—we feel the intervention of urgency. But while urgency is welcome, it is not automatically thrilling. The effect of the flattened passages in the *Quartets* is not simply a matter of what Roland Barthes called the “dilatory space” on which the pleasure of narrative gratification depends; neither is it a matter of what James Wright called “prose lines” in poems, lines of lesser intensity that create a backdrop or launching pad for rhetorically heightened lines. The effect of dilation feels at once most powerful and most tenuous if, once the train speeds past, as trains are after all given to do, the doldrums of G major feel in retrospect curiously enticing.

“Enticing” is potentially a misleading word, however, for such moments must also continue to feel unsettling, unjustifiably flat. While the power of Eliot’s enervated writing depends on context, that power is also contingent on a challenge to context: dilation may threaten to last so long that we forget the possible intervention of necessity—forget the very context on which the power of such passages also depends. In *King Lear*, Goneril’s dilatory speech doesn’t challenge us in quite this way; dramatic necessity motivates her otherwise unnecessary verbiage. But compare Goneril’s protracted expression of love for her father to the kind of protracted speaking we hear later in *King Lear* from Kent, Edgar, and Lear himself. Kent is the first character in the play who speaks with a rambling verbosity that feels as inexplicable to us as it does to his auditors: when asked simply to identify himself, he says,

I do profess to be no less than I seem, to serve him truly that will put me in trust, to love him that is honest, to converse with him that is wise and says little, to fear judgment, to fight when I cannot choose, and to eat no fish.

Outcast, speaking in disguise to the outcast Lear, Kent insists that he can “deliver a plain message bluntly,” but he does anything but that. Though Goneril’s speech is unnecessarily elaborated, it sets a dramatic action swiftly in motion. Kent’s speech not only stalls the

engine; his language dismantles the grammatical rails on which necessity runs while at the same time riding on them. To be no less than one seems is to eat no fish: who could disagree?

Shakespeare became a master of this more unstable species of dilation. Recall the gravedigger's scene in *Hamlet* or the knocking at the gate scene in *Macbeth*, scenes that interrupt actions of propulsive inevitability, yanking us out of the revved-up space of art and dropping us back into the apparently inconsequential space in which we exist, as if we turned away from the drama to have a conversation about grocery shopping. When most effective, such scenes leave us feeling unsettled, not just relieved or hungry for what's next. The audience of *King Lear* craves a release from the play's harsh economy of necessity, in which nothing comes from nothing and something from something. And yet the release offered by Kent's behavior does not console easily or permanently. Is his speech desperate or determined, a lapse or a reprieve?

By the time Shakespeare was writing, there was already an established tradition not only of describing dilation but of discriminating between plausible and implausible versions of it. But by the time Eliot was writing the *Four Quartets*, the impulse that led him to entertain the aesthetic function of flaccid writing had become controversial in a more particular way. Once romanticism found its inevitable conclusion in modernism, a modernism that prized compression and concision, then lassitude became something more inevitably to be scorned. This development obscured the longer history of aesthetic choices, making alternatives seem mutually exclusive. And since Eliot was the twentieth century's most influential opponent of dilation in *The Waste Land* before he became its most elegant exemplar in *Four Quartets*, the sound of lassitude became an especially charged aspect of Eliot's legacy. In the world after modernism, that sound can be almost indistinguishable from the sound of Eliot himself.

Some say that the measuring of time
Is a recognition of what it is, but

I think the things that are in it
Are more like it, though not quite it.

Actually what is in it is controlled
And colored by the units of measuring it.
That summer jog you had
A long time ago
Is probably it, it fits so
Neatly over it anyway, nobody
Could ever tell the difference.

This passage from John Ashbery's long poem "Litany" recalls Eliot's generalized diction and all-purpose exempla ("That summer jog you had"), pushing Eliot's preference for unemphatic argument ("Some say") and floating pronouns ("it fits so/Neatly over it") to an extreme. Ashbery's poem is unthinkable without Eliot's precedent.

But while much of "Litany" sounds like the dilatory language of the *Quartets*, Ashbery's poem does not establish a context for such language. Not only are we at liberty to forget the possible intervention of necessity in "Litany"; it never arrives—no A-flat major, no speeding train, no lines of contrasting energy. Instead of feeling that we descend from aesthetic to real time (as we do in Eliot's *Quartets*), we feel that Ashbery has not delineated an alternative to real time—as if our experience of "Litany" were easily coterminous with a discussion about grocery shopping. The result is an unrepeatable achievement: a poem in which very little sense of aesthetic singularity or culmination is ever possible—a poem as determinedly relaxed as *The Waste Land* is irremediably intense.

It was inevitable that such works of art were conceived after modernism. Think of Andy Warhol's *Sleep*, a film of the poet John Giorno sleeping for five hours, or Morton Feldman's String Quartet II, which maintains its quiet, homogeneous texture throughout a single movement lasting over six hours. Even more relentlessly than "Litany," these works of art redeploy the terms of what other works of art have trained us to recognize as dilation, attenuating those terms to the point where they relinquish their power. We feel the

counterintuitive thrill of lassitude in Feldman or Warhol inasmuch as our knowledge of earlier works of art provide the context for it. Such art throws us back on the history of modernism with gusto.

But if “Litany” is in these terms a postmodern poem, a poem that invites us to consider its relationship to modernism, so is “The Dry Salvages,” though of a particular kind—the kind that encourages us to imagine art as a continuous struggle over the last few centuries, rather than over the last few decades. In the short-term history of taste, dilation comes in and out of style; the power of works of art embracing it depends on works of art that dismiss it with equal vigor. In the long-term history of art, such oppositions fall away, relieving us from the pressure to narrow the field of artistic expression. *Four Quartets* offers that relief, for instead of upending modernism’s disdain for dilation, the poem reestablishes its place within the context of a variety of aesthetic choices—one of many effects to which an artist might aspire, as Shakespeare or Beethoven did. The poem bequeaths these choices to later poems, as it received them from earlier ones.

Recall now the opening line of Elizabeth Bishop’s “Brazil, January 1, 1502”: “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes.” The first thing my ear notices about this line is the diction, which is dull. We’re dealing in generalities here—“Januaries, Nature”—not the most typical province of poetic language. The second thing I notice is that the line is a pentameter: “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes.” A tone has been established. This poem is speaking calmly and loftily about how things are, seemingly unaware that how things are doesn’t sound very interesting.

Januaries, Nature greets our eyes
 exactly as she must have greeted theirs:
 every square inch filling in with foliage—
 big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,
 blue, blue-green, and olive,
 with occasional lighter veins and edges,
 or a satin underleaf turned over;
 monster ferns

in silver-gray relief,
 and flowers, too, like giant water lilies
 up in the air—up, rather, in the leaves—
 purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,
 rust red and greenish white.

Like anybody who's spent time with this poem, I've registered the poem's epigraph ("embroidered nature. . . tapestried landscape"), which suggests that the poem is self-conscious about its low-energy act of representation. And I've figured out who Bishop is talking about when she says "theirs" in the second line: the pronoun refers to the Portuguese who first observed the harbor at Rio de Janeiro on 1 January 1502. But when I *hear* those two opening lines again—"Januaries, Nature greets our eyes/exactly as she must have greeted theirs"—I don't think about any of that. Instead, the pronoun "theirs" seems meaningless, even more so than the noun "Nature." For while the pronoun wants to point to particular people in a particular place at a particular time, the poem doesn't tell us who or where or when. We're pushed forward into the linear process of discovery, which is the life of the poem, yet for many lines there is virtually nothing to discover—only the fact that leaves may be large or small, flowers yellow or pink.

At the same time, the versification seems to be getting soggy. The second line is also a pentameter ("exactly as she **must** have **greeted theirs**"), but unlike its predecessor, in which the stressed syllables match the normal intonation of the clause ("Januaries, Nature greets our eyes"), this pentameter asks us to put a heavy stress on the word "as," a word we wouldn't ordinarily stress. Quickly, any sense of a consistent metric disappears from the poem. What's more, while the opening line is enjambed, asking us to put particular pressure on the word "exactly" ("Januaries, Nature greets our eyes/**exactly** as she must have greeted theirs"), every subsequent line ends either with a full stop or by parsing the syntax—by breaking the syntax in a predictable place rather than using the line endings to energize the syntax. "Brazil, January 1, 1502" doesn't sound like "The Dry Salvages," but like Eliot, Bishop has relinquished the power of the most basic

poetic devices, and the result is an unrelenting lassitude. Rather than fulfilling the sonic and semantic expectations aroused by its first two lines, “Brazil, January 1, 1502” attenuates that relinquishment for so long that we may cease to be aroused. Why does its opening stanza seem so deeply invested in getting things right when there is no apparent reason for getting things right? Is there a reason for exactitude that the poem hasn’t yet given us a reason to imagine?

Context, once again, is all, and the final stanza of the poem supplies it. In contrast to the lassitude of the poem’s opening lines, the diction here is bracingly concrete, the syntax hungry for predication.

Just so, the Christians, hard as nails,
 tiny as nails, and glinting,
 in creaking armor, came and found it all,
 not unfamiliar:
 no lovers’ walks, no bowers,
 no cherries to be picked, no lute music,
 but corresponding, nevertheless,
 to an old dream of wealth and luxury
 already out of style when they left home—
 wealth, plus a brand-new pleasure.

When the Portuguese arrived on 1 January 1502, Bishop explains, they were incurious enough to find the new world landscape “not unfamiliar.” They presumed the harbor into which they sailed to be the mouth of a great river, which they named Rio de Janeiro—river of January. But there is no river. Error is built into the very name of the place, and once we register how the energetic language in Bishop’s poem is presenting a new world landscape as an allegory for old world values (“Still in the foreground there is Sin”), we have to wonder if a similar imposition of values might have been taking place in the low-energy language of the poem’s opening: “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes/exactly as she must have greeted theirs.” Who said nature was a girl? Is nature feminine in the same way that a flower might be purple, yellow, or pink? Is exactitude opposed to error, or is it a species of error? At the end of the poem, when we see

the Portuguese entering their own representation of the foreign landscape—"they ripped away into the hanging fabric,/each out to catch an Indian for himself"—then the poem's opening lines feel not pointlessly lackadaisical but pointedly contrived, a provocation.

That provocation is at once ethical and aesthetic. But while the poem's ethical dilemma feels resolved by the end of the poem, which condemns the Portuguese for their rapaciousness, the aesthetic dilemma remains naggingly unresolved. For no matter how many times we've read "Brazil, January 1, 1502," no matter how clearly we remember that the poem will contextualize its opening lines, those lines also continue to feel flatly pointless, resisting the context that also makes them meaningful. If they didn't do so, if their lassitude didn't last long enough to disrupt our sense of proportion and dissipate our wish for gratification, then the poem would not feel like a linguistic drama we want to inhabit over and over again; it would feel instead like a puzzle we've already solved, a problem we need to think about only once. Like the *Four Quartets*, "Brazil, January 1, 1502" asks us to live in time, the time in which we think and breathe, repeating ourselves, correcting ourselves. It asks us to recognize that by living in time we don't simply diagnose error but inhabit it, returning again and again to the beginning with a renewed sense of the inadequacy of our sharpest discriminations.

This is what great works of art do. The only plausible answer to the question "can bad writing be a virtue?" is never, but if works of art are to remain open to the full range of possibilities inherent in their mediums, then the question needs continually to be raised. And it needs to be raised by the works of art themselves, works that invigorate our standards of excellence by confounding given notions of what constitutes excellence. One of the most thrilling pentameters in Shakespeare is "Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill him! Hold, hold, hold, hold, hold," but how could one possibly determine, outside of the scene in *Coriolanus* in which it occurs, that the line is good or bad? How could one even tell that it's a pentameter?

These questions rest on a foundational presupposition: the effect of a particular aesthetic gesture is never predictably good or

bad or anything in itself; its success depends on its relationship to other effects. The question of value is more charged when we're trying to describe the crucial presence in art of an effect that in itself seems purposeless—an effect that depends on the abandonment of all our usual tools for describing how and why an artistic medium is worthy of our attention; but the presupposition on which the question rests remains the same. Our effort to describe a single effect leads us inevitably to consider its relationship to other effects both within and without a particular work of art. So reading Ashbery or Bishop, we may find ourselves reading Eliot, just as we may find ourselves reading Shakespeare when we read the *Four Quartets*. We slow down, our thoughts wander, and we're gripped by what we're reading because we've drifted away from it, as if for a moment we'd dozed off, forgetting to turn the page.