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Difficult Ornaments: Florida and the Poets by Ange Mlinko
(review)

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instead to foreground the “non-linear possibilities of the poem’s readings” (171).

In a keen observation offered as she draws towards her conclusion, Azambuja notes that “Poetry enables the momentary realisation of slivers of the ‘unseeing.’” “Unseeing” alludes to the Buddha’s comment in the *Surangama Sutra*: “When unseeing, why do you not see the unseeing? If you see the unseeing, it is no longer unseeing. If you do not see the unseeing, it is not an object. Why isn’t it yourself?” We find ourselves again in the realm of the ineffable, “that which cannot be captured by reason or language” (179). Unseeing is the stripping away of available concepts and ideas, but the unseeing can’t be put into words, at least not directly or definitively, because that would become another limited and limiting way of seeing. Hence Azambuja’s deft coinage “slivers of the ‘unseeing’” with its subtle suggestion of objects seen that are not really objects nor altogether seen. The poetry of the four poets featured in *The Zen of Eco-poetics* is designed to foster this unseeing, making “the visible a little hard // To see” (CPP 275). As this phrase from “The Creations of Sound” suggests, Stevens is trying to upend or dislodge perception in order to open up the space for the genuine act of imagination. As he insists in a koan-like formulation in “The Plain Sense of Things,” “Yet the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined” (CPP 428). Imagination in this sense is not the simple binary opposite of reality, and is certainly not the subjective component of poetic composition, but is rather an ongoing process of seeing and unseeing, perpetually breaking perception down in order to open perception up. *The Zen of Eco-poetics* offers useful insight into this dynamic, its rootedness in four early modernists’ encounters with East Asian thought and creative practice, and its echoes of the new materialism in contemporary ecocriticism.

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Difficult Ornaments: Florida and the Poets¹

By Ange Mlinko. Oxford UP, 2024.

Reading *Difficult Ornaments: Florida and the Poets* in Key West is an exercise in exacting magic, in checking the physical place with its textual representation and re-living it in a sort of triple vision: from Ange Mlinko’s poetic descriptions to the actual Florida Keys and back to the poets’ ornamental fecundity that attracted me in the first place.

In winter 1989 during an undergraduate modern poetry seminar led by Professor Kathryn Chittick at Trent University, I fell under a linguistic spell cast by Wallace Stevens as I prepared a presentation on his “Of Modern Poetry.” After two weeks of immersion in his poetry, and essays about it in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, I was hooked by the kaleidoscopic linguistic color of a hedonistic Eden—one that is particularly attractive to northerners infused with the sub-tropics. Mlinko captures this fascination in chapter two, subtitled

“Green Coconut Ice Cream,” through Stevens’s poetry and letters. Here is his arrival in Miami, 1916:

This is a jolly place—joli. It is alive. It is beautiful, too. . . . When I got here at midnight last night, the air was like pulp. But there is a constant wind that keeps stirring it up. . . . The town is situated on a bay which is separated from the sea beyond by a narrow beach. The beach is deserted at this season. . . . The houses are not pretentious. Their grounds are full of oleanders as large as orchard trees, groups of hibiscus, resembling holly-hocks, strange trumpet-vines, royal palms, cocoanut-palms full of cocoanuts, which litter the ground, orange and grape-fruit trees, mangoes in bloom, bougainvillea, castor-beans, etc. etc. You soon grow accustomed to the palms. The soil is utterly different from ours. It seems to be all sand covered with sparse grass and the surrounding jungle. After all, the important thing in Florida is the sun. It is as hot as a coal in the day-time. It goes down rather abruptly, with little twilight. Then the trade winds quickly blow the heat away and leave the air pulpy but cool. (Mlinko 33; L 191)

After quoting this passage, Mlinko continues: “Then in 1922, beholding the Keys for the first time (with [Arthur] Powell and company): ‘This is one of the choicest places I have ever been to.’ [Stevens] describes the soil again, Crispin’s motto incipient in his avid noticing: ‘The ground is white coral broken up, as white as this paper, dazzling in the sunshine. . . . The place is a paradise—midsummer weather, the sky brilliantly clear and intensely blue, the sea blue and green beyond what you have ever seen’” (33; L 225).

Mlinko synthesizes Stevens’s letters, Florida poems, Peter Brazeau’s *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, and other poets’ materials effectively into what she deems “the peacock style” (25). Her book’s title leads readers into it: “Difficult ornament, I conclude, names the quality I love so much in Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, James Merrill, Harry Mathews—the word play, the labyrinthine syntax, the patterning, and most of all the metaphors that, with tendrils invading every part of speech, blossom into full-blown metonyms” (18). There’s joy in those extensions as well as years of sustenance for like-minded readers.

Why “difficult”? I suspected it might involve modernism. Mlinko effectively exhibits Stevens’s complex wordplay and rhetorical ornamentation through “The Comedian as the Letter C,” but I wonder whether her emphasis on Stevens’s personal difficulties is necessary. Mlinko quotes Elsie Stevens:

“I think he finds it just very difficult. He would like to relax very much, but he finds it very difficult. You must forgive him.” . . . Wallace Stevens’s colleagues at Hartford Insurance Company agreed that he didn’t have friends. He lived in a spacious manor with his reclusive wife, Elsie, in a cold marriage; their hobby was gardening, and they gardened separate plots. He was diligent in

his work, refined in his tastes, and quietly authored some of the most sublime American poetry from the first half of the twentieth century, very little of it wielding the second half of the century's favorite pronoun, "I." He deflected readers who would presume too much intimacy. He found it just very difficult. (29)

Perhaps I'm protective of Stevens, but I wonder if other readers also tire of this personal narrative; the last sentence seems an unnecessary pile-on that over-emphasizes Mlinko's title in a way that strays from her astute poetic analysis. There are a few other annoyances in this book, but these are mere blemishes in the larger scope of most often "getting it right" eloquently:

While Stevens's letters to Elsie attest to Florida's endless ability to flabbergast him, his Florida poems are an ecstasy of golden green: they are the odes that Adam would have declaimed in Eden. There is "Fabliau of Florida," "O, Florida, Venereal Soil," "Indian River," the "immense dew" of "Nomad Exquisite," whose key word "nomad" comes from the Greek *nomas*, "roaming in search of pasture." Later, the poems would turn elegiac: "A Farewell to Florida," "The Idea of Order at Key West," "A Fish-Scale Sunrise." A fabliau is a French form of bawdy verse, and behind "venereal" is Venus: Florida, for Stevens, is rampant, erotic, fecund. These qualities pervade the language itself, so that lyric seems to mimic landscape much as insects mimic flora, and flora mimic insects in turn, in an evolutionary tango that birds as well as mammals are gradually admitted to over the eons. It is an evolution that advances by mirroring. When we perceive the eyes of a peacock's tail, we are spooked by the illusion of being seen; yet behind the "fake" eyes is, inarguably, a supple intelligence that proceeds by imitation and analogy. An inanimate force drives species to specific ends: reproduction and adaptation, or change. Language is the same: it makes more of itself, and it adapts. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens formulated it thus: "It Must Change. . . . It Must Give Pleasure."

No one else makes so explicit the connection between language and fecundity, language and biological ornament. (34)

Stevens, and Moore, are the masters that teach Bishop this. Chapter three, on Marianne Moore, is not as engaging as surrounding chapters on Stevens and Bishop, but that could partly be because I am not as enthralled by Moore as the other two poets. As with poets such as Auden and Pound, I admire Moore's skills more than feel her words. However, Mlinko does a wonderful job with Moore's animals as they are technically wrought in her unique manner, as she wrote in "Poetry," of constructing "imaginary gardens with real toads in them":

Marianne Moore . . . comes closest in her marriage of zoological knowledge with a linguistic *wunderkammer*. She visited Florida once as an adolescent and found it less appealing than the New England coast, but it was an inspiration behind "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns," her great poem of the imagination and a fitting companion poem to "The Comedian as the Letter C." (47)

Stevens-Moore-Bishop is an amazing triptych of poets because of their rendering of the natural world. Each poet enables readers to see language in action to re-form nature so that we participate in creation stories; at once we see the thing itself and the artificial construction of it:

Resplendent siblings, both Moore and Stevens blended the natural world—the world of perceptions—with a construct of the imagination. As Stevens wrote in a letter, "I have been going to Florida for twenty years, and all of the Florida poems have actual backgrounds. The real world seen by an imaginative man may very well seem like an imaginative construction" (Stevens, *Letters* 288–9). . . . Where Stevens emphasized the venereal and Venusian in Florida, Moore countered with something purer, neither phantom nor wanton. Her Florida is curious, where curios originate, and where curators go to curate. (64)

Mlinko charts "Stevens and Moore's artistic kinship" (67) by delving into their essays about each other such as "The Accented Syllable," "On Wallace Stevens," and "A Poet that Matters," as well as their published poetry in the avant-garde journal *Others*. She effectively compares "The Steeple-Jack" with "Domination of Black" to show how the artistic transformations resemble the "majesty of peacocks" (50).

"The aesthetic triangle between Bishop, Stevens, and Moore traverses Florida at its base" (67). This is a loaded sentence that might have readers wondering about all the people inhabiting the state as tourists, artists, and colonizers. As these north easterners traverse Florida we might think about colonial repetition. Such political and geographical trespass is intrinsic to Florida unless travelled by the Indigenous people whom Bishop recognizes in "Florida." Mlinko reads this poem and its revelations of ugliness and abjection as differentiating Bishop from the other two poets. Bishop's free verse allows for unruly tropical disorder. Mlinko also attends to Bishop's eventual dissatisfaction with Key West as a "base" increasingly taken over by the Navy, so much so that people were evicted from homes, slept in cars and lots, and even—in a few cases—killed themselves. Key West is a stomping ground in many ways. From my walk down Duval Street to bar talk with a local while watching the Florida Panthers and Toronto Maple Leafs playoff game, I heard that nobody in Key West cheers for the Panthers or the Miami Dolphins because everyone's from the northeastern states. I saw some team flags in town, but it is mostly true. "The real is only the base. But it is the base," wrote Stevens in "Materia Poetica" (*CPP* 917).

While Mlinko convincingly reveals Bishop's base better than most by adding real facts to the worn story of Bishop's increased drinking in Key West, she can also exaggerate when demonstrating how Bishop built upon the poetry she memorized "almost by heart" in college:

[A] close look at "Florida" suggests that it is a rewriting of Stevens's "Nomad Exquisite." Or rather, it is an expansion of his compressed, imagistic vividness, which leaves out so much of the rot and rankness of subtropical biomass. His "immense dew" and "green vine" are clarified, in Bishop's poem, to "brackish water," "held together by mangrove roots." His "big-finned palm" becomes her "palm trees clatter" just as his "green sides / And gold sides of green sides" becomes her "green hummocks" and "damp gold wings." His "flakes of flames," an image of sublimity, comes into focus when set side by side with her buzzards circling "like stirred-up flakes of sediment." His "forms, flames, and flakes of flames," moreover, revert to their origins as real brushfires: "Smoke from woods-fires filters fine blue solvents. / On stumps and dead trees the charring is like black velvet." Finally, Stevens's "eye of the young alligator" becomes Bishop's alligator calls. The disconcerting image, of a deep male bellow erupting from the "Indian princess," can fairly be imagined as Stevens's voice erupting from Bishop's own throat. (71-2)

Does Bishop really project Stevens's Florida as such? Isn't Mlinko going too far in the last sentence to imagine Stevens's voice bellowing out of Bishop's throaty alligator? That fancy takes away from the alligator's warning of retribution to the colonizer who left the Indigenous skirt in the sand. However, the occasional interpretive mistake is compensated by carefully wrought syntheses. I have always admired Bishop's compressed and synesthetic imagery in this poem, and I didn't realize until reading this book that it's partly due to Bishop's Stevensian music. Mlinko explains:

In "Florida," Bishop could write in the key of Stevens—here is his florid humor, his peacock brilliance:

The palm trees clatter in the stiff breeze
like the bills of the pelicans. The tropical rain comes down
to freshen the tide-looped strings of fading shells:
Job's Tear, the Chinese Alphabet, the scarce Junonia,
parti-colored pectins and Ladies' Ears,
arranged as on a gray rag of rotted calico,
the buried Indian Princess's skirt;
with these the monotonous, endless, sagging coast-line
is delicately ornamented.

(76; Bishop 24-25)

Now that is some difficult ornamentation. Although Mlinko's interpretive claims sometimes continue to ascribe overabundant intentional agency to Bishop's crafty inheritance from Stevens, I agree with her overall detection of Stevens's imagistic music in this work:

"Clatter" recalls the opening line of the opening poem of *Harmonium*: "Every time the bucks went clattering" and the list of shells' names transposes the sense of being "delicately ornamented" to the page, creating for itself a shoreline with its ragged margin. Later in the poem, phrases like "The mosquitoes/go hunting to the tune of their ferocious obligatos" and "the poorest/postcard of itself" lightly echo Stevens' trademark assonance. . . . (76-77)

Other early poems such as "Wading at Wellfleet" and "The Imaginary Iceberg" display Stevensian sound imagery and thought respectively. Mlinko is strong at expressing Bishop's differences:

Bishop relaxes Stevens's blank verse into conversational, free-verse rhythms that subvert the longing for "ideas of order"; they allow for the random and arbitrary with expanding and contracting lines. Her new environment was teaching her how to look at disorder without imposing an order on it, aestheticizing it. She wrote in her journal, "What I like about Key West is its sketchiness, its fragility—the wooden buildings laid so lightly together, in the midst of the dangerous, poisonously colored seas, full of man-eating fish, subject to hurricanes; also apparently liable to be forced apart and over-run by the strange plant-life, etc. Why didn't Stevens do more with it?" (77)

Well, I suggest that Stevens remained mostly a tourist while Bishop lived there. And while their differences are endemic to their stylistic writing, the progression from Stevens's wondrous ideas of order to Bishop's beautiful inclusion of ugliness takes readers on a sweet ride of Florida through the first half of the twentieth century. Consider "The Idea of Order at Key West" and then "The Street by the Cemetery." Both poems exhibit night light so bright it's almost neon, or phosphorescent, or photo negative. Life-in-death and death-in-life, the old Romantic poles transform sensory intensity into friendly dialogues—a difference being that Stevens harkens back to mysterious creation where Bishop makes us look at the waste. Both poems present a Key West harbor exceptionally.

Mlinko writes: "Known for both her nomadism and her exquisiteness—in the etymological sense of 'seeking out'—Bishop both springs from a Stevensian aesthetic and serves as a correction" (72). She adeptly explains how Bishop's development of "proliferal style" in Florida initiates her prosaic poetics. This book focuses on Florida, but the poem that best illustrates Bishop's dialogue with Stevens, and how she transforms his "blank verse *moo*" (*Poems, Prose, and Letters* 740) into a contemporary prosaic poetry—as Vidyan Ravinthiran,

Penelope Laurans, and Bonnie Costello have shown—is “The End of March,” set in Massachusetts.

Moore’s influence on Bishop is traversed through their well-known disagreements about Bishop’s “Roosters.” Moore “recoiled from ‘Roosters’” while Bishop maintained its “sordidities” (87). Yet Mlinko has us rethink Bishop’s depiction of Key West’s ubiquitous cocks by showing how the poem resembles Stevens’s style rather than Moore’s:

Deep from protruding chests
in green-gold medals dressed,
.....

glass-headed pins,
oil-golds and copper greens,
anthracite blues, alazarins[.]

.....

The crown of red
set on your little head
is charged with all your fighting blood.
Yes, that excrescence

makes a most virile presence,
plus all that vulgar beauty of iridescence.
(86; Bishop 27–29)

Mlinko writes that Bishop “has referred to it as her ‘war poem,’ and the language is more overtly Stevensian and peacock-like, as well as more violent in its decoration” (86).

Mlinko ends the Bishop chapter, subtitled “A Queer Antique Musical Instrument Floating in the Sea,” with the 1946 sale of her beloved house at 624 White Street (which we can now tour thanks to Arlo Haskell and the Key West Literary Seminar). She then includes a coda, suggesting an alternative location of “The Bight”: Garrison Bight rather than the local consensus of Key West Bight. While this spot is impossible to pinpoint, Mlinko is most often contextually accurate:

[Bishop’s] sense of desiccation is embedded in the etymology of Key West, Cayo Hueso, “Island of Bones,” or “Bone Key” (which Bishop, incidentally, had planned to use as a title for an unfinished suite of poems). In a translanguing homonymous leap, *hueso* (“dry”) became the English “west,” fittingly for the farthest island of the chain bearing westward into the Caribbean. The bones discovered on the island where the Spanish landed seemed to have come from an epic battle between warring Native tribes. “Key,” of course, also has a ghostly association with bones, through Latin *clavis*, whence

our “clavicle” (“small key”) and the ivory of keyboard instruments, claviers or clavichords. (Bishop herself played and had a clavichord shipped from New York to White Street in 1939.) (79)

This review is long already so I’ll be quick with the chapters on James Merrill, Harry Mathews, and Laura Riding Jackson. They are worth reading, especially for nuggets like this: “In Florida, as in the Mediterranean landscapes of Greece and Italy, a limestone karst is filtered by rainwater that erodes deep caverns and underground streams” (98). These coastal geologies are magical, and Mlinko helps explain why in this elemental synthesis.

James Merrill’s father Charles “adopted a coat of arms featuring the head of a peacock” (99). Merrill’s youthful poetry has “the difficult ornaments of intricate syntax sinuously overlaying a rhyming stanza pattern combine[d] with the metaphorical language to give an impression of frozen baroque grandeur” (100). As Merrill’s poetry matures “we intuit a fluid medium in which the anxiety of death, or ‘drying up,’ is mollified by a recourse to ramification, those palm roots that keep putting out tendrils under duress and, with enough patience and faith, are eventually rewarded” (103–104).

Chapter 6 on Harry Mathews is exceptional, and rivals earlier chapters on Stevens and Bishop. Mathews continues the gorgeous tradition of superimposing the Mediterranean on Florida with “poems that glittered with the dazzle of Mediterranean sunlight on sea: poems from a life lived in Mallorca, Spain, France. Mathews seemed the embodiment of an ideal: the man who knew how to live” (112). He’s also steeped in classics such as the twelfth-century sestinas of Arnaut Daniel, also admired by Pound and Eliot, from whom Mathews learned much of his poetics. Mlinko focuses on “Cool Gales Shall Fan the Glades,” which embodies an ultra-hot Key West climate tempered by wind. Riding a bicycle is comfortable on the flats of Key West. It’s only when one steps inside to air conditioning that a sweat-drenched shirt becomes noticeable. Mlinko concludes that “the thrill of Mathews’s poetry lies in its subversive gorgeousness without apology—and maybe, too, in the near-masochistic pressure of a temperament disciplining itself” (128).

What better way to end a book on florid poetry than with an all-consuming obliterator? “Laura Riding Jackson was the bad fairy of Modernist poetry, denouncing it exactly for the peacock traits celebrated in this book” (133). Riding Jackson was praised by W. H. Auden in 1942 as one of “the four best American poets” (138; Jenkins 48) alongside Eliot, Moore, and Louise Bogan (with whom he was speaking). In 1943, Riding Jackson “gave up her vocation for good, and for almost fifty years Florida sheltered her silence” (132). Although she did not write for long, she had great influence on poetics, such as William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, and on her lover Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess*. Riding Jackson was the only poet in this book to remain in Key West; yet in “‘The Flowering Urn’ she speaks of ‘fertility’s lie’ the way she will later speak of poetry’s lie” (143) *à la* Keats, to forge eternal beauty as a life force to ward off death.

With the exception of Riding, the other poets “escaped to Florida . . . to fecundate their imaginations” (143). “The state with the prettiest name” (Bishop

24) was a magnet of desire, for “The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world” (CPP 286). Mlinko uses those lines from Stevens’s “Esthétique du Mal” as epigraph. What a physical world is captured here, and potentially freed.

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Note

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