

Jeredith Merrin: On "The Fish"

Throughout her work, she subverts the conventional Romantic trope of world-as-woman by insisting upon the indeterminate nature of nature--now female, now male, now ungendered other. And, as we might expect, Bishop is most subversive at her most Wordsworthian moments. In "The Fish," for example--strikingly Wordsworthian in its evocation of almost religious awe and joy in the presence of embodied nature--Bishop refigures the usual Romantic figure, making us see nature as a "He," a sort of finny five-star general:

[. . .]

But even as she develops her own alternative figure, Bishop holds it up to question. She introduces this fiercely independent, masculine version of the fish with a contrasting version--domestic, and (as a result of the poet's sly adaptation of the timeworn girls-as-flowers trope) suggestive of the feminine:

[. . .]

Determinedly "unpoetic" in her prosy rhythms, her patient agglomeration of seemingly random details and associations, Bishop here avoids poetic presumption, subjective sway. She acknowledges the tenuous relation of figurative language to reality with the tentativeness of simile ("Like medals"; "shapes like full-blown roses"; "like a big peony"). Humorously, she undercuts her own anthropomorphism ("--if you could call it a lip?"). And with a pile-up of arresting particulars, she tips the scale toward quizzical observation rather than controlling allegory.

Nevertheless, Bishop's frequently anthologized "The Fish" gradually accrues more allegorical point than most of her poems (one reason why it is a teachers' favorite). It slowly builds, as I have already suggested, toward a more Wordsworthian--more emotionally rounded, end-rhymed, and almost visionary--conclusion:

[. . .]

Bishop avoids Wordsworth's egocentric, centripetal action by externalizing, focusing outward, as the title of her poem tells us, on "The Fish." Whereas Wordsworth internalizes and subsumes a naturalized human being (the almost moss-covered leech-gatherer), Bishop attends to a separate, natural creature: first by "catching" the fish both literally and figuratively (by hooking it and simultaneously "capturing" it with self-conscious anthropomorphic comparisons), and then by letting the fish--together with any suggestion of co-optive figuration--go. Her perceptions lead not merely to imaginative conquest or introspection, but to a sense of mutual "victory" and a specific action. She saves the creature's life. The undeniably serious conclusion with its Noah's Ark-like rainbow still has about it her very quiet, and very un-Wordsworthian, touch of humor (in what is, after all, a kind of elaborate "fish story").

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