

James McCorkle: On "The Fish"

Perhaps nowhere else in Bishop's poetry is the eye's journey so celebrated as in her much anthologized poem "The Fish," The journey begins with the external, in the realm of the unseeing self, with the prosaic opening lines:

I caught a tremendous fish and held him beside the boat half out of water, with my hook fast in a corner of his mouth.

The first word, "I," a pun on the self and the self that sees, precludes the opening--and flowering--of our eyes and our language. The direct and graphic description of a situation remains a moment when we look but are not yet actively and imaginatively engaged. We are external and separate since we have no connection with the other.

While Bishop examines the fish, she also begins to enter the body of figurative language:

his brown skin hung in strips like ancient wallpaper, and its pattern of darker brown was like wallpaper: shapes like full-blown roses stained and lost through age.

The simile creates depth: we enter the house of language, where things stand behind things and each is dependent on the others--for they are linked by the trope's marker "like." By repeating the wallpaper simile, the apparent domesticity of the narrator is revealed and there is a convergence of two distinctly different worlds. Implicit in this convergence is a revelation of decay and mutability through the lucidity of her observation of the fish's patterned and peeling skin.

After continuing the examination of the exterior of the fish with an increasing degree of metaphor and precision--barnacles are "fine rosettes of lime," the fish is clothed with "rags"--the poet is rhetorically self-defined and imaginatively penetrates the fish:

I thought of the coarse white flesh packed in like feathers, [. . .] and the pink swim-bladder like a big peony.

The power of observation and looking resides in and rises with the power of imagining. We move closer to the certainty we believe lies in the tactility of physical presence--be it fish or rhetoric. At each of these liminal moments transformation takes place, since we cross the abyss between the two halves of a metaphor or simile.

The movement into the fish also initiates self-interrogation. Through the use of self-reflexive tropes, the narrator crosses the threshold of exteriority--where objects remain either marginalized or idealized discretely--into a realm where objects are interrelated not only among themselves but with us. The narrator stares into the fish's eyes, only to have the fish

"not / ... return my stare" and deny any anthropomorphic pathos and sympathy. Self-reflexivity at this moment becomes transparent: the narrator acknowledges her own regard, seeing herself in relation with the other as two beings, rather than a subject distanced from (and desiring appropriation of) an object. The aside that qualifies the event--"It was more like the tipping / of an object toward the light"--qualifies the perception and makes presence more provisional. The fish mediates between the narrator and a language with which she can picture herself. The description of the wallpaper, the flower imagery, and the metaphors of ornament and clothing comprise a taxonomy that composes the speaker and creates the mystery of the speaker's presence. She is both present in these details and absent, in that the details are metaphors whose other term is left unstated. Figurative language becomes the common and defining ground that both the fish and the speaker, in their mutual mysteriousness, share.

The narrator implicitly acknowledges the limitations of language through the use of such asides as "if you could call it a lip." In using language, we impose it upon the world either to bring the world and ourselves into renewed relation or to subject the world to discipline, thus imprisoning the world and refiguring language as disciplinary. Yet figurative language also subverts the subjective and repressive qualities of language. To realize this double bind becomes a form of transcendence, though not the hierarchical transcendence of unicity. Transcendence here is the process of the dialectical movement of figurative language. The sharpening of observation, exemplified by the correction of "five old pieces of fish-line" to "or four and a wire leader / with the swivel still attached," reflects the process of reifying the self, the other, and language. Speculation is transformative and interminable, as exemplified when the fishing equipment becomes medals of valor "with their ribbons / frayed and wavering," before they are transformed again into "a five-haired beard of wisdom / trailing from his aching jaw." The fish can never be defined or gazed upon as a totality--any definition of any particular is exchanged for another. The generation of metaphors, one displacing another, grants language its continuation and life; thus, the narrator is caught in an interminable process of focusing her vision--but at some point the vision can no longer be sustained; instead it must be relinquished.

Bishop's imperative in "The Monument" ("Watch it closely") echoes "The Fish" ("I stared and stared") and describes this potentially interminable movement of perception, which is tantamount to the poem. During the process of increasing attentiveness, the speaker glimpses a provisional fullness:

I stared and stared and victory filled up the little rented boat, from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow [. . .] until everything was rainbow, rainbow,
rainbow! And I let the fish go.

The fish fills with language until it can hold no more. It is at this moment that the generation of language can go no farther. The fish must be discarded and replaced. The self has also reached its own limits of creation and definition. Artifice, if it is to remain coherent, finds itself limited. Still unanswered is whether nature is equally limited, or if it is that which remains limiting and unapprehendable. The rainbow of oil leaking onto the water's surface replaces the fish and allows discursive connections to continue. This dispensation, however, is ironic: it takes place in a grubby rented boat, where the language wears out, indicated by the repetition of "rusted" in two successive lines. The "victory" is the rainbow of a thin film of oil spreading across the bilge waters, overrunning the "pool of bilge," to spread over everything. Similarly,

the rainbow draws together the multitude of colors found throughout the poem, which parallels a rainbow's concordance of the undistorted visible colors of the spectrum. The rainbow spreads over the boat and over language "until everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!" Though it is tempting to read the final lines as an ecstatic moment that marks the narrator's full recognition of the fish and interconnectedness, such a reading remains naive, for the poem has come to describe the generative and metonymical functions of language. Jerome Mazzaro considers these final lines a parody of "God's restoration of dominion to Noah" in which Bishop's wry evolutionist stance suggests that humans' dominion is only by accident and technology. Although the rainbow reflects a new dispensation, it is one that inscribes, as Mazzaro argues, departure and uncertainty. The simple rhyme of "rainbow" and "go" underscores the provisionality of any interconnection, since it recalls the passage and loss of childhood. We must let go any notion of totality or synthesis, either rhetorical or existential. Instead, the materiality of language and time comes to be emphasized; the poem lets go of the symbolic, and reinvents the relational. The poem moves toward transcendent closure with "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow," but opens up and initiates a new, though unfigured, process that subverts closure and death: "And I let the fish go."

From *The Still Performance: Writing, Self, and Interconnection in Five Postmodern American Poets*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989. Copyright © 1989 by the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Elizabeth Bishop [2]

Author:

James McCorkle [3]

Poem:

The Fish [4]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/james-mccorkle-fish>

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