

C.K.Doreski: On "The Fish"

"The Fish" [NS], Bishop's most frequently anthologized poem, relies upon a Wordsworthian spiritual exercise to justify a rowboat transformation from plunderer to benefactor. The collapse of distinctions between land and sea, the air and earth of the speaker, obscures the borders between life and art. Bishop perceives the fish in land-language of "feathers" and "peonies" and "tin foil" and "isinglass." Even as she works those changes, however, the fish works reciprocal wonders of its own. Passive resistance deprives the fishing poet of her triumph: "He didn't fight. / He hadn't fought at all." She soon understands that her knowledge of the fish is inaccurate.

Evidence of past encounters?"two heavier lines, / and a fine black thread / still crimped from the strain and snap / when it broke and he got away"?tells of a different fish. Earlier seen as "battered and venerable / and homely" (the line-break softening the accuracy of description), the fish now assumes the mock-role of tribal elder and hero:

Like medals with their ribbons frayed and wavering, a five-haired beard of wisdom trailing from his aching jaw.

Deprived of the fight, the poet must contemplate her position as the harbinger of death. The "little rented boat" marks a closed world wherein the speaker represents the moral force of her species. Taken by the incongruity and insignificance of the colloquy, the reader is swept from the sensuous into the psychological, then moved beyond earthly particulars to a spiritual whole:

[lines 65-76]

As in the Christian parable, the oil upon the waters brings peace. It also engenders communication with the otherworldly. Through a rare Wordsworthian "spot of time," a genuine epiphany, the poet admits, somewhat reluctantly, a momentary conventional wisdom. This leap from perception to wisdom signals the arbitrariness so characteristic of the epiphany.

Though "The Fish" is certainly central to her canon, Bishop's boredom and dissatisfaction with the poem suggests a fear that the poem settles into sentiment instead of expanding into true wisdom.

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