

Thierry Ramais: On "The Fish"

In what might first look like a rather ?romanticized?, almost naive description of a fisherwoman?s passion for her hobby (we probably all have read, indeed, at some point of our childhood, rose-colored tales of hunters/fishermen taking pity on their prey(s)), Elizabeth Bishop tells us in ?The Fish?, I believe, a lot not only on man?s relation to nature, but also, in more general terms, on man?s relation to the ?other?, the way in which, after vain attempts at objectifying this ?other?, the ?reality? of the latest, its ?humanness?, always comes back in full swing, either to haunt or to charm us.

The poem starts with the epitome of fishing people and their love for tall-tales: ?I caught a tremendous fish?. The tone of the I-narrator is that of a woman proud of her victory over nature, her domination over an animal which seems to have managed, so far, to elude all other fishermen. Surprisingly, however, even though the fish is ?tremendous? and of ?a grunting weight?, it is also said to have offered little resistance: ?He didn?t fight. He hadn?t fought at all.? We do not know if the narrator is trying to convey to her listeners that, whatever the resistance was, it felt like a weak one to her (possibly increasing thereby her own merit as a skilled fisherwoman) or if the fish did indeed offer no resistance but, in all cases, this fish is different from the others (note how the fish is almost instantly referred to as ?he? instead of ?it?, a process of humanization and masculinization which I will come back to later) and the fisherwoman does express some early signs of admiration for it: it is ?venerable and homely? and his picture is imbued with ancient-like respectability (his old age summons in the narrator, I believe, both admiration and fear for the passing of time), its skins hung ?like ancient wallpaper? and offers ?shapes like full-blown roses stained and lost through roses?.

In these few first lines of the poem, an increasing shift in the narrator's perspective and focus is noticeable. From the first rather cocky (but empty) comment on how big the fish supposedly is, we are indeed slowly moving into the narrator's thoughts about the fish, its physical appearance, its shape, patterns and colors. From the narrator's observations stem mixed feelings and the process that will eventually lead her, by the end of the poem, to admire the beauty of the animal is one interrupted by moments of doubt and even repulsion. There is a strong sense that, after the exultation of the catch, the fisherwoman is now looking at this fish closely for the first time and that her eyes, along with her train of thoughts, somehow get lost in the meanders of its animalistic beauty. Even what could be described as repulsive (its "tiny white sea-lice", the "rags of green weed" hanging down) is somehow highly aestheticized. There is a strong sense that repulsion, combined with fear (see, for instance, his alluding to the "frightening gills" of the animal, the "dramatic reds and blacks" of its entrails) is a necessary step in the process of looking closely, of admitting the "reality" of the fish, of describing it objectively, demystifying its tall-tale attributes and of eventually admiring it. Repulsion is a very "humane" impulse of protection, but one which, in this poem, does not resist the test of the gaze. The fish indeed gradually becomes an object to be admired in a reverent, almost religious way, and becomes less and less one on which the feeling of "ownership" can hold its grasp. This dissociation between the fisherwoman and her catch, her "object" becomes apparent as she admits that the fish's gills "can cut so badly", echoing, I believe, her realization that this fish, despite the appearances, is not one used to give itself up easily.

The narrator's imaginative description of the animal's entrails is also, like the earlier description of its outward appearance, one imbued with aestheticism, the animal's inside are colorful, its flesh is compared to "feathers". After considering the inside and outside of the animal, the fisherwoman catches a glimpse of its eyes and, after recognizing that these eyes are "far larger than [his]", shows signs of attempts at establishing some form of "connection" between herself and the animal. Little by little, the fish stops being this "other", this object of pride that it was at the beginning of the poem, and gradually becomes imbued with human attributes as the description goes on. In the same way as one would try to catch the attention of a stranger in order to befriend him/her, the narrator is hoping to find some response to his stare in the fish's eyes which "shifted a little, but not to return my stare", echoing a first failed attempt at truly establishing a connection.

Fascinated by the physical strength of the fish (let us notice, for instance, the narrator's pointing to the fish's "lower lip" if you could call it a lip, echoing again her tendency to humanize the animal), the fisherman becomes aware of the various "fights" it has endured. There is a strong sense of the focus of the poem (and of the narrator's thoughts) shifting from pride to admiration; the fisherwoman might be good in what she does, but the fish itself has obviously been victor in many fights, too. By the end of the poem, the "victory fill[ing] up the little rented boat" stops being a simple matter of boasting about a good catch, it's the victory of both the fisherwoman and the fish itself. The animal stops being a mere trophy, it is imbued with human qualities which the fisherwoman can identify with. As a result, the latest feels she cannot do anything but let it go. The poem obviously celebrates a moment in person's life when his/her humanness goes as far as to recognize the humanity of nature itself, to consider nature not as "object" but as equally "subject". From the triumph of the catch to close observation, repulsion and eventually admiration, the ending tone of the poem then becomes one of near-euphoria, as the narrator exclaims how, on the boat, "everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!" The feeling of admiration of and reconciliation with nature has become so

strong that everything around the narrator indeed becomes nature and that, after having recognized the humanness in nature, the fisherwoman now recognizes her belonging to nature inside her own humanness. In the same way as, as David Kalstone puts it, the narrator has ?summon[ed] up? the animal from his ?own inner depth?, she has also ?summon[ed] up? those feelings of reconciliation from deep inside herself.

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