

Bonnie Costello: On "The Fish" (2)

? "The Fish" invokes folk narrative, specifically the great American "fish tale" sublimely parodied in *Moby-Dick*. Bishop's anecdote, like Melville's tale, challenges the official narrative drawn from the Bible: that man will have dominion over the fish of the sea. Bishop catches an old, heroic-looking fish without a struggle, but lets it go. Bishop's rainbow at the end of "The Fish" explicitly reminds us of the ancient rainbow that marked this covenant between God and Noah. Bishop's ending refutes narrative's inherent structure of mastery. Yet we still go back through the poem to interpret even this anti-epiphany in causal, narrative terms. Why did she let the fish go, we ask. To the extent that the elements of the poem serve to justify this final action, they serve plot. Yet as we pursue this sequential logic, we founder on the "victory" that fills up the little rented boat. Whose victory? The fish's? The poet's? As we ask such questions the author's impulse of secrecy rather than sequence becomes apparent. We can move farther back into the poem for answers to our questions, but the enigmas remain. Again, the words get in the way of the story's clear and clean effect. Indeed, we find that the beginning of the poem is driven by description not altogether in the service of plot. Why is the fish's skin like old wallpaper? How is this scene related to Bishop's personal past? Even if we recognize what [Tzvetan] Todorov [in *Genres in Discourse*] calls an epistemological rather than a mythological plot, we cannot reduce the elements of the poem to simple linear logic.

In Bishop narrative is typically forestalled by description; this is part of what turns her stories into poems, what makes them more spatial than linear. But it is also true that each description carries within it the fragment of another story, so that diachronic sequence is converted into synchronic layerings of narrative. The description, in other words, introduces a number of free motifs that invite interpretive application to the primary, associated motifs, but that are not obviously connected. In a sense the bladder of the fish, "speckled with barnacles, / fine rosettes of lime, / and infested / with a tiny white sea-lice," is a figure for this suspension out of linear logic, as are the strips of ancient wallpaper that embody another unpursued narrative, one of the poet's memory "stained and lost through age." Bishop's descriptions are full of lost or erased narratives ?

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