

## Stephen Cushman: On "The Fish"

[T]he familiar poem "The Fish" can be reread profitably as a configuration of simple parallels and more complex subordinations, culminating in the paratactic connection reminiscent of biblical syntax: "And I let the fish go." The careful avoidance of subordination, as in "so I let the fish go," reveals the speaker's reluctance, even refusal, to impose a more obvious moral closure on her narrative. Instead, Bishop reserves subordination for the shift from the speaker's simple narration of her fish story to an imaginative identification with the fish she catches. Through the first 21 lines the only conjunction is "and" and several statements are linked without conjunctions at all. Then, as the first-person speaker shifts from "I caught" to "I thought," comes hypotaxis:

While his gills were breathing in the terrible oxygen -- the frightening gills, fresh and crisp with blood, that can cut so badly ? I thought of the coarse white flesh packed in like feathers.

In this poem, with its paratactic skeleton of "I caught," "I thought," "I looked," "I admired," "I stared and stared," "And I let the fish go," hypotaxis signals the journey to the interior, as the mere recounting of events yields to personal reflection on, and appreciation of, those events. As in "the Map," in which hypotaxis accompanies the printer's excitement "as when emotion too far exceeds its cause," parataxis in "the Fish" governs emotion, whereas hypotaxis releases it, even in the vision of a "pool of bilge / where oil had spread rainbow."

From Stephen Cushman, "Elizabeth Bishop's Winding Path," Chapter 5 in *Fictions of Form in American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 131.

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