

Penelope Laurens: On "The Armadillo"

A well-modulated lyric like "The Armadillo" demonstrates how the formal qualities of Bishop's poetry help to hold the reader's emotional response in check. "The Armadillo" meditates on the Brazilian custom of floating celebratory fire balloons [1] on saints' days and festival days. It depicts the almost unearthly beauty of these fragile, dangerous objects which rise in the night sky, seeming to imitate stars and planets, but which also sometimes fall flaming to earth, disrupting and destroying natural life. The animals in the poem, driven from their nests by a fallen balloon, emerge frightened and mystified, all, from the ancient owls to the baby rabbits, vulnerable in the face of this disaster. Even the ordinarily well-protected armadillo is defenseless before the incomprehensible and terrifying shower of fire.

The question for the critic of this poem is how Bishop shapes the reader's response to this beautiful and cruel event. One could say that the poem, by its factual presentation alone, asks us to recognize the chaos these illegal balloons generate. Yet, until the final stanza, there is little to indicate that Bishop's involvement in the scene is anything more than an aesthetic one. The dramatic beauty of the fire balloons and the vulnerable beauty of the animals are both described with equal power.

The distancing that goes on through most of "The Armadillo" is a way of keeping the poem free of a sentimentality that the depth of underlying feeling might generate. Although the beauty and delicacy of the finished work make this seem unlikely, less authorial control might well reduce it to moralizing (i.e. when men float fire balloons they may do violence to the natural life around them). Instead, Bishop exercises her command of the formal constituents of verse and her descriptive powers to hold the poem back from any easily paraphrasable meaning and to give it moral resonance.

The primary way Bishop manages this control is metrical variation. This form of variation is characteristic of Bishop's sure sense of herself: it shows her commanding tradition by apparently allowing her poems to develop spontaneously. At the same time that this variation gives the reader the impression that the poem is progressing naturally, however, it also carefully limits the intensity of response he can have to it. The habitually shifting rhythms of the poem do not allow the reader to lose himself in its lyric music; instead, they keep jolting him to recognition, thereby keeping him from "taking sides"--from becoming, that is, too caught up either in the beauty of the balloons or the terror of the animals.

The way this works is clear in these first [4] stanzas:

[Laurens quotes the poem]

It would certainly not be true to say that these quatrains have no music. They do, but it is a distinctly variable one. The shift from two quatrains of three stress lines, each with a five stress third line that mirrors the appearance of the fire balloons and their flushing and filling with light, to the varying three and four stress lines of the next quatrains, keeps the reader constantly readjusting the meter [1] in his head. Even in the first apparently regular stanzas

there are examples of the roughness Bishop prefers: the first full sentence ends in the third, rather than in the fourth line of the opening stanza, countering the regular flow of the meter. And in the second stanza, the abab rhyme scheme shifts, retaining a hint of rhyme from the first stanza in "saint" and then picking up one of its full rhymes in "light," but setting the precedent for more variation in the following stanzas. Throughout the rest of the poem, the lines have either three or four stresses, but these stresses vary so from stanza to stanza that the poem projects a sense of constant shifting in spite of its recognizable lyric pattern.

With such extensive shifting it soon becomes clear that this is not simply the ordinary variation all good poets exercise to keep their poems from becoming too regular. Rather, it is variation that preserves a lyric quality while at the same time strictly delimiting lyric effusiveness. While reading this poem the reader is never allowed to forget himself and to be transported by the momentum of the verse. Instead, the metrical roughness keeps him detached, his attention concentrated on the complexity of the event the poet is describing.

Another characteristic technique Bishop uses to great effect in "The Armadillo" is that of drawing back from emotional intensity at just the point where a Romantic poet would allow such intensity to break through most completely. These stanzas from the center of the poem show something of how this works:

[Laurans quotes lines 21-36]

The medial pause of the final line of the first quatrain here, together with the series of enjambed lines following it, lead the reader to feel the fright and confusion of the owls, forced from their nest by the shattered balloon. But, typically, Bishop quickly draws back from this intensity. Just after this metrical excitement there is a change: the lines alter from the tetrameter of the former quatrains to three, four, and five stress lines, and the lines also become more end-stopped and more interrupted in their flow. This change mirrors the difference in the animals' response to their plight: the owls fly up shrieking, while the armadillo scurries away alone, and the baby rabbit jumps out, as if lost and mystified. Part of Bishop's achievement here is to catch the specific response of each animal and to convey it in the lyrical gesture of the verse as well as in the language.

But more important than the way Bishop catches the individual quality of each animal here is the way she controls the reader's response to the main event by choosing, just at this point, to reserve intensities and to begin patiently to describe the animals. The exactitude of the description determines the final meaning of the poem: it forces the reader to slow down and to visualize the particular vulnerability of each of these creatures when faced with this incendiary accident. Yet until the very end, Bishop directs the reader to the animals' trauma only obliquely, through the description itself, while the way she breaks and controls her verse holds him back from sympathizing with them too effusively. The italics which emphasize that the baby rabbit is "short-eared" physically stop the flow of the verse, obliterating much of the reader's momentary empathy for the animal by compelling him to focus on its physical uniqueness. And the exclamation "So soft!" to describe the rabbit is daring in another way. Its use of cliché is made to seem naive, as if Bishop were too unpracticed to find a more original way to describe the rabbit; but when followed by so subtle and exact a metaphor as "a handful of ash," the old cliché assumes renewed force, as if this direct simplicity were the only possible way to render the quality of the small animal. Again, the very fact of the exclamation keeps the reader from being spellbound by the ongoing impulse of the poetry.

After all this holding off, the final quatrain can be interpretive and dramatic without risking sentimentality:

Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry! O falling fire and piercing cry
And panic, and a weak mailed fist
Clenched ignorant against the sky!

All of the animals' panic and misery is conveyed in Bishop's own summation (italicized to separate it from the rest of the poem). In these final lines, their plight extends subtly to become our own. We, of course, understand the fire balloons. But, mailed as we are, with our own strength and intelligence, we cannot protect ourselves from the equally mystifying and terrible events that shake us. It is surely important to note, at this point, that Bishop dedicated this poem to Robert Lowell, who became a conscientious objector when the Allied command began fire-bombing German cities. Bishop's poem points directly to these fire bombings, which wreaked the same kind of horrifying destruction on a part of our universe that the fire balloons wreak on the animals. In the last quatrain, the "mailed fist," besides being a familiar figure of speech for threats of war-making, represents the protective "armor" of a soldier which is suggested by the armadillo's carapace. The whole quatrain, with its exclamations and enjambed lines, leads upward in intensity to the expression of helplessness in the face of such terror. But because this intensity has been preceded by so much reticence, the emotion here seems earned. There is no sense of false moralizing about this poem; in fact, no sense of moralizing at all, although the moral dimension of the poem is inescapably present.

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