Roger Gilbert: On "At the Fishhouses" and "Diving into the Wreck"

Two of their most familiar and oft-anthologized poems?Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" and Rich's "Diving Into the Wreck"?reveal some surprising affinities of trope and language while casting into relief the fundamental differences between the poets, which revolve around questions of knowledge, history, and, in a key metaphor for both poems, immersion. Most prominently, both poems allegorize the sea as a medium of pure knowing wholly distinct from the compromised, constructed world above. Bishop famously says of the icy water off Nova Scotia that "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be: / dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free, / drawn from the cold hard mouth / of the world, derived from the rocky breasts / forever, flowing and drawn, and since / our knowledge is historical, flowing and flown" (66). "Historical" in this final line assumes a double meaning: Our knowledge is necessarily historical inasmuch as it occurs in time and is therefore subject to the transience of all temporal things, "flowing and flown"; but it is also knowledge of history, of the lives and events that precede our own and give it meaning. Thus the history of this particular Nova Scotia fishing village proves to be closely bound up with Bishop's own painful childhood and its formation of her present self. The old man the speaker meets near the water "was a friend of my grandfather," she tells us, and like the "ancient wooden capstan" with its "melancholy stains, like dried blood," his presence speaks of a past beyond recovery. "We talk of the decline in the population," she reports dryly, her euphemistic language failing to obscure that the real subject of their conversation is death?her grandfather's included, as the "was" in the preceding line poignantly attests.

Rich's allegory is no less clear-cut than Bishop's, but she is not quite as explicit in her association of the sea with knowledge, choosing at first to characterize it by negation: "the sea is another story / the sea is not a question of power / I have to learn alone / to turn my body without force / in the deep element" (Fact 163). The world of the "sun-flooded schooner" with its "sundry equipment" of ladders, knives, books, and masks is governed, like the human world at large, by the will to power, the effort to master and subjugate one's environment. But the sea does not yield to such efforts, requiring a different approach, gradual, patient, "without force." As becomes clear in the course of the poem, this is because the sea marks a dimension beyond the reach of change, action, or intervention. Like memory, the sea preserves traces of past traumas that can only be inspected, acknowledged, and laboriously brought to light, never revised or effaced. Like Bishop's sea, then, Rich's is ineluctably historical, but unlike Bishop's, the kind of knowledge it contains is not "flowing and flown" but stable, solid, "more permanent than fish or weed." The wreck is not going anywhere.
If both poems draw metaphorical maps in which the sea embodies a pure or imagined knowledge beyond the reach of all human agency, they differ crucially in the ways they approach this alien realm. The two poems share a fundamentally downward trajectory; both begin above sea level and then chart an incremental descent that carries them past its threshold. Bishop and Rich employ similar poetic devices to evoke this movement, crafting strongly transitional passages that mimic in their cadence and syntax the sinking motions they describe. Bishop's passage is especially ingenious in its interplay of form and matter:

Down at the water's edge, at the place where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp descending into the water, thin silver tree trunks are laid horizontally across the gray stones, down and down at intervals of four or five feet.

This passage itself forms the descending ramp it names, made up of regular horizontal lines each containing "four or five feet." The corresponding passage in Rich's poem also gives a drumlike emphasis to the word down:

I go down. Rung after rung and still the oxygen immerses me the blue light the clear atoms of our human air. I go down. My flippers cripple me, I crawl like an insect down the ladder and there is no one to tell me when the ocean will begin.

In both passages the transition from land to sea is measured and gradual, but in Rich's poem it is quite clearly a matter of active agency, a willed descent undertaken in the face of enormous difficulty. Bishop is more circumspect; she merely registers the means of descent without evoking an individual act. Her greater ambivalence toward this route may be gauged by the clashing vectors named in her passage?" Down at the water's edge, at the place / where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp / descending into the water" (my emphasis)?creating a push-pull effect rather than the impression of steady, purposeful movement given by Rich's lines.

Both poets also signal the transition to a more fluid medium by loosening or abandoning punctuation; Bishop describes the water as "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear," omitting the commas she would normally place after the first three adjectives, while Rich makes a more dramatic elision to suggest the diver's felt loss of control in an alien element: "First the air is blue and then / it is bluer and then / green and then / black I am blacking out and yet / my mask is powerful." Again, however, what sets their approaches most dramatically apart is the degree of willfulness each brings to the water and the dark knowledge it represents. Bishop's speaker does not, of course, physically enter the sea as Rich's does, only surmising its effects on her body ("If you should dip your hand in, / your wrist would ache immediately"); but even in her imaginary descent she seems halting and full of trepidation, casting about for distractions in something close to a panic. After calling the sea an "element bearable to no mortal," she offers the typically Bishopian self-correction "to fish and to seals," thus opening the way for a digression about a particular seal that briefly dispels the gathering sense of menace. Playfully invoking debates over the proper method of Christian baptism, Bishop reports that this seal is "like me a believer in total immersion," a line with clear implications for the poem's allegory of knowledge. Yet like Bishop's speaker, the seal's behavior seems to belie such firm belief, as it anxiously hovers on the threshold between the two elements: "he would disappear, then suddenly emerge / almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug / as if it
were against his better judgment." The seal's tentative probing of the dangerous world above the water closely mirrors the speaker's reluctant engagement with the sea, an element she acknowledges to be "bearable to no mortal."

As though drawn irresistibly back to the water, the speaker next repeats her earlier formulation?"Cold dark deep and absolutely clear"?then tears her eyes away once more: "Back, behind us, / the dignified tall firs begin." After another quick descriptive interlude she returns for a last time to the sea, now forcibly maintaining her gaze: "I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same, / slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones, / icily free above the stones, / above the stones and then the world." In a characteristic bit of metaphorical sleight of hand, Bishop inverts the usual mapping of land and water, placing the sea "above the stones and then the world" (my emphasis) as if to reinforce its status as a dimension of knowledge detached from and indifferent to all worldly particulars. The hypnotic repetitions in these lines hint at the speaker's tormented relation to the sea, betraying a compulsive, almost masochistic drive to enter its deathly space. She knows too well what the results of such contact must be, though: "your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn / as if the water were a transmutation of fire / that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame."

I've already cited the allegorizing passage that ends the poem, disclosing in a somber epiphany that this corrosive element that entices and destroys is knowledge in its purest state. What the poem stages with great power is the profound ambivalence toward knowledge that energizes much of Bishop's work. Her poetry repeatedly locates itself on the threshold between aesthetic and cognitive modes of apprehension, feeling and recording the pull of each, yet unwilling to immerse itself completely in either. Bishop's penchant for picturesque description?the celebrated "eye" once invoked by critics to relegate her to minor status?certainly appears in "At the Fishhouses," particularly the poem's first half, with its lovingly textured account of a landscape plastered with herring scales; but its presence there serves chiefly to set off the colorless, homogenous, cold realm of knowledge that waits below.

Where "At the Fishhouses" remains uneasily poised on the margin that divides land and sea, unwilling to do more than conjecturally dip a hand into the chill water, "Diving Into the Wreck" takes the full plunge, in keeping with Rich's more aggressive stance toward knowledge. Rich's diver is of course much better equipped than Bishop's speaker to enter the hostile element, with her mask, wet suit, and flippers; for her the boundary is there to be crossed, not gingerly tested and probed. Thus, while Bishop's poem divides itself symmetrically between the fishhouses and the water, positioning the ramp-passage as a kind of fulcrum, Rich's poem takes place almost entirely underwater, with only the most cursory reference to a world above. Indeed the language used to narrate the diver's initial descent suggests it is what she calls the "human air," not the water, that threatens to drown her: "Rung after rung and still the oxygen immerses me" (my emphasis). The dull atmosphere of ordinary human affairs is itself an immersing element, Rich insists, to be cast off through total immersion in the more bracing element of historical memory. Rich is as conscious of the hazards the sea presents as Bishop is, yet she forces herself to confront them because the knowledge she envisions there is not simply fatal but potentially redemptive as well. The poets' differing conceptions of knowledge are clearly reflected in their central tropes: Whereas Bishop identifies knowledge with the sea itself?gray, undifferentiated, numbingly abstract?Rich makes of the sea a medium through which more specific, localized objects of knowledge like the wreck can be encountered and explored. Unlike Bishop's paralyzing generality, the cautionary knowledge Rich seeks can be put to use, carried back to the surface and translated into action, and so warrants the kind of
active questing her speaker undertakes.

Another key point of contrast between the two poems involves the place of beauty in their allegories of knowledge. In Bishop's poem, beauty is located entirely above the water, among the weathered fishhouses and tubs lined "with layers of beautiful herring scales." It's here that the speaker encounters the old man who has "scraped the scales, the principal beauty, / from unnumbered fish with that black old knife, / the blade of which is almost worn away." That scraping movement serves as another powerful emblem for this poem's vision of knowledge, which entails a remorseless expunging of beauty and sensual particularity so as to arrive at the cold gray substance of truth. Rich's diver also carries a knife whose blade she dutifully checks, but her excavations lead her toward beauty rather than away from it: Even as the wreck bears witness to damage and disaster, she tells us, it has been "worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty." Again we can surmise that it is the redemptive, nearly utopian potential Rich ascribes to the knowledge of disaster that lends it beauty, where Bishop finds in it only beauty's antithesis. By positing an aesthetic reward at journey's end, Rich shows that her impulse to descend into the harsh element of historical knowledge is neither masochistic nor purely altruistic. If Bishop's poem is a psychodrama that stages or enacts a central ambivalence, Rich's poem is essentially didactic, meant to instruct and embolden us in our own quests for difficult knowledge.

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