

Christian Reed: On "The Fish"

"The Fish" refuses to be caught. This poem seems, on some fundamental level, irreducible to any one interpretation, "high-sounding" or otherwise. It functions as an embodiment of the poetic that cannot be collapsed into the conceptual, the philosophical, the arguable. "The Fish," as such, functions as an exemplary poetic utterance. Attempts to reduce this utterance to the easily comprehensible always produce some remainder, always admit some error that allows "The Fish" to swim away with the bait.

Formally, as many critics have noticed, Moore's "Fish" is very striking. The poem is composed of eight stanzas, each of which (1) has five lines, and (2) follows the rhyme scheme *a a b b c* and (3) the syllable count 1, 3, 9, 6, 8. This triple-mark of order is not immediately apparent; the reader's first glance at the text suggests the disorder of lines at radically different lengths and pervasive enjambment. However, while reading, the sense of the pattern nonetheless gradually suggests itself – an experience that, as many critics, beginning with Wallace Stevens, have noticed, mimics the sensible apprehension of waves on the sea. Each stanza, like a wave, builds (in the first two lines) and breaks (in the second two), giving way for the one that follows (and repeats the same cycle). In this way, we get a poetry in which the structure of the lines, their inherent rhythm, lines up their descriptive content perfectly. The force of this utterance, under this kind of reading, derives from the special conjunction between the poem's formal structure and the substance of its descriptions.

Although this reading of the poem does account for a measure of the poem's power, and is important to understanding how the poem *works* (read, in the terms of "Poetry": makes itself useful), "The Fish" cannot simply be reduced to this gloss. The attempt to apply this interpretive scheme to the poem inevitably produces some significant remainder, some inassimilable poetic material. For instance, the *c* is a recurrent remainder: if the stanza derives its structure from the wave, building (*a a*) and breaking (*b b*), the presence of the last line (*c*) is systematically ignored, discarded, thrown back. If the wave-like rhythm of "The Fish" marks its poetry, then the *c* is excluded from this poeticism. The *c*, of course, is a homophone for "the sea" – the very name of the image the *c* is being excluded from. The site of exclusion, of the remainder, then, covertly names that from which it is barred, and hence names this act of exclusion as such. The formalist reading of the poem also has no place for the title, which (as in William Carlos Williams' "The Yachts") is made to function as a semantic unit within this poem: "The Fish" "wade / through black jade," (1-2). The title, then, also is a manifest remainder, an element of the poem reduced or excluded in the act of explaining the poem.

Another provocative reading of "The Fish" finds it to be "a poem about injury of wholeness, resentful but resigned deprivation," a poem saturated with "a sense of infringement, violation, and injury," (Hadas, MAPS). This reading embraces the poem as "the work of a thirty year old woman whose rather unnervingly cool sympathies lie with a battered and violated nature." However, this pessimistic reading also produces a significant remainder. The critic propels herself into pessimism by reading the image of "the / turquoise sea / of bodies" (16-18) as a phantasmal image of the water an overfull grave (also as in Williams' "The Yachts"), so that the sea is "not deliberate, not playful; not an expansive sea?" This reading captures some of

the power of this image, but at the expense of its true richness. The 'sea / of bodies' seems not only to be an image of death, but also an image of flourishing, thriving, healthy life ? an image supported by the emphasis on light and the play of illumination in the preceding lines:

The barnacles which encrust the side
of the wave, cannot hide
there for the submerged shafts of the
sun,
split like spun
glass, move themselves with spotlight swiftness
into the crevices ?
in and out, illuminating
the
turquoise sea
of bodies. ? 8-18

The 'sea / of bodies' is not only a collection of physical remnants forsaken by death, but also a profusion of living, moving, embodied creatures. And so, once again, the poetic language of 'The Fish' is compromised, reduced, exploited, by explanation.

This, of course, is not to say that no attempt at explanation should be made. It is more to say that many attempts should be made, that no one attempt to render - in conceptual, philosophical, arguable, language - the power of the poem can function perfectly, can avoid leaving behind some significant remainder, can avoid performing some uneasy motion by which 'The Fish' manages to slip away.

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