

C. K. Doreski: On "At the Fishhouses"

In "At the Fishhouses," from her second book, *A Cold Spring*, the language, having gained a good deal of momentum, becomes increasingly sensuous and specific, and claims, at last, through the trope of the sea, a thoroughly sensate and utterly transparent climax that invites entry, immersion, and transference:

[lines 71-83]

As a descendent of Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Frost, and an antecedent of Susan Howe's New Englandly, noun-driven Language poetry, Bishop has been an (I)witness. Her account of a repeated phenomenon—"I have seen it over and over"—the indifferent seas slopping over and above the stony shore wholly recreates the implied experience, maintaining the illusion of witness by the seductive staging of the event.

First, the poet tempts her readers into the realm of possibility: "If you should dip your hand in, / your bones would. . . ." She then courts plausibility with the logic of sequence: If one takes the first step-immersion (earlier in the poem Bishop notes that she believes in "total immersion")—then one is primed for the tide of events that will surely follow. Her adherence to physical, sensate realities underscores her knowledge, and engenders belief. Though readers may not understand this experience, they feel it; they experience it. In this process of transference, the poet effaces herself by making the moment of perception the reader's own, demonstrating that "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be." What, then, does it refer to? The sea, the water, the tides? Asked to make this metaphysical leap from the physical and sensory knowledge of the sea to the epistemological sense of it, one straddles the yawning chasm between what humans can know—"dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free"—and that which projects unmoored minds into the "historical, flowing, and flown." This educational disclosure is locked in the language, which reveals itself to be nonrepresentational after all, but a code. Here lies the unnerving power of the reticence that requires interpretation through recognition that language is experience. Like Thoreau's "johnswort spring[ing] from the same perennial root in this pasture," Bishop's slopping sea requires the sight of "infant eyes." Both flower and sea court an original relationship through an infant's expressionless impressions in hopes of rekindling that "visionary gleam."

Natural surfaces, the raw stuff of geography, require a language that mediates between nature and culture and marks their intersections. The surface of Bishop's sea, for instance, like most romantic water views, conforms in verbal purpose to the larger rhetoric of the life cycle. Though not as ominous as the ocean of Marianne Moore's "A Grave," the description of the sea of "At the Fishhouses" conceals through metaphors of precious metal and stone as much as it reveals through its verbs of massive and meditative power:

[lines 13-20]

The opaque but mirroring surface spills from sea to land, obscuring but transforming the shore world. This "mirror" offers no reassurance, no reflection of the meditating narrator. The shattered planes engender no correspondence between land and sea, and cannot function as a trope to link nature and culture. Instead, a counterresponse emerges unilaterally from the cold water. A rather incongruous doppelgänger? the "curious," "interested" seal? exchanges "looks" with the poet. Like the exchange between the travelers and the moose, this marks a reflective self-confirmation. Without the penetrating presence of the seal, the sea would roll on without form, purpose, or direction:

[lines 65-70]

The uneasy confirmation of self involves a risk of immersion, an affirmation of faith, an acknowledgment of the efficacy of the metaphor of creation. The seal breaking through the surface of the unknown initiates that which must be completed in experience.

Mirrors, rather than water, offer the most reliable, if most mundane, "silver" surfaces, and keep the poem more safely, if less adventurously, within the bounds of human culture. Bishop's self-reflections, however, even when confined in the mirror, assume a variety of forms and moods.

In spite of her wide use of tropes of knowing, including the journey, Bishop only once defines the "knowledge" of her poems. The final movement of "At the Fishhouses" [CS] risks using the sea, a powerful and ambitious metaphor that postulates knowing as a fluid, expressive, but chaotic, absorptive, and formless process expressed by the modifiers of "knowledge," "dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free." The line that introduces this closing metaphor asserts that the relationship between knowledge and imagination is definitive: "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be." Changed in the third typescript from "This is what I imagine knowledge to be," this line asserts the social, rather than the individual, import of this metaphor. Seasoned by a sensory immersion, the rhetorical flow must now abstract that sensational knowledge into the matrix of a historical yet nondogmatic understanding. Despite the firm antecedent link to the sea, this it shimmers with ambiguity. The poem struggles to remind itself that its ebb and flow of modifiers is securely moored in the sea, the figural, rhetorical function of which is as solid as its literal referent is fluid. The experience generated by the poem is primarily one of metaphor-awareness as a means of warding off or controlling the abstraction toward which all knowledge tends. Beyond metaphor lies metaphysics, in which, as Melville pointed out, it is easy to drown.

The personification of the shore world, immediately following the modifiers of "knowledge"? "the cold hard mouth / of the world, derived from the rocky breasts"? refuses accessibility to conventionally comforting ideas of motherhood in favor of raw origin. The security of the bedrock shore is the viewpoint it offers on origination and the concomitant peace of death, a physical vantage-point and a figurative irony. The sea, too, occupies both a figurative role (as knowledge, chaos, psychic depth, amniotic fluid) and a physically verifiable biological function as originary medium. To expect wisdom or nourishment from the known but imaginatively dead shore-world is an error, but to step from it into the dark, salt, flowing sea is to be a transcendentalist, and suicidal. Not even the language of transcendence, then, can generate a fiction adequate to both the senses (the physical self) and the psyche (which finds its analogue in the sea). Knowledge, that troubling abstraction, leads beyond metaphor,

beyond the apprehensible world. The poet cannot follow, but remains on the rocky, un nourishing shore, and gazes at the abstract, unobtainable freedom beyond, and infers, if she dares, the mysteries beyond the range of the senses. Yet it is precisely the act of discovering this limitation that is "historical," accretive, "flowing," organic, and "flown," perishing.

In "At the Fishhouses" Bishop speculates upon the province and parameters of the available language of knowledge and, by extension, the limitations of the role of metaphor and other kinds of figuration in her writing. Unlike the childlike question-and-answer scenario of "Five Flights Up," this meditation defines knowledge (or rather, defines the nature of knowledge) without restricting the source of inspiration. That is, in its act of linguistic and dramatic self-discovery, "At the Fishhouses" privileges the power of meditation and the assertive gaze of the speaker, rather than a particularly configured scenario limited or empowered by the stance, age, or available vocabulary of the speaker. Though Bishop's measured tone and insistence on the social dimension of knowledge bear little resemblance to Emerson's "perfect exhilaration" (an exhilaration that might have thrust Bishop's persona into the cold sea), the return to "reason and faith" resounds throughout the poem. Like those of Emerson's "lover of nature," Bishop's "inward and outward senses" remain "adjusted to each other"?she refuses to abandon herself to the enticing fluid vagueness that would extinguish those senses. Her orchestrating personality directs and empowers this scene, and retains control despite the undeniable implications of her meditation. As Emerson would explain this process of discovery in Nature:

Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both . . . Nature always wears the colors of the spirit.

The poet of this marginal "Fishhouse" world (and its later companion piece, "The End of March" [G]) engages nature with a full awareness of the problematic relationship between language and the environment. Like Lowell's inchworm, Bishop is always "feeling for something to reach something"; her movement toward knowledge is an associative process. Grounded by her commitment to the figurative language of the senses, she reaches beyond her grasp, but faces the full implications of doing so.

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Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Elizabeth Bishop [2]

Author:

C. K. Doreski [3]

Poem:

At the Fishhouses [4]

Source URL: <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/c-k-doreski-fishhouses>

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