"LONG PIG"


This paper came about from my puzzling over Bishop’s representation, in her famous poem “In the Waiting Room,” of a male corpse about to be eaten by cannibals. The poem is generally thought to center on the poet’s discovery of her own identity as a female, since she emphasizes, in the course of the poem, her reluctantly made connection with her aunt, with the National Geographic tribal women and their horrible pendulous breasts, and with her female name, “Elizabeth.” Yet factually speaking the most revolting photograph the young speaker sees in the magazine is certainly that of the human being about to be cooked, the meat reductively named “long pig” by the cannibals:

A dead man slung on a pole
— “long pig,” the caption said. (Complete Poems 159)

It is clear that the young Elizabeth is concentrating on the more exotic and sensational details visible in the magazine: she singles out volcanoes rather than rice paddies, black, naked women rather than clothed white or Asian ones, a meal of “long pig” rather than one of wild boar. The link between these troubling visions and the poem’s speaker is the relatively
“normal” appearance of the white explorers Osa and Martin Johnson in the midst of the tropical scenes. Still, the insertion of “long pig” and, at the end of the poem, of “the War” (previously unmentioned) suggests that Bishop had to include, even in a poem principally about female sexuality and vulnerability, the ultimate facts of cultural cruelty — the tribal hunting and eating of men by men, and its contemporary equivalent, modern warfare.

Yet the picture of “long pig” is not merely an instance of cruelty and death: it is also, and perhaps more centrally, an instance of the fantastic — by which I mean a metaphor that calls attention to itself by its own far-fetchedness. “Long Pig” inserts into the poem — as the late mention of war does not — Bishop’s inveterate fascination with the fact of cultural difference. There are in the poems many neutral exhibitions of that fascination — for instance, the handmade clogs, each with a different tune, in “Questions of Travel” — but here I want to point out how often the fantastic, in Bishop, is allied not only to the exotic but also to a diseased or dying thing. Another way of putting this is to say that the details that appear most gratuitous in her poems — such as “long pig” — are often inserted in the service of a compulsion by which the exotic, the fantastically imagined, and the dead or diseased or mutilated are joined in one complex object.

The most savage instance of this complex occurs in “Pink Dog,” as the Brazilian hairless scabies-ridden female dog is imagined, fantastically, as decked out in a carnival costume and mask:

You are not mad: you have a case of scabies. ...

Now look, the practical, the sensible
solution is to wear a fantasia.
Tonight you simply can’t afford to be a
n eyesore. But no one will ever see a
dog in mascara this time of year. (190-191)

Just as a human corpse is one degree removed from actuality by being seen metaphorically as “long pig,” so the pink dog will be one degree removed from the threat of being murdered by disguising herself in a fantastic way. In each case, the far-away exotic, the imaginatively fantastic, and the dead (or, in the case of the dog, one threatened with death) rise up at once together in a single image. “In the Waiting Room” buries that triply-significant image (“long pig”) in the middle of the poem, while “Pink Dog” places the image of the mascara in a climactic position, at the end.

I believe that Bishop is compelled, over and over, to invent or adopt such images: that the exotic alone, or the fantastic alone, or even the exotic and the fantastic combined, did not suffice to convey one complex of her sensibility. Somehow death — or its equivalent in the mutilated or the spectral — had to join the exotic and the fantastic to make the complex complete.

The earliest examples I have found in Bishop’s work of this triadic convergence represent it as a tidal wave capable of destroying an idyllic scene. The 1929 poem of ‘sexual temptation’, “A Wave” (217) prevents, however, the convergence from occurring. It allows both the exotic and fantastic poetic house-room, but refuses the menace of erotic self-annihilation, “total immersion” in the threatening “wave” of sexual experience. As “A Wave” opens, the Baudelairean exotic-erotic sets the scene: “How still, how blinding is the light / Spellbound and golden shines the foam.” As the dangerous incoming wave hovers, it incarnates itself in a series of fantastic metaphors: its “helmet” rises, it is a “radiant bird,” a “wonder.” The slightest gesture of erotic acknowledgment from the speaker to the other half of the “we” of the poem would allow the wave to crash on the land:

...the motion
Of a hand,
A tiny quickening
Of the heart,
And it will fall
And nothing more
Can keep the sea and land apart.

However, the gesture of assent is not made, and the wave recedes, doubling back on itself and subsiding dully into the
sea. "We are too innocent and wise, / We laugh into each other's eyes."

An underwater drowning actually is allowed to occur in a 1933 poem, "The Flood," (220), but the ingredient of the exotic, as well as any consequent death, is absent. The flood is rendered as a regional and known phenomenon, and the familiar New England town of its occurrence is rendered fantastic by its lively subaqueous existence after the flood:

And slowly down the fluid streets
the cars and trolleys, goggle-eyed,
enamelled bright like gaping fish,
drift home on the suburban tide.

In short, in this poem Bishop tames the flood, permitting the fantastic, but not any actual annihilation.

It is in the tortured and baroque "Three Sonnets for the Eyes," also written in 1933, that the triadic complex of death, the exotic, and the fantastic is first allowed full development. At first, Bishop imagines the living eye-sockets as basins in which illusions withdraw, as in an ebb tide, but then replenish themselves fully. This steady-state universe is destroyed in the last of the three sonnets. The exotic location of the poem is a cemetery; the eyes are truly dead; and the fantastic is represented by the surreal image of eyes as organic machines exploded from their bone-nests into malfunction and disappearance:

Either above thee or thy gravestone’s graven angel
Eyes I’ll stand and stare.

.......

I’ll

Look in lost upon those neatest nests of bone
Where steel-coiled springs have lashed out, fly-wheels flown. (224)

Bishop will remember, and re-use, this closing on "flown" in "At the Fishhouses."

Although the complex of the exotic, the fantastic, and the dead naturally does not occur in all of Bishop's poems, it appears often enough to be notable. In "The End of March" — to cite a late instance — the exotic realm is the sky, inhabited by a fantastic sun-lion who has descended to make majestic paw-prints on the beach before returning to the sky. The "dead" thing in the poem is a tangle of floating white string, seen at the tide-line by Bishop and her companions, but transformed by the poet into a fantastic ghost:

a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,
falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost. ...
A kite-string? But no kite. (179)

It is not until the very close of "The End of March" that the fantastic dead mass of string is brought together with the exotic sun, a lion-sun "who perhaps had baited a kite out of the sky to play with." The Hardy-esque carelessness of celestial fate, amusing itself with a kite but then "killing" the kite and its string, brings the poem to ironic resolution.

The closeness, for Bishop, of these three realms — the exotic, the fantastic, and the deathly — seems to be accounted for in part by the uncanniness of death itself, the most exotic of all destinations. Since it is the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns, it generates the most intensely fantastic analogies for and around itself. In the early canonical poems, the complex shows itself in the imaginary and exotic iceberg of "cloudy rock" that "like jewelry from a grave" adorns only itself ("The Imaginary Iceberg" 4); the conjunction is also evident in Bishop's appropriation of Felicia Hemans' Casabianca on the Nile ("The boy stood on the burning deck, / Whence all but he had fled"). In Bishop's hands, the tableau "while the poor ship in flames went down" becomes a congeries of representations of love, death, and a fantastic melting-together of identities:

Love's the obstinate boy, the ship,
even the swimming sailors...
And love's the burning boy.
("Casabianca" 5)
In inserting these two fantastic death-dealing actions — the one of actuality, the other of dream, and neither present in Defoe's original — into the story of Robinson Crusoe on his exotic island, Bishop allows her three-part complex its full imaginative activity. We can see, in "Crusoe in England," how long it takes her to "creep up" on the fascinating-but-unsayable scene of dyeing and murder, and to say it. A similar delay, followed by a "screen version" of the complex, followed by the full complex, occurs in "Over 200 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance." In this poem, the exotica occur first ("The Seven Wonders of the World ... / the squatting Arab") followed quickly by a gesture — unembroidered by the fantastic — toward mortality ("the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher" [57]). I call these latter terms because they are still in the realm of the guide-book cliche: they have not yet been internalized within the poet's imagination.

As the poem moves to Mexico, we find a "screen-version" of the complex, in which the word "dead," after being used of a man, is "neutralized" by being immediately predicated of volcanoes:

In Mexico the dead man lay
in a blue arcade; the dead volcanoes
glistened like Easter lilies. (58)

The fantastic makes its appearance in the unlikely comparison of the volcanoes to Easter lilies, a resurrection image invoked to cancel out the disturbing corpse in the arcade. At last, after one more postponement via the divagation to the Marrakesh lesbian brothels, the full complex of the exotic-fantastic-deathly appears, making real the previous offhand references to "the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher." The speaker sees "what frightened me most of all." This is a grave, a "holy" grave located, exotically, in the desert under a stone canopy. But it is not unique — not "the Sepulcher" — it is one of many, and it does not look "particularly holy." The exotic and the (disappointingly) sepulchral now being present, it is time for the fantastic to appear, and it does, with the unforeseeable comparison of the grave, or its inscriptions, to — of all things — yellowed cattle-teeth. And the actual presence of the
sepulchral (which we recall from one of its earliest appearances in "The Monument," where the monument may or may not contain "the bones of the artist-prince" [25]) is gone one better here by becoming the despoiled sepulchral: someone has presumably robbed the tomb of the body of the "poor prophet paynim who once lay there." Here at last is Bishop’s compelled coarticulation of the exotic, the deathly, and the fantastic:

An open, gritty, marble trough, carved solid
with exhortation, yellowed
as scattered cattle-teeth;
half-filled with dust, not even the dust
of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there. (58)

Why is this complex — an exotic location, a corpse, a leap into the fantastic — so frequent in Bishop’s imaginative excursions? Another way of putting this question is to ask what would be the contrary of the compelled triadic complex, its antidote, its exorcism? It would be something not exotic, but familiar, combined with something not deathly, but life-filled, expressed in a metaphor not fantastic but natural. We see this antidote in the tableau with which “2000 Illustrations” comes to its yearning end:

Why couldn't we have seen
this old Nativity while we were at it?
— the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
and, lulled within, a family with pets. (58-59)

The empty “holy grave” is exorcised by the peopled holy cave; exotic Arabia is exorcised by the little town of Bethlehem; and the death-fantasy of scattered cattle-teeth is exorcised by the comfortable presence of the ox and the ass as family pets. That which enables this exorcism of the demonic is a specialized form of inspiration, represented — in an old and natural metaphor — as light and flame. This flame — which is the substitute for an image of the divine infant lying on straw, or for Southwell’s Burning Babe — breaks out from rocks, has no color or sparks, is nourished on straw, and is both undisturbed by the agitations of existence and independent of the animate energy of breath. Bishop’s undisturbed, unbreathing flame is a clear descendant of the purgative flame of Yeats’s “Byzantium”:

At midnight on the Emperor’s pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where unbegotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a trance
An agony of dance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

The “negative theology” of definition by subtraction, used by Yeats in the form of “no... nor... nor... un... cannot,” reappears in Bishop in the form of “un... un... less... less...” Both passages share the theme of that which is fed but cannot be disturbed, both ascribing that quality to flame.

The light-filled, positive, “normal,” triad of the familiar, the life-giving, and the homely reveals contrastively, by the form it takes of the Christian Nativity imagined as “a family with pets,” the origin of Bishop’s dark compelled triad of the exotic, the deathly, and the fantastic. One can explain, at least in part, the tableau of life instead of death, and the familial instead of the exotic, as the obverse of Bishop’s orphaned state and her displacement from Massachusetts to Nova Scotia and back again. But the fantastic is harder to accounted for. Of course, the fantastic is only the metaphorical raised to some nth power of exhibitionism. Yet such exhibitionism consorts oddly with Bishop’s level tone and modesty of self-presentation. One might at first guess that the fantastic, for Bishop, is a symbol of the aesthetic. Yet she often represents art as a solacing encounter with the recognized (as in “The Map” or “Poem”), or as a form of life-giving or cherishing (“The Monument”) or as a “watery, dazzling dialectic” resolving contraries (as in “Santarém”) rather than as a disquieting confrontation with the bizarre.
The fantastic must be, then, a special sub-genre of the aesthetic. When art is represented as an excursion into the fantastic, it is because the poet has been evading the ruthless demands of art on the soul. When the poet is “sleeping on the ceiling,” she is peaceful; but that peace can be felt only because she is avoiding a necessary encounter with the demons of the unconscious:

We must go under the wallpaper
    to meet the insect-gladiator,
    to battle with a net and trident,
    and leave the fountain and the square.
    But oh, that we could sleep up there. ...
   (“Sleeping on the Ceiling” 29)

The poet’s inner demons take on, when she doubts her strength to confront them, the grotesque form of an insect-gladiator waiting under the wallpaper when one doubts one’s strength to confront them. “Pink Dog” exhibits the same dynamic: we find, inside the costume and mask, Bishop’s demon as a scabied bitch who has abandoned her children; still elsewhere, ornamenting the desert tomb, the demons are exhortations yellowed like scattered cattle-teeth. Still elsewhere, in “Arrival at Santos,” Bishop’s anxieties produce the empty wasps’ nest — judged “ugly” by another traveller — instead of the traditional filled honeycomb of the poet. In “The End of March,” lengths of meaningless white string replace what should be a string buoyantly keeping a kite aloft; and in “Going to the Bakery,” the inner demons have so tainted the innocent items of confection that they appear mortally ill:

The round cakes look about to faint —
    each turns up a glazed white eye.
The gooey tarts are red and sore. ...

The loaves of bread
    lie like yellow-fever victims
    laid out in a crowded ward. (151)

The anxiety behind the creation of such a fantastic feverward of cakes and tarts and loaves suggests that merely seeing something exotic — strange Brazilian pastries, in this case — was to Bishop a particularly powerful stimulus to her most primitive repressed terrors of abandonment, illness, and failure. In short, the more a poem evaded confrontation, the more it was likely to represent art as something fantastic. Because of the depths stirred up unexpectedly in her by an unfamiliar sight, Bishop prized the exotic as an anteroom to self-discovery and writing; because of the primitive resistances and anxieties it provoked in her, the exotic moved her to fantastic conjunctions of death and bizarrie.

Even when the triad of death, the exotic, and the fantastic is muted, it declares itself to the eye that has learned to recognize it. The grandmother’s house in Nova Scotia is the first exotic location for the New England child that Bishop was: she was not brought up to believe that her destiny lay in remaining in Great Village; rather, she knew her destiny lay in Massachusetts (as her translation there, and her attendance at the Walnut Hill School, bear evidence). In “Sestina,” the unnamed and ungendered child persistently draws the missing parental generation — not “a family with pets” but an unmated “man with buttons like tears” (the mother being suppressed entirely in an unacknowledged death). The fantastic almanac dropping its little moons into the child’s flowerbed, and the grandmother’s surrealist teacup full of dark brown tears add the element of the inscrutable, as the child Elizabeth — for who doubts that the anonymous child is she? — struggles with the demons of double parental absence (unexplained in the poem, but biographically linked to the death of the father and the madness of the mother). The exotic, the deathly, the fantastic: even in their mild forms in “Sestina” they unite like cells bearing tailor-made receptors for each other.

In their more violent forms, as in “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” the exotic becomes the arena of conquistadors, the deathly becomes “L’Homme Arm,” and the fantastic becomes the landscape-tapestry of Sin, represented as one female lizard eyed by four male lizards:
The lizards scarcely breathe; all eyes
are on the smaller, female one, back-to,
hers wicked tail straight up and over,
red as a red-hot wire. (92)

This fantastic image, equating Sin with animal lust, prepares us for the final violence, when the “Christians, hard as nails” “ripped away into the hanging fabric.” “Ripped” modulates into the unsaid “raped” as the Christians are each “out to catch an Indian for himself — / those maddening little women who kept calling” (92). The exotic venue, the death-dealing armed men, and the fantastic emblem-image of Sin mobilize Bishop’s harshest poem of cultural encounter and primitive drives of cruelty.

Bishop needs to transmute even the familiar into the exotic in order to provoke the state of writing. Or perhaps it is truer to say that unless the familiar scene or object appears in an unfamiliar aspect it cannot engender verse. The Nova Scotian parlor of “First Death” becomes exotic because of the coincidence of the frozen red-eyed loon and Arthur’s frosty coffin; even what should be an ordinary fish becomes fantastic because of his five lip-embedded hooks and lines; the familiar Atlantic shoreline in “At the Fishhouses” is rendered exotic as it is gradually painted a homogenous silver; and the Atlantic itself becomes fantastic because it is conceived of as a burning and briny analogue to knowledge, in which total immersion means death to any mortal. The exotic engenders the fantastic, and the fantastic the deadly — or the exotic engenders the deathly, and the deathly the fantastic, until the triad is complete.

The involuntary magnetism of the three terms for each other is broken, in certain poems, not by the evasion of one of the three terms as in “The Wave” or “The Flood,” but by the poet’s courageous examination of an anxiety palpably present in the poem. The pre- eminent poem of this kind is “At the Fishhouses.” It makes the familiar shoreside scene exotic, as I’ve said, by covering it over, stroke by stroke, in all-pervasive silver. And though the poem draws in passing a minor fantastic image of death — the rusting capstan is said to be stained “the color of dried blood” — its two major fantasies (emphasized by ellipses) are those of the seal and the fir trees, both invoked as mental resting-places for anxiety, both serving to stave off the dangerous passage down the ramp into the ice-cold water. The seal, already immersed, does not fear the water; the stationary fir-trees do not have the power to encounter it. Twice the Atlantic note is prematurely sounded: “Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,” but in each case the speaker skitters away from it, first into a meditation on the seal and next into a meditation on the fir-trees. Finally, the Atlantic note is liberated into unhindered being: “dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free.” This is the note of death, since the water is an “element bearable to no mortal.” But instead of moving away from the ocean, as she had done as the young speaker of “The Wave,” or instead of pretending that an alternate form of life could go on underwater, as in “The Flood,” Bishop nerves herself to encounter the sea, because she has come to know that she is “a believer in total immersion.” She fully grants the ache and the burn and the indifference of the sea, and her terror before it. But as she finally represents the ocean, it gives not only an ultimate death but an interim nourishment “derived from the rocky breasts forever, flowing and drawn.” The sea sucks us on the milk of necessity; and the acknowledging of necessity and reality — our voluntary “drawing” from those “rocky breasts” is a form of life, not death. To be “utterly free” is to be at the opposite pole from death, even if our free knowledge is flowing, and eventually flown. In seeing flown-ness as part of flowingness, Bishop exorcised the fear of death, and the anxiety of her own demons, from this grand conjunction of the exotic silver shore and the fantastic burning tide. She could not do so until she realized the involuntary nature of earlier compelled conjunctions of the triad. Once she had disjoined its components, consciously and deliberately, from each other, she could conjoin them voluntarily and majestically in her clear portrait of elegiac anxiety faced and overcome in “At the Fishhouses.”

There are other such “involuntary” conjunctions in Bishop, such as that of the domestic and the strange, or the knowable and the inscrutable. In every case, the best poems are those in which the psychologically “inevitable” magnetisms are recognized as such, separated, scrutinized, and then aesthetically rejoined. The deep contribution of the exotic to Bishop’s poetry is one that has already been amply acknowledged,
and I have only added, here, that it frequently presents itself as inseparable from two other strong components of her art — death and the fantastic. Her art needed the abrasion of the exotic and the permission of the fantastic to face down and expose the worst of her terrors. In an unpublished poem distributed at the Brazil conference on Bishop, “Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke Box,” we find Bishop praising Poe — that connoisseur of the exotic, the fantastic, and the deathly — for being “exact.” Poe the artist is contrasted in the poem with the sexually mechanical modernity of the juke-box. Bishop must have sensed that if she was not to be the captive of her compulsions, she had to join Poe in being exact about them.

WORK CITED