

A Response to Frank J. Kearful*

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Frank Kearful's essay, "Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Prodigal' as a Sympathetic Parody" provides the best close reading of the poem to date, explicating the peculiar deviations within the double sonnet form, and flushing out the subtleties of meaning that inhere in puns and syntactic ambiguities. We are reminded what mastery Bishop displays in breaking rules of form, and what linguistic reserve she brings to apparently simple word choice. Like most of Bishop's critics, Kearful sees these intricacies ultimately serving an autobiographical impulse, to create "a psychological portrayal of an alcoholic's entrapment in his addiction. [...] Bishop's formal high jinks and her secular parody of the biblical parable join forces to fashion an askew, unsentimental representation of herself as an alcoholic" (16-17). In pursuit of this line of argument, one might even add "herself as an asthmatic alcoholic" since, as Kearful shows, issues of "breathing" (18) are foregrounded in the poem. (Other Bishop critics have certainly made much of the concern with "breath" as a link to her bodily suffering.) But is the soul of the poem to be found, ultimately, in the pursuit of autobiographical links? Kearful's astute reading inadvertently demonstrates the opposite. Evoking one of Western culture's best known parables, the poet moves out of the isolation of her own distress into the community formed in the space of abiding forms and narratives. In the "he" of the Prodigal, we find not an "I" but a "we." Classics carry with them the history of their use, as Kearful's comment on earlier "parodies" of this

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parable makes clear. If we recognize ourselves in these stories it is because they are cast in such a way as to include us.

More compelling is Kearful's notion of "sympathetic parody," and here he recognizes that Bishop has entered into a conversation not only with the Bible, but with the lyric tradition which is its afterlife. To Kearful's thoughtful annotation of Herbert, Hopkins, Frost, and Williams, I would add Wordsworth (his "Michael" is explicitly a Prodigal son story; the son's name is "Luke"). And as Bishop's story moves from the complacency of day to the inner insecurity of night, we may hear Emily Dickinson. Her fly's "Blue—uncertain—stumbling Buzz" (Dickinson no. 591) reverberates in "the bats' uncertain staggering flight" (CP 71). (Bishop was reading Dickinson at this time.) To Kearful's excellent suggestion of ecphrastic elements in the "two-tier nativity scene" we might add Dutch and Flemish genre painting, particular Breughel, who painted sacred scenes in a secular manner. Bishop knew as well as Auden (whom she treasured): "About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters" ("Musée des Beaux Arts" 179). But great artists, and especially artists such as Bishop who were drawn to demotic sources, respond to the culture of their own time as much as to the canonical works of the past. While we are considering allusions and echoes we might glance into the secular "sty" (22) of popular culture, and remember that *The Wizard of Oz*, one of the most talked about films in America in 1939 and after, opens with Dorothy falling into a pig pen, and ends with "there's no place like home."

Kearful's sense that "The Prodigal" deserves a prominent place in Bishop's canon, and his note that she was proud of her achievement in the poem, are borne out by the reverberations of the poem throughout her work. If she was drawing from life to create a mimetic surface of alcoholic tremors and anxieties, she was also creating a lexicon and image pool from which she would draw repeatedly, to explore a range of emotions and ideas. In the same volume as "The Prodigal" we find the title poem "A Cold Spring" (CP 55), where the cow "eating the after-birth" from a newborn calf certainly offers a benign version of the pig that always eats its young. Parents in Bishop are never protec-

tors; at worst they are murderers and cannibals. While the pigs here have the quality of fable, the collapsing distinction between animal and man in "In the Waiting Room" sends the child into vertigo. Is there an understated cannibal image in "long pig, the caption said" (CP 159)? The prodigal's reduction to the condition of animal produces an "enormous odor" (CP 71); the animals of "Five Flights Up" again ascribe size to the insubstantial, but this time in a redemptive "enormous morning" (CP 181). If the prodigal is horrified by his animal baseness, the speaker of "Five Flights Up" longs for an animal presence. The sunrise "burning puddles" and turning the barnyard mud to red in "The Prodigal" anticipates the sunsets' effect in "The Moose," producing a "red sea" and "rich mud / in burning rivulets" (CP 169). But if this infernal, volcanic instability pervades the landscape of experience, in "The Moose" the "loose plank rattles / but doesn't give way." We are not left walking a "slimy board" in the dark. Bishop's pigs may be "self-righteous" (CP 71), whereas the "towering" moose is simply "curious" (CP 169), but, as always, the poet reminds us how much we have to learn from the animals. In "The Prodigal," the foul smell brings the protagonist to his senses, but the bats lead him to his feelings, and feeling, for Bishop, walks ahead of the mind. Surely this poem is as much about such modes of knowledge (including self-knowledge) as it is about the poet's addiction to alcohol. In reading poetry such as Bishop's, we must distinguish the particulars that may prompt the poem and even pervade its description, from the purposes of the poem and its ultimate motivation, which is to find the spiritual in the material and the communal in the most intense private feeling. What, in an autobiographical sense, would it mean for Bishop to "make up [her] mind to go home" (CP 71)—"home, wherever that may be" (CP 94)? As her poems show us repeatedly, there is no return for the prodigal—the biographical home is full of screams and corpses and tears.

As the poem moves from sight (the pig's eye view) to "shuddering insight" (the bats' uncertain flight), from physical world (sty) to symbolic (ark), we see Bishop reinscribing this parable with the "sus-

pended" (15) Biblical subtext (as Kearful's references to Lucifer and Noah point out). Certainly this subtext no longer carries "theological agency" (15), but is its agency therefore reduced to self-description? Modern poets are drawn repeatedly not only to this parable (we can add Derek Walcott to Kearful's list) but to the form of parable itself, precisely for its generalizing power, its way of stopping the dominant narrative and creating distance, abstraction and mystery.

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