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The Weight of “Disaster” in Bishop’s “One Art”

Art is not life. More, it is a deception, mirroring experience and emotion, but never truly becoming that which it reflects. Art is attractive in that it is a controlled balance between rigid structure, which is too mundane for its purposes, and chaotic discord, which is too feral. Poetry is art. Loss is not. In her villanelle “One Art,” Elizabeth Bishop proves this to be so. The poem itself is an emotive crescendo, and while its speaker struggles to hold the pain of loss within the confines of art, its readers note the incongruity of such an effort. One word prompts them, and fuels Bishop’s crescendo with a momentum, a tone, and a coda; “disaster” impels the poem “One Art.”

Fittingly, the crescendo begins softly. The poem’s opening stanza assumes a fairly impassive tone, which transpires from the speaker’s feigned indifference toward the prospect of losing. Though the immediate clash between Bishop’s title and its implication briefly upsets the mind from a logical standpoint, the speaker’s hasty assurance that loss is “no disaster” seems in earnest. Thus, the shadows “disaster” casts on the first stanza are so lightly drawn that they are hardly traceable, if at all, upon a first reading.

Yet, with each of its three subsequent appearances, the word weighs heavier on the formal arrangement of the villanelle, and depresses its tone. “Disaster” is a loaded word—undisciplined, forceful, and moving—and its repeated appearance at the ends of the third and fifth stanzas underscores its gravity. Thus, although only used by the speaker to highlight its antithesis, “disaster” speaks for itself, deliberately and consistently contradicting the element of control denoted by its rhyming counterpart, “master.” The momentum of “One Art” derives from the mounting conflict between human faculty and that which exceeds it—between the words “master”

and “disaster.” In its body, the poem spends most of its words on mastery. Directly, in the second and third stanzas, and through submission of personal example in the fourth and fifth, the speaker advocates that one must appoint loss a virtuous habit, and treat it as a practiced art. In these middle stanzas, “disaster” requires no such support. As the poem’s momentum builds, the speaker’s losses become more profound, and their effects more taxing. While its words rally behind “master,” the villanelle’s underlying sentiments sponsor “disaster.”

And indeed, “disaster” wins the last word in this battle. In the last stanza of “One Art,” Bishop’s crescendo rises to its forte. Here, love is lost, and “disaster” resonates almost deafeningly in the reader’s mind. A greater number of the speaker’s words now serve its case; the adverbs “even” and “too” demonstrate enormous clout by laying emphasis on the speaker’s anxiety and candidly differentiating this stanza from the others. Further, emotional turmoil reigns absolutely in the poem’s last line. The speaker’s composure appears so strained that his/her voice seems to crack with the repetition of “like,” and to require a prompt—“*Write it!*”—to utter the poem’s final word: “disaster.”

Thus, Bishop’s crescendo ends on a note of dramatic irony—sadly, loss can be a disaster. So, if it is to be “One Art,” we are not artists, as we can only learn to endure loss, not to master it.

Works Cited

Bishop, Elizabeth. “One Art.” Elizabeth Bishop The Complete Poems: 178. New York, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983.