Manipulation of Toil in Frost's Poetry: Interference of Truth and Imagination

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Introduction:

This paper tackles the idea of toil in some of Robert Frost's poems (1874-1963), with special reference to two relatively important poems: "Mowing" and "Birches". How and why does the union of fact, dream and toil interfere to result in graceful revelations of truth and knowledge?

Frost's particular thoughts on the role of metaphor in the making of poetry help in answering such questions, stating that truth and imagination can give a clear image of life. In applying statements from Frost's essays to these two poems, I build in part on some critics' opinions on toil and vision in order to emphasize the ability of Frost's poetry in connecting between imaginative vision and physical toil. Consequently, the discussion will extend the bond between the demanding daily reality and the mythical and metaphorical properties of poem diction.

The Argument:

Many critics of Frost note that in poems such as "Mowing" and "Birches" dream-like facts and tangible dreams rise out of some acts of labor. They stress that Frost can purposely be reticent or sly about truth and vision. Many poems seem to concentrate on vision by itself: a vision in a special, fated moment, and offer glimpses of benign or malignant forces in nature.[1]

These suggestions, however, are undercut by the Poet's irony, doubts, and awareness of how his mood colors a scene, and "they may be checked by a subsequent observation by other alternatives and facts". Yet the possibilities for

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imaginative insight and a truer, finer bond between a man and his surroundings are not cancelled either.[2]

"Mowing" and "Birches", which dwell on two dreams and common earnest acts, are two poems that do result in oblique, graceful revelations of truth, knowledge, and love. They put forth "a clarification of life, a momentary stay against confusion".[3]

The type of toil in Frost's poetry is that one which sets forth the mutual duty of both writing and reading it, hence the connection between vision, dreams and facts. This point of view is emphasized even more by Richard Poirier's comment on Frost's poetry:

Any intense labor enacted in his poetry,
like mowing or apple picking, can penetrate
to the visions, dreams, myths that are at
the heart of reality[4]

For the major idea in Frost's poetry is that since the speaker's dream represents an ideal rooted in the real world, his ability to dream about a job well done represents his heaven on earth. The capacity of contemplation sets the speaker apart from the inferior toil, though he does not affirm that man has an immortal soul.

Robert Frost invents occasions when conflicting kinds of reality are resolved. The bond tying the demanding daily reality and the mythical properties of language owes less to sophisticated metaphysics than to natural, almost inventible, way of thinking and performing. Frost states in his essay "Education and Poetry" that "all metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the beauty of it. It is touch and go with the metaphor"[5]

The mixture of need, toil and principal metaphorical expression, help the interference of fact and dream in "Mowing" (1915). The mower has his song, the scythe's whisper, which creates some impression. In spite of the

personification of the "scythe", there is a refusal of exact knowledge of what the blade sang:

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that way my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself,
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, About the lack of the sound-
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.

(1-6)

This listening for whispers seems a basic human trait. And more than a universal aspect of human frailty, it is essential to the whole project of poetry and art. A whisper cannot be forced to reveal too much. Yet, "it reveals real sensations of woods and pasture". The scythe may whisper out of awe for some spirit and respect for its silence; then again, the scythe may whisper, simply because it is the sound scythes make.[5]

The mower reveals more about the reality of the whisper:

It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of *fay or elf*
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows

(7-10)

"Anything more", is paradoxically less and "too weak". In fact, anything "more than the truth" is debilitating to art. As a statement about living, the poem seems to say that toil in the world, "embracing and engaging its facts through actions is preliminary for knowledge about it"[7]

Truth comes before understanding and it must be worked for.
And so the challenge for the liver of life-and the reader of

poetry-is to toil in order to embody that physical, factual truth:

Not without feeble pointed spikes of *flowers*
(Pale Orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.
(11-14)

A comparison between the dream and the activity is revealing for what the dream leaves out. And such a comparison must be based on the visual elements in the dream, since all the other elements are ascribable to purely natural aftereffects and ear no symbolic relationship to the whole point of cutting as many packs of grass as possible: to reap a great harvest.

That scene of order linked value during grass-cutting is not present in the dream. This poem could also tell us that the best dreams are those based on realistic events and things opposed to those of fantasy and make belief.

The discursive blank-verse meditation "Birches"*[*] builds a mosaic of thoughts from fragments of memory and fantasy. The poem moves back and forth between two visual perspectives: birch trees as bent by boy's playful swinging and by ice storms.

The facts about the ice storm grow the more and more figurative as the poet's imagined preference appears real and prosaic. In the first lines, the poet associates a real scene with an image. Then, the poet intends to compare between the two:

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think-that some boy's been swinging them.

[*] First published in the Atlantic Monthly in August 1915, later included in the Mountain Interval volume, 1916.

But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
As ice storms do. Often you must have seen them.
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After rain.

(1-7)

Forst appeals to the reader to imagine with him the sight of the trees "loaded with ice" and the sound of them clicking upon themselves. The appreciation of the scene becomes clear by comparing them "to a work of human creation: the cracking and crazing of the enamel on a piece of poetry"[8].

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker sees one thing, but is being pulled in a different direction to visualize what is most favorable to him. The speaker tells the reader that he likes to "visualize" ice storm bent trees as trees which have been bent as a result of a boy's swinging on them. In this scene, the speaker is being pulled from reality into a vision of fantasy.

Hence in the first lines of the poem, imagination turns into a fantasy then into a day dream. Yet, he quickly comes to his senses and knows that it is not the boy, but the "ice-storms" that "bent them down to stay" in that manner and not a boy; only ice-storms could do that. It is specifically here that Frost "wakes himself out of the day dream with a , shot of reason. It is wishful thinking that draws him to delusion".[9]

What follows is by no means a lifeless fact, but an enchanting account. Not "just some" ordinary woods, the trees appear as handycrafted to turn as pure as glass, and the ice drops are described in an attracting way to match the wonderful scene:

They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust-
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away

You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen

(7-13)

The offhand "you'd think" shows the common use of expressions of fancy and falls back on shared myths about the heavens and earth. The accurate description in the next lines also suggests possible metaphors:

The are dragged to the withered backen by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in they woods
Years afterwards, trailing leaves on the grounf

(14-18)

After "withered", "bowed", and years "afterwards" might for the first time imply an old man's back bowed by life's burdens. But because visual image can distract us into several implications, we soon come to know that the trees are:

Like girls on hands and like that throw their hair
Before them over their hands to dry in the sun
But it was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm

(19-22)

The downword movement of these lines concludes "with an evocative simile comparing the trailing branches of the tress to girls on hands and kness"[10].

Depending on simile, which is the perfect figure of comparison, the opposition of the things compared can sustain a divided vision. The poet then circles back to his first image of the boy. The turn itself suggests the way to think of truth and fact:

"Truth" here, with capital T is an abstraction personified; it is a figurative value which indeed implies that "the poet prefers an untruth which does not deal in facts. His fancy, though, is down to earth" [11]

Coming down to reality, now the image of the boy riding the trees can be revealed with more clarity:

One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon.
(28-33)

The sagacity of Frost's skills now appears. While claiming to have paid homage to the standards of truth in his digression on the iceloaded branches, what he has actually done is to digress into language of fictions. For here he focuses all his attention on his task.[12] Frank Lentricchia rendered this digression by asserting that:

When [Frost] turns to the desired vision of the
young boy swinging birches he is not turning
from truth to fiction, but from one kind of
fiction to another kind of fiction: from the
fiction of cosmic change and humanized
nature to the fiction of the human will riding
rough shod over a pliable external world[13]

An indispensable matter is to be evoked here: the feeling of the solitary boy weather of joy, accomplishment, or adventure is not expressed. His game settles him in no clear

relation with nature. Yet, when we come to know that Frost once said in his article "Education by Poetry" that "We like to talk.....in indirections" (p: 332), the ambiguity would soon vanish to pave the way for what is behind.

The boy here has the power and the will to learn how to ride the tree. Thus toil tends to be the basic tool of learning. And we can see the didactic touch in words like: "one by one", "over and over again", "not one....not one" (28, 29, 31 successfully).

To match with the first poem tackled, we can see that the pains the boy bears resemble the effort of the mower's earnest love. The swinger of birches (whether boy or poet) must know his own powers and know the strength of the trees and of the metaphors too. This parable is both history and dream:

So was I myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be
(41-42)

Unlike the boy among the birches, the poet is subdued by a "pathless wood" (44); the poet's dream of release is, however, similar to the boy's physical action in getting away from earth to begin "over and over again:"

I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.

The boy's pastime of swinging birch tree is a symbol of escape from and return to life's usual activities. As Forst implies here, the answer to life's discouragements is not to surrender unconditionally to despair but simply to "get away" and "then come back". A man has got to keep his disentanglement:

It is extrication that Frost is advocating
in *" Birches"-extrication here symbolized*
by the poet's own habit as a youngster of
swinging.[14]

Regarding earth as "the right place for love" (54), the poet clearly uses the story for its figurative value; another of Frost's comments comes to mind .The aim is to restore the ideas of free will by means of toil. The poet's imagination

helped in gaining both the free will and the truth. By continuous toil and effort, the boy did recover his freedom to know all there is to know and to keep his balance:

And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back
(57-60)

When one needs to escape from the pressure and toil of life, "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches" (61). Despite these considerations the poet does not choose to leave earth entirely; instead, he recognizes that "Earth is the right place for love". In the final lines of the poem, he returns to the birch once again in order to establish a balance between the groundness of daily life and the dream of absolute freedom. Forst ends the poem with typical understatement.

Conclusion:

Robert Frost's poems "Mowing" and "Birches" projected, with presumable evidence, the role of toil in uniting and accepting truth, dream and imagination together. This has been so far declared through the mutual role of metaphor to provide the right means towards knowledge. Frost's aim of fusing fact and dream exceeded being for its own sake. Rather, the aim was to picture how toil can lead to utter knowledge. Toil and imagination bring the poet into an intimate relation with earth-practical, therefore true and necessary to life. In order to convey a game or harvest into a real and moving existence, one must be committed to hard work and evaluate both fact and dream.

Notes and References

1- Similar discussions on the role of vision and nature in Frost's poetry are found in books like that of E, Richard, On Poetry Poets (Urbana: University of press, 1979), pp.197-180.

2- James White, The Edge of Meaning (Chicago: University Chicago press, 1998), pp83.

3- Edward C. lathem and Lawrence Thompson eds, Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc, 1972), p.394. I cite this text for Frost's poetry and prose throughout: giving page number for prose and line number for poetry within the paper.

4- Robert Forst: The Work of Knowing. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). P. 275.

5- Ibid, P. 335.

6- See Helen Vendler, ed. Voices and Vision (York: Random House, 1987). Pp. 99-102.

7- Priscilla M. Paton "Robert Forst: The fact is the sweetest that lobor knows", ***American Literature.*** Vol. 53. No. 1. (March 1981). P. 48.

8- Christopher Beach, ***The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth Century American Poetry***. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2003), p. 20.

9- Mullet Master, "Comments about "Birches". (Website: file//c. Documents. Administrator. Retrieved: 10/1/2007-04-10).

10- Cristopher Beach. P. 21.

11- Priscilla M. Paton, p. 52.

12- See Robert Penn Warren. ***New and Selected Esays*** (New York: house: 1989), pp. 298-9.

13- ***Robert Forst: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self.*** (England: Duke University Press, 1975). P. 78.

14- Roland L. Ecker, "The Idea of Work in Robert Frost's Poetry". (Website: file//c. Documents. Administrator. Retrieved: 6/11/2006).

(معالجة موضوعة "الجهد" في شعر روبرت فروست: تداخل الحقيقة والخيال)

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يتناول البحث موضوعة الجهد في بعض قصائد روبرت فروست (1874–1963) مُرَكِّزاً على اثنتين من قصائده وهما (الحصاد) و(أشجار البتولا). فكرة البحث تتلخص في براعة فروست في توحيد الحقيقة والأحلام والخيال كوسيلة للوصول إلى المعرفة والتعلم. وتم هذا باستخدامه دور الصيغ الشعرية في الربط ما بين الرؤية الخيالية والجهد البدني. وينعكس هذا بدوره على ربط متطلبات الحقائق اليومية بخصائص لغة القصيدة الشعرية.

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