

Guy Rotella: On "Home Burial"

However dim, the vestiges of elegy in "The Death of the Hired Man" are largely traditional and consolatory in effect; the presence of elegiac vestiges in "Home Burial"²⁸ is more overt, but their effect is a good deal less conventional and far less happy. Earlier I mentioned a significant but oblique exception to the general exclusion of Frost from consideration as an elegist in studies of the genre by Sacks, Shaw, Ramazani, Vickery, and Spargo. That exception is the extended discussion of "Home Burial" in Shaw's *Elegy & Paradox*. Frost's tragic drama (like "The Exposed Nest," the poem is also covertly autobiographical) depicts a marriage and home being destroyed (or buried) by the irreconcilably different and competing modes of grief experienced by parents suffering the death of their first child: he accepts traditional forms of solace; she is inconsolable and won't (or can't) share her bereavement or let it go. Shaw's analysis of the poem is characteristically insightful, and its profile aligns nicely with the brilliant responses to "Home Burial" offered by Joseph Brodsky and Seamus Heaney in *Homage to Robert Frost*.²⁹ But Shaw's immediate concern is to demonstrate the inability of the psychoanalytic and therapeutic model of mourning to account for all the effects of elegy in general and of Frost's poem in particular. To show the limitations of Freud's account (according to which successful mourners survive grief, overcoming loss by accepting a consoling figurative substitution for it, while unsuccessful mourners are destroyed by grief: overcome by loss, they reject consolatory substitution and fall cripplingly ill with melancholy), Shaw focuses on Frost's refusal in "Home Burial" reliably to distinguish strong from weak mourners in hierarchically psychic or other judgmental terms; that is, he focuses on Frost's willingness to grant both the husband's consoled response and the wife's inconsolable one their due, in whatever bittersweet mixture of sympathy and disparagement each of them deserves. This is wholly right, I think, and in keeping with the poem's exposure of language's limited ability to heal the wounds it depicts: throughout "Home Burial" words (including body language) are salt as well as salve. Still, there are ways in which those vestiges of elegy Shaw doesn't address play vital roles in Frost's great poem, not least in affirming and assailing the logic of figuration Freud and traditional elegy enact.

The husband in "Home Burial" seems to have achieved the solace provided by "normal" mourning. He's laid the child to rest himself, burying him in the "little" farmyard plot where his people are. The intimacies of this involvement, the homely placement of the family graveyard, and the dead child's accommodation within familiar patterns of life, death, and continuity all console him (as does his pragmatic response to infant mortality, an event more common and predictable than shockingly rare in the early twentieth-century moment when the poem is set). Meanwhile, the gap between his real but solaced sorrow and his wife's desperate and irremediable grief has left the couple estranged, their affective and sexual life destroyed (the comfort he means to convey by comparing the graveyard to a bedroom, as if to say, with elegies before and since, that death is only sleep, also dreadfully declares, and half-inadvertently at best, that their marital life is dead or frigid). The husband struggles bravely to bridge the gulf between them, but his attempts at gentleness and understanding, his willingness to be taught, and his moving plea that he be allowed to penetrate his wife's suffering ("Let me into your grief") are fatally damaged by utterances that shift uncontrollably from affectionate accommodation to angry accusation. An irrepressible sense

of the "natural" superiority of his own responses (???What was it brought you up to think????), his will to power (he mounts bullishly; she cowers under him), and his snide, conventional views of gender (???A man must partly give up being a man / With women-folk???) all disable his attempts at reconciliation. Meanwhile, Amy's wholly convincing grief renders her inflexible (?She???refused him any help / With the least stiffening of her neck and silence?). She, too, has gender biases (assessing his ability to understand her feelings, she says, ??I don't know rightly whether any man can??). Amy accuses her husband, only half-justly, of not knowing how to speak. And she denies his grief any legitimacy whatever. She insists that precisely because he buried the child himself and expressed his sorrows about death and decay in terms of the ordinary tasks and talk of farming, he ???couldn't care??. She evaluates the very sources of his consolation as beyond the pale of meaningful emotion. In words of almost Shakespearean dignity and philosophical weight (her ?Don't, don't, don't, don't? echoing Lear's imperious negations, for instance, or Benedick's calm conviction in *Much Ado About Nothing* that ?every one can master a grief but him that has it?), Amy rejects the very idea of human compassion. To her, neither condolence nor community exists, let alone provides convincing solace in the face of individual death and private sorrow. Her enormously moving words have tragic grandeur. In their melancholic exclusivity and refusal of limits they are also nearly deranged, for what Amy assails are the unalterable facts of time and change and death, the root conditions of life itself.

?Home Burial? is desolate and desolating. It ends in impasse. I want to conclude this brief discussion of it by considering how a particularly powerful vestige of elegy (and of anti-elegy) in the poem participates in that impasse. The husband of ?Home Burial? is a farmer, of course; he takes solace in performing his accustomed tasks. He is also a version of Frost, a farmer-poet whose own first child died at four, and who, I suspect, took solace for that in his own accustomed tasks, including the handiwork of making this scarifying poem. The identification between the poem's farmer-speaker and Frost as farmer-poet is confirmed by biographical fact. It's also confirmed by each man's investment in metaphor and by the etymological and epigrammatic logics that bind spade to sword (?spada?) and sword to pen (?the pen is???), connections that emphasize the inextricability of creative and destructive elements in every human art and action. Those things in turn help make audible the echo, in the husband's homely comparison of his deceased first child to the ?best birch fence a man can build,? of Ben Jonson's description of his deceased first son as ?his best piece of poetry.? Like Jonson's poem, Frost's ?Home Burial? interrogates the worth of elegy and of poetry alike. Both poems are fully controlled yet racked with guilt and self-loathing. Both insist that nothing humans make: fences, marriages, homes, children, or poems, can escape the deathly ?rot? that comes to everything. Those intertextual matters join with Amy's attack on her husband's earthy metaphor and with her disparagement of the repetitive rhythmic (that is, poetic) actions he used in digging the grave, which actions, in her view, unfeelingly lightened?like an elegy?the gravity of grief by lifting or transposing, converting, or turning sorrow into something else?consolation, say, a metaphor, a poem?by means of patterned labor. And all of these details indicate the presence in ?Home Burial? both of Frost's heartfelt trust in poetry's ability to temper or ?stay? sorrow and his chastising doubts about that ability, including his guilt that he may be profiting aesthetically from his child's death and his fear of Elinor's disapproval that he writes about such things at all. ?Home Burial? puts on trial not only the best birch fence a man can build, but marriage, elegy, poetry, and the entire beguiling array of human efforts to forge a satisfying form of consolation in the face of death and grief. All are praised for their capacity and accused of selfishness, delusion, and fraud (or forgery). ???There, you have said it all,???and you feel better?,? the husband says, confirming his trust in the healing power (the talking cure) of conversation, poetry, and language.

???You?oh, you think the talk is all? she replies, incurably wounded, wholly unconvinced, and entirely dismissive.

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