

William H. Pritchard: On "The Road Not Taken"

On December 16, 1916, he received a warm letter from Meiklejohn, looking forward to his presence at Amherst and saying that that morning in chapel he had read aloud "The Road Not Taken," "and then told the boys about your coming. They applauded vigorously and were evidently much delighted by the prospect."

Alexander Meiklejohn was an exceptionally high-minded educator whose principles and whose moral tone toward things may be illustrated most briefly and clearly by some statements from his essay "What the College Is." This, his inaugural address as president of Amherst, was printed for a time as an introduction to the college catalogue. What the college was, or should be - what Meiklejohn hoped to make Amherst into - was a place to be thought of as "liberal," that is, "essentially intellectual": "The college is primarily not a place of the body, nor of the feelings, nor even of the will; it is, first of all, a place of the mind." Introducing "the boys" to the intellectual life led for its own sake, would save them from pettiness and dullness, would save them from being one of what Meiklejohn referred to as "the others":

There are those among us who will find so much satisfaction in the countless trivial and vulgar amusements of a crude people that they have no time for the joys of the mind. There are those who are so closely shut up within a little round of petty pleasures they that have never dreamed of the fun of reading and conversing and investigating and reflecting.

A liberal education would rescue boys from stupidity, its purpose being to draw from that "reality-loving American boy" something like "an intellectual enthusiasm." But this result could not be achieved, Meiklejohn added, without a thorough reversal of the curriculum: "I should like to see every freshman at once plunged into the problems of philosophy," he said with enthusiasm.

Now, five years after his address, he was bringing to Amherst someone outside the usual academic orbit, a poet who lacked even a college degree. But despite - or perhaps because of - this lack, the poet had escaped triviality, was an original mind who knew about living by ideas. For he had written among other poems "The Road Not Taken," given pride of place in the just-published *Mountain Interval* as not only its first poem but also printed in italics, as though to make it also a preface to and motto for the poems which followed. It was perfect for Meiklejohn's purposes because it was no idle reverie, no escape through lovely language into a soothing dream world, but a poem rather which announced itself to be "about" important issues in life: about the nature of choice, of decision, of how to go in one direction rather than another and how to feel about the direction you took and didn't take. For President Meiklejohn and for the assembled students at compulsory chapel, it might have been heard as a stirring instance of what the "liberal college" was all about, since it showed how, instead of acceding to the petty pleasures, the "countless trivial and vulgar amusements" offered by the world or the money-god or the values of the marketplace, an individual could go his own way, live his own life, read his own books, take the less traveled road:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I --
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The poem ended, the boys "applauded vigorously," and surely Meiklejohn congratulated himself just a bit on making the right choice, taking the less traveled road and inviting a poet to join the Amherst College faculty.

What the president could hardly have imagined, committed as he was in high seriousness to making the life of the college truly an intellectual one, was the unruliness of Frost's spirit and its unwillingness to be confined within the formulas - for Meiklejohn, they were the truths - of the "liberal college." On the first day of the new year, 1917, just preparatory to moving his family down from the Franconia farm into a house in Amherst, Frost wrote Untermeyer about where the fun lay in what he, Frost, thought of as "intellectual activity":

You get more credit for thinking if you restate formulae or cite cases that fall in easily under formulae, but all the fun is outside saying things that suggest formulae that won't formulate - that almost but don't quite formulate. I should like to be so subtle at this game as to seem to the casual person altogether obvious. The casual person would assume I meant nothing or else I came near enough meaning something he was familiar with to mean it for all practical purposes. Well, well, well.

The "fun" is "outside," and lies in doing something like teasing, suggesting formulae that don't formulate, or not quite. The fun is not in being "essentially intellectual" or in manifesting "intellectual enthusiasm" in Meiklejohn's sense of the phrase, but in being "subtle," and not just subtle but so much so as to fool "the casual person" into thinking that what you said was obvious. If we juxtapose these remarks with his earlier determination to reach out as a poet to all sorts and kinds of people, and if we think of "The Road Not Taken" as a prime example of a poem which succeeded in reaching out and taking hold, then something interesting emerges about the kind of relation to other people, to readers - or to students and college presidents - Frost was willing to live with, indeed to cultivate.

For the large moral meaning which "The Road Not Taken" seems to endorse - go, as I did, your own way, take the road less traveled by, and it will make "all the difference"-does not maintain itself when the poem is looked at more carefully. Then one notices how insistent is the speaker on admitting, at the time of his choice, that the two roads were in appearance "really about the same," that they "equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black," and that choosing one rather than the other was a matter of impulse, impossible to speak about any more clearly than to say that the road taken had "perhaps the better claim." But in the final stanza, as the tense changes to future, we hear a different story, one that will be told "with a sigh" and "ages and ages hence." At that imagined time and unspecified place, the voice will have nobly simplified and exalted the whole impulsive matter into a deliberate one of taking the "less traveled" road:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -- I took the one less traveled by, And that
has made all the difference.

Is it not the high tone of poignant annunciation that really makes all the difference? An earlier version of the poem had no dash after "I"; presumably Frost added it to make the whole thing more expressive and heartfelt. And it was this heartfelt quality which touched Meiklejohn and the students.

Yet Frost had written Untermeyer two years previously that "I'll bet not half a dozen people can tell you who was hit and where he was hit in my Road Not Taken," and he characterized himself in that poem particularly as "fooling my way along." He also said that it was really about his friend Edward Thomas, who when they walked together always castigated himself for not having taken another path than the one they took. When Frost sent "The Road Not Taken" to Thomas he was disappointed that Thomas failed to understand it as a poem about himself, but Thomas in return insisted to Frost that "I doubt if you can get anybody to see the fun of the thing without showing them and advising them which kind of laugh they are to turn on." And though this sort of advice went exactly contrary to Frost's notion of how poetry should work, he did on occasion warn his audiences and other readers that it was a tricky poem. Yet it became a popular poem for very different reasons than what Thomas referred to as "the fun of the thing." It was taken to be an inspiring poem rather, a courageous credo stated by the farmer-poet of New Hampshire. In fact, it is an especially notable instance in Frost's work of a poem which sounds noble and is really mischievous. One of his notebooks contains the following four-line thought:

Nothing ever so sincere That unless it's out of sheer Mischief and a little queer It

wont prove a bore to hear.

The mischievous aspect of "The Road Not Taken" is what makes it something un-boring, for there is little in its language or form which signals an interesting poem. But that mischief also makes it something other than a "sincere" poem, in the way so many readers have taken Frost to be sincere. Its fun is outside the formulae it seems almost but not quite to formulate.

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