George F. Bagby: On "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things"

"The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," serves a function roughly analogous to that of "Design"; it reads a natural lesson the point of which is the potential uncertainty of natural lessons. The poem presents an interesting contrast to Promethean pieces like "Wild Grapes" and "There Are Roughly Zones." In each of those poems, an apparent natural lesson suggesting the limitations on human desire is cast aside in favor of a transcendent lesson reasserting the primacy of aspiration. "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," on the contrary, deduces first an apparent lesson which implies the centrality of human concerns, and then a corrective lesson which insists that the heart’s desires are not so central after all.

The first descriptive portion of the poem (lines 1-14) paints a somber natural emblem: a burned-out house, no longer occupied by humans, and a deserted barn now inhabited only by birds, which "At broken windows flew out and in." The preliminary, mistaken lesson of this scene, implicitly drawn in the next two lines, sees natural melancholy at the passing of human presence: the birds’ "murmur" seems "more like the sigh we sigh / From too much dwelling on what has been." Such excessive "dwelling on" or living in the burned-out shell of the past would obviously be an un-Thoreauvian lesson, however; indeed, as the first poem of "The Hill Wife" group reminds us, it represents an essentially neurotic view of natural solicitude.

The poem, consequently, traces a second movement in its last two stanzas. There, as the poem’s perspective broadens, the scene, though emptied of human activity, is perceived as no less hospitable to the phoebes, to life in the broad sense, than it has always been. In these lines personification, ironically, not only assures us that the birds do not weep for the loss of human companions ("they rejoiced in the nest they kept"?always a double-edged verb in Frost). It also suggests that the nonhuman world?not only the "aged" elm, but even the inanimate pump which "flung up an awkward arm" and fence post which "carried a strand of wire" to provide convenient perches?manifests just the sort of solicitude for the phoebes which the phoebes do not manifest for the departed humans. Thus even a scene of human desolation, perceived in a sufficiently broad natural context, is an emblem of continuing vitality (and nonhuman community). That true lesson has been hinted at as early as the poem’s opening quatrain, where the submerged metaphor suggests a Thoreauvian kind of springtime renewal out of apparent autumnal death. "The house had, gone to bring" a glow to the sky, but the chimney is left standing "Like a pistil after the petals go"?like the reproductive center of the faded flower, bearing the seed of another generation.

As its structure and title imply, however, "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" is not primarily about natural resilience and regeneration; it uses that lesson chiefly to illustrate a larger concern: the dangers of a too narrowly human perspective—not unlike that parodied in "The Most of It." The poem does not suggest that natural wisdom is inaccessible to the human observer (the true lesson, after all, waits to be read in the scene); but it does chasten what might be called the Blakean tendencies of the imagination and warn us of the dangers (not to mention the emptiness) of finding only our immediate selves in the natural text. The legitimate use of personification here is to represent something like solicitude in the natural world, not for
us, but for itself.

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