

John J. Conder: On "After Apple-Picking"

The central problems of the poem are posed in the opening lines of its conclusion with the introduction of the ambiguous word "trouble" and the provocative image of "sleep": "One can see what will trouble / This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is." Although the trouble and the "sleep" are intimately connected in the lines, for purposes of analysis it is best to keep them separate. The speaker himself does so, since he apparently knows what will trouble his sleep but is uncertain about the kind of sleep overtaking him. Arranged in the order most convenient for answering them, two questions emerge in "After Apple-Picking": What is the nature of the sleep? What is the nature of the trouble?

A complex of familiar references points to death as one possible form of sleep. The very situation of the poem, a surcease from picking apples, recalls the Garden of Eden from which, after the apple was picked (and eaten), man was expelled into a world of sin and death. The speaker affirms that he was "well" on his way to sleep even before his morning venture with the sheet of ice. Since life is a process ending in death, the speaker's comment, juxtaposed against the reference to "heaven," promotes the possibility that the speaker may be journeying to an immortal sleep. The season of the year emphasizes nature's death, while the woodchuck's hibernation suggests a pattern of death and resurrection.

Intriguing though these references are, a reader familiar with Frost's playful ways ("I like to fool," he said) knows better than to take them hastily at face value. The most popular reading rejects the possibility of death. Since the speaker's dream, according to this account, represents an ideal rooted in the real world, (his ability to dream about a job well done represents his heaven on earth. His capacity for contemplation sets him apart from the inferior woodchuck, though he does not affirm that man has an immortal soul.

Insofar as this reading rejects death and immortality as one possible form of sleep in "After Apple-Picking," the commentary is consistent with a general opinion that Frost is nonteleological in his thought. Since he neither affirms nor denies that the emergence of mind suggests ultimate meaning in the universe, Frost would necessarily remain neutral in his attitude toward immortality. But if the speaker's dream and sleep exist in life, then to assert that, after his labors, the speaker "is now looking not into the world of effort but the world of dream, of the renewal," is to oversimplify the poem. This view identifies the dream (interpreted as pleasurable) with the sleep (seen as a time for contemplation as well as renewal) and in the process limits both. Such a reading qualifies the word "trouble" into insignificance (to be troubled by a lovely dream is to be superior to the woodchuck, who cannot dream) and oversimplifies the speaker's attitude toward his experience. Given the feats of association that he makes, given the fact that he speaks in contraries, the speaker's attitude toward his sleep is far more complicated than at first seems clear, and his trouble far more real than might be supposed.

The speaker's attitude toward his sleep is complicated because of the possible kinds of sleep overtaking him. To be sure, this may be a night's sleep from which the speaker will awake, refreshed, ready to turn to those "fresh tasks" mentioned by the puzzled speaker of "The Wood-Pile." This possibility is supported by the reference to "night"; it is at "night" that he is

"drowsing off"; the speaker, having completed the last of his labors as best he could, may be about to go to bed.

But the association of night with "essence of winter sleep" gives "night" a metaphoric context and so expands its meaning. Indeed, a simple night's sleep seems an improbable meaning, since the speaker was "well" upon his way to sleep before he dropped the "pane of glass" in the morning. Perhaps, then, his drowsy state may be part of the "essence of winter sleep"; that is, perhaps it is a sleep similar to nature's. Enough correspondences between the human and natural worlds exist to dictate this as one possible kind of sleep. The speaker's apple-picking ceases as the year nears conclusion, and his "drowsing off" is associated with "essence of winter sleep":

Essence of winter sleep is on the night, The
scent of apples: I am drowsing off.

If his sleep is to be like nature's, what then is the point of the reference to the woodchuck? Since the woodchuck surely could not ". . . say whether it's like his / Long sleep, as I describe its coming on, / Or just some human sleep," the speaker's avowal to the contrary apparently reduces the conclusion to mere whimsy. Presumably woodchucks do not dream and do not desire great harvests. Men do. Presumably men do not go into physical hibernation for months. Woodchucks do. But the point of the reference to the woodchuck is not simply to create a contrast between a human and an animal sleep but also to introduce an implied comparison?an inexact analogy between the speaker's sleep and the sleep of nature. If only man has the potential to desire great harvests, his desires may follow a cycle similar to nature's. They may wax and wane like (or with) the seasons; they may emerge, as the woodchuck does in the spring, or lie dormant for months, as the woodchuck does in winter.

For the man who is ". . . overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired," such an analogy carries with it its own measure of reassurance. Assuming that the desire for harvests and the act of harvesting together are an emblem of man's creative spirit working its will on the world, a reader can see that implicit in this situation is the question: Will my desire, my will, my talents be resurrected, directed toward reaping new harvests? Although he would find it more comforting to think that "just some human sleep" is a single night's sleep which will restore his powers so that he can turn to "fresh tasks," he can be reassured by the analogy between man and the seasons nonetheless. His desires will lie dormant longer, but they will surely be revived, as nature is. . . .

. . . The speaker himself is uncertain of the analogy, speculating whether his sleep is like the woodchuck's, ". . . as I describe its coming on, / Or just some human sleep" (italics mine). As he has described that sleep coming on, indeed, the speaker clearly has been speaking contraries. The analogy with nature which his associations establish are, in the process of his speaking, undermined by suggestions that the sleep will be different from nature's.

Those suggestions become explicit in the contrast between the sleep of the woodchuck and

"just some human sleep." Precisely because the implied comparison between the speaker's sleep and the woodchuck's is undone by the power of the contrast (men can only have a human sleep), the assurance offered by the comparison with nature is also retracted. The contrast between the two kinds of sleep, furthermore, has been anticipated from the beginning of the poem, thus providing the fullest impact to the concluding line, "Or just some human sleep."

From the outset, nature seems to have become alien to the speaker. The first section concludes with the speaker's commenting that he is no longer interested in picking apples, in appropriating nature to his own uses: "But I am done with apple-picking now." The parallel between his drowsiness and the "essence of winter sleep" is, at best, tenuous, held together by an uncommitted colon in the last line of the statement, "Essence of winter sleep is on the night, / The scent of apples: I am drowsing off." The "essence," in short, is more directly associated with "the scent of apples" than with the speaker's sleep. The parallel tenuously established by the colon breaks down in the next section, which describes the strange sight of the winter world through a sheet of ice. Perhaps he does see through this "glass" "the world of hoary grass," but even that is not certain, and no other object in the external world he views is mentioned. Before he describes the "form" of his dreaming, he significantly lets the pane of ice fall and break, an action in stark contrast to his behavior during the harvest, when he took special pains to keep the apples from falling. Of course, since the ice is melting, the gesture is perfectly normal. Deliberate mention of the detail, nonetheless, suggests his alienation from nature. Once he could handle it (in the literal and metaphoric senses of that term); now he cannot.

If the speaker is divorced from nature, then what would "just some human sleep" be? One can concede that the speaker is physically and mentally fatigued, his desire for a "great harvest" satiated. In that case it is possible that he is entering the world of renewal, that his sleep will be composed of pleasant dreams, a contemplation of the ideal based on the real; and it is possible that his trouble will be minimal, composed of the physical aftereffects of too much apple-picking: the "ache" and the "pressure" retained by his "instep arch"; the feel of the swaying ladder; the "rumbling sound" of apples. But it is not at all certain that his is the sleep of renewal. Indeed, to argue with certainty that this is the sleep of renewal, a reader would have to rest his case on the analogy between man's cycle and nature's, an analogy that seems to fail in the poem. Such an analogy, furthermore, would not be consistent with Frost's point of view, one which sharply differentiates man from nature. . . . Both Frost's habit of speaking contraries and his point of view toward nature militate against a simplistic view of sleep and argue for a darker side of "just some human sleep."

That darker side can be discerned by recalling what is lost by the failure of the analogy between man and nature. If nature can renew itself automatically, man, viewed as distinct from nature, cannot be assured of such renewal. Nature has her unknown source of creative revival. What is man's? The source of his creativity is the assumption that his harvest has value, that the activity is worthwhile. If the speaker questions the purpose of his activity, doubts the value of his harvest, then indeed his may be a sleep of the creative powers, one which will last until the doubts are removed.

The speaker makes it eminently clear that he once highly valued his harvest. Simply put, he "desired" a "great harvest," and the desire was sufficiently strong to justify extraordinary discipline and control: "There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch, / Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall." The sense of value which he associated with manual contact ("cherish in hand") is confirmed in the lines immediately following:

For all That struck the earth, No matter if not
bruised or spiked with stubble, Went surely to
the cider-apple heap As of no worth.

The crucial phrase, "As of no worth," is ambiguous and reflects the speaker's habit of "talking contraries," of retracting "everything . . . [he] said, nearly. "For to describe the fallen apples as "of no worth" is to imply their worth. It is not possible to tell whether the speaker, now commenting with the advantage of hindsight, would have characterized these apples in the same way during his actual apple-picking. What is clear is that this description of his past activities implies a sense of relative values (fallen apples are inferior to harvested ones), but a highly ambiguous one. Since the speaker has declared that ". . . I am overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired," he is in a mood to apply the same logic of talking contraries to the harvest itself. If the fallen apples are as "of no worth," then he hints, the harvest itself is as of great worth, a description which implies its opposite. The exhausted speaker, in short, is in doubt about his values.

Doubts related to questions of value are in his mind as he recounts his apple-picking, so it is not surprising that the dream induced by his venture reflects his confusion. It is by no means certain, of course, whether the "dreaming" is confined to the visual description of the apples or whether it includes all the aftereffects of picking apples. Since this is probably more than a simple night's sleep, it is likely that the dream is much like one experienced when awake, as when a person still feels the rocking of the boat even after he has set foot on firm land. Assuming that the dream embraces, the full range of sensations, the reader can observe a striking contrast between the visual and the other sensory elements. Only the apples are "magnified"; there is no suggestion that the "ache," the "pressure," the swaying of the ladder and the rumbling of the apples are felt and heard more intensely than during the actual pursuit of the harvest. Not only are the apples larger than life; they are also autonomous, independent of the speaker's control as they appear in the mind's eye: "Magnified apples appear and disappear."

The erratic movement of the apples, certainly, may be quite consistent with the nature of this dream, one experienced when awake. Stare at an object long enough and its impression is retained after the eyes are closed. The eyelids blink shut, and the speaker sees apples. They flick open, and the apples vanish. Quite possibly the image so retained is magnified. But for readers concerned with the depth of the actual in Frost's poetry, such an explanation is hardly sufficient. Frost no doubt wants to show that the form of the speaker's dreaming is a consequence of the activity which inspired it, since the speaker concludes the dream with the

statement, "For I have had too much / Of apple-picking: I am overtired" (italics mine), and then describes the apple-picking itself. To settle for a purely naturalistic explanation of the relationship between the two, however, is to limit the poem.

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 element in the dream, since all the other elements are ascribable to purely natural aftereffects and bear no symbolic relationship to the whole point of picking as many apples as possible: to reap a great harvest. That sense of discipline associated with value during the apple-picking is not present in the dream. The apples are unrelated to the speaker, moving of their own accord, without his direction, his sense of purpose. Furthermore, they are all magnified; the distinction between those harvested and those lost does not exist. Gone is the speaker's sense of relative values. Associated with the statement ". . . I am overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired," their magnification and autonomy bring into bold relief the very doubts surfacing toward the end of his description of the actual venture of picking apples. He has literally lost sight of all the values of the harvest. If this is a happy sleep of contemplation, the happiness is highly qualified.

Concerned about his values, the speaker is also concerned about the nature of his sleep, a concern imaged in the contrast between himself and the woodchuck. As part of nature the woodchuck will automatically be renewed. But the speaker may need, for renewal, not simply rest, some period of dormancy, but also some certain knowledge of human values. And where is such knowledge to come from? Recall, this is a poem about what happens after apple-picking. Hardly an allegory either supporting or denouncing Christian doctrine, the work nonetheless relies on overtones of the Fall to enrich its complex meaning. When man first picked the apple, he was expelled from Eden to labor by the sweat of his brow, a consequence of his newly found knowledge of good and evil. The speaker lives in a fallen world where he has labored and sweated. But he gains no sure knowledge as Adam did. His ladder is pointed toward heaven only, and he has had to descend from it. Man can climb the ladder toward heaven, toward certainty, but when he returns, he discovers how little he has learned with certainty. He cannot even know the nature of his sleep, although the possibilities seem clear.

Perhaps his will be like the woodchuck's sleep, the sleep of nature, in the limited sense that his creative powers are subject to the same kind of cyclical movement observed in the seasons. At worst, this sleep would be like nature's in its duration, though not in its character (unlike nature, man can dream). Such a sleep, induced by physical and mental fatigue, is not a function of man's uncertain values. His values are certain; his ability to act on them, limited. This is the sleep of renewal.

This meaning of "sleep," though possible in the poem, seems obviated by the apparent failure of the analogy between man and nature. Although Frost allows for its possibility in the reference to the woodchuck, such a sleep seems inconsistent with his larger view of man and nature. A second possible sleep, not far removed from the first, is also ascribable to a straining of the physical and mental powers, a strain just severe enough to confuse the speaker's sense of values and to blur his sense of purpose. But if he originally possessed a firmly grounded sense of value and purpose, he can be reasonably certain he will awaken from this sleep, from this confusion about values. A good rest, a night's or a month's, will settle the matter. Thereafter, he can turn to "fresh tasks" with no need to investigate his values. Given Frost's larger poetic world, this meaning is the most likely. The will to live and to create provides the ground for man's values.

But in the world of "After Apple-Picking," recovery is not certain. Frost's "feats of association" are so complicated, his performance in hinting so masterful, that the poem suggests the possibility of a third kind of sleep. If the speaker's encounter with the apples has led him to question not just the nature, but the source of his values, then, his sleep may be longer, even permanent. It is one matter to recover values lost because of fatigue. It is another to be forced to return to their source, particularly if that source is only the "I myself" who "desired." For when desire fails and values falter, what source outside the self can restore desire? In "After Apple-Picking," the ladder only points toward heaven.

What will trouble the speaker's sleep, whatever sleep it is? He is only falling asleep in this poem, and he does not yet know which sleep his will be. Its duration will determine its nature. It is his uncertainty as to when (or whether) he will awaken which will be carried into his sleep, troubling it. Ironically enough, only when he awakens will he know what sleep it is? or, rather, was.

From "'After Apple-Picking': Frost's Troubled Sleep." *Frost: Centennial Essays*.
Copyright © 1973 by University Press of Mississippi.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Robert Frost [2]

Author:

John J. Conder [3]

Poem:

After Apple-Picking [4]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/john-j-conder-after-apple-picking>

Links

[1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/robert-frost>

[3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/john-j-conder>

[4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/after-apple-picking>