

Robert Faggen: On "The Wood-Pile"

. . . In "The Wood-Pile" the narrator finds in his frozen swamp ambiguous evidence of order and cultivation that does not yield simple revelations. The facts?the behavior of the bird and the woodpile itself?become hard to read in this ecologically complex environment.

The narrator's purposes remain obscure, though he seems ambivalent about them. Is he escaping, fleeing, or seeking something? At first he wants to "turn back" but then continues with "we shall see." See something literally or colloquially, as in "see what will happen"? There is a ruefulness in his recognition that he is "far from home":

[lines 1-9]

Ungraspable, beyond our naming or taming, the place is inhuman. One senses that the narrator is testing himself, attempting to overcome his fears and expectations in an environment indifferent to his ego. All the while he convinces himself of a decision and of his power of choice, both of which are soon mocked.

What he eventually sees are indications of life and form?the little bird and the woodpile?that do not conform to the uniformity of the trees; they are evidence of the Lucretian swerve of independence and order in a chaotic world. He attempts to infer some intention, purpose, or design from these facts, which resist comprehension. The bird, probably a white-tailed junco, becomes the target of the narrator's projections about purpose. According to the narrator, this bird is defensive, sure that he is after him for his white tail feather. But the narrator checks his own anthropomorphism with the wonderfully ambiguous qualifying phrase "Who was so foolish as to think what he thought." The real problem is the antecedent of the relative pronoun who, the bird or the narrator. Is the narrator foolish to try to think what the bird thought, or is the bird foolish for thinking that the narrator is after his tail feather? Both readings reveal something about the narrator and his quest for meaning:

[lines 10-16]

On one level the narrator appears to be mocking the bird for his paranoia and egotism, "like one who takes / Everything said as personal to himself." But the foolishness may be the narrator's for projecting onto the bird his own thoughts and his human tendency to see the world in terms of his own ego.

But the narrator's attention to the white feather in the bird's tail suggests that the bird may well indeed have something to fear; the narrator's attention to it betrays his lack of indifference to an unusual trophy, a thing of beauty, that he might want to capture or possess (not unlike the narrator seeking the trophy nest in "The White-Tailed Hornet"). The narrator asserts his own freedom from this desire with the line "One flight out sideways would have undeceived him," while confirming his own inability to liberate himself from this desire to take off "the way I

might have gone," if he were still not bound to his instincts. The bird goes behind the woodpile, according to the narrator, "to make his last stand":

[lines 17-22]

Why does the bird go behind the woodpile? Probably not to make his last stand. Rather, the woodpile is the location of his nest, as the junco is the kind of bird who builds nests in fallen logs and close to the ground. The white feather, despite the attention of the narrator, serves the purpose of mating, not beauty for human eyes.

A carefully cut "cord," perhaps a play on chord, of the hardwood maple, it seems a religious sacrifice or a work of art, at least purposefully ornamented and finished by the clematis. But the clematis itself is seeking material upon which to grow. And it might also show the bird's real motive in going to the woodpile? seeking the seeds of the clematis for food. There is a network of growth and destruction. These aspects of the tangled swamp are lost on this seeker of ordered perfection comprehensible in human terms:

[lines 23-34]

Its isolation and age are remarkable indications of what appears to have been an inexplicable and, more important, deliberate action of waste. The environment overwhelms, threatens, and destroys any angular form of human order that can be imposed upon or made from it. The tree growing next to it? like the Darwinian Tree of Life, which encompasses both life and extinction? supports the pile, while the man-made stake and prop are "about to fall." The human destruction of a tree to create form is subsumed by the larger Tree of Life. . . .

The speaker of "The Wood-Pile" seems surprised that someone could build such an altar as the woodpile, "far from a useful fireplace." As a form set against the chaos of nature, it appears to serve no survival function, and that is its glory. What kind of individual would do this?

[lines 34-40]

The speaker's revelation is ambiguous. His own quest for perfection (the white feather, the perfect work of art) is mocked by the thought of a creator who moves on from form to form. There is a Lucretian lesson in this, that the fear of death and the concern with immortality are likely to produce fear and foolishness. The woodpile is an example of waste for its own sake. Its creator moves on with little concern for how others perceive what he has done or for the future of what he has made. But was his motive the "sheer morning gladness at the brim," as the speaker of "The Tuft of Flowers" said in hope of discovering a common faith? If the woodpile is a metaphor for a human effort at form or art or individuation? free from practical constraints? it reveals only that all attempts at transcendence lead back to some form of ecological function in the material world: "To warm the frozen swamp as best it could / With the slow smokeless burning of decay." The woodpile takes on a life of its own. Like Darwin, Frost moves past thinking about who made the cut wood, a creative agent of change, to the wood itself, which serves a purpose even in its death. Indeed, its presence and decay allow

for clematis, and the clematis provides seed for birds. And it does in its decay actually allow enough warming so that trees can grow, from the bacterial breakdown into methane, though the phrase "as best it could" indicates the limits Frost tends to ascribe to any single effort. The woodpile with its apparent merging of formal and final causes at the hands of an absent creator would be an example of l'art pour l'art were it not for the fact that its apparent ecological function defeats the projections and hopes of the narrator. Here too, Daphne eludes Apollo. The speaker would be as indifferent as the bird, as indifferent as the woodchopper, and indifferent to the woodpile itself as its purpose and design collapse into the swampy chaos of biological interpenetration and transformation. The conclusion expresses a recognition of the vanity of human pursuit in a pluralistic and inhuman universe.

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