

## Guy Rotella: On "Birches"

Although "Birches" describes a boy's game instead of a chore, it too has fact, dream, and in that intent game a commitment as deep as one of earnest love. Here Frost's comments on being at home in figurative values are most apt for his actual poetic images: knowing how to ride metaphor is analogous to knowing how to ride birches.

The facts about the ice storm in "Birches" grow the more and more figurative as the poet's imagined preference sounds real and prosaic. In the first lines, the poet associates a real scene with an image in his mind, and he deliberately distinguishes between the two. The casual assumption, "you must have seen them," makes his statements sound public and verifiable:

[quotes ll. 1-7]

What follows is by no means lifeless fact but an enchanting account. Not just some ordinary woods, the enameled trees look as crafted and ornamental as fine glass sculpture, and the fallen ice evokes a mythical catastrophe:

[quotes ll. 7-13]

Again the poet knows metaphor's limits and implies that anyone knows them. The offhand "You'd think" shows how common it is to slip into expressions of fancy and fall back on shared myths about the heavens and earth.

The accurate description in the next lines also suggests possible metaphors :

They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load, And they seem not to  
break; though once they are bowed So low for long, they never right themselves:  
You may see their trunks arching in the woods Years afterwards, trailing their  
leaves on the ground . . .

After "withered," "bowed," and "years afterwards," I tend to picture old men bowed by life's burdens, but that is not the case. As part of our education in metaphor, we must learn that a visual image can take us in several directions. To the poet these trees are

Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair Before them over their hands to  
dry in the sun.

The poet then circles back to his first image of the boy. That turn itself suggests something

about the way one habitually thinks of truth and fact:

But I was going to say when Truth broke in With all her matter of fact about the ice storm . . .

"Truth" with a capital "T" is abstraction personified, a figurative value. She, a trusted absolute, it seems, and not the poet interrupts with these "facts"? "crystal shells" and "the inner dome of heaven." By implication, the poet prefers an untruth which does not deal in facts. His fancy, though, is down to earth. No idle, elvish tale here:

[quotes ll. 23-40]

Why is the game of this solitary boy so appealing and poignant? He never expresses his feelings, whether of joy, accomplishment, or adventure. His game, which leaves the birches limp, places him in no idyllic, pantheistic relation with nature, yet it redeems itself in part. The meaning of his actions is not explicit. As Frost once said, in poetry "We like to talk in parables and in hints and in indirections" ("Education by Poetry," p. 332). Here the hints and indirections tease us to make more of the parable. At the same time, something holds us back, an adherence to fact, perhaps, to orchises or apples or birches. The tease lies in the account of the boy's thoroughness and intentness in his sport. An air of dedication, purpose, and fulfillment hovers about "one by one," "over and over again," "not one . . . not one." The boy has power; he subdues and conquers. He understands perfectly how to maneuver the trees and fly from branches to ground. The predicates which convey this could preface some finality. "He learned all there was" and "he always kept his poise," themselves poised at the ends of lines, evoke the mastery and freedom of one who knows "all there is" about life. But the boy's wisdom, after its fling into the air, lands on something specific: "He learned all there was / To learn about not launching out too soon," "He always kept his poise / To the top branches." His knowledge is valid in that context, as truth in "Mowing" is valid in terms of the sun's heat and the silence.

[....]

The swinger of birches, boy or poet, must know his own powers and know the strength of the trees and the strength of metaphor.

This parable is both history and dream:

[quotes ll. 41-53]

Unlike the boy among the birches, the poet is subdued by a "pathless wood." The form of his dream of release corresponds to the boy's physical action: getting away from earth to begin "over and over again."

In the last lines, the poet clearly uses the parable for its figurative value, and another of Frost's comments comes to mind: the aim of metaphor is "to restore you to your ideas of free will" ("Education by Poetry," p. 333). The poet's imagination, with metaphors which attend to longings and to real events, restores free will without distorting the truth. The trees are not

bent by the boy; thinking that he changes the woods is the fiction. However, it seems someone really has climbed the trees and enjoyed a flight from sky to earth. By using metaphors which fuse fact and dream, the poet is no longer beaten back; and he recovers the freedom of the boy who knows all there is to know and who always kept his poise:

[quotes ll. 54-61]

In the end, dividing Frost's poetic images into fact, dream and both is impossible. Frost undermines such divisions in a manner both playful and serious, exploring slippery issues about the natures of perception, interpretation, reality and truth. His poems often illustrate the mind seeking out metaphor and meaning in some rural or domestic scene, testing different possibilities. They also show with varying degrees of irony the mind, language, and familiar, perhaps inherent, myths imposing themselves on a landscape. Or maybe the landscape imposes something on the mind. . . .

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