

John Hollander: On "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be The Same"

If a mythical starting point for the pastoral music of outdoor sound might be located in the Virgilian shepherd's liquid metronome, the more complex Romantic reading of nature demands a different sort of account. One poem by Robert Frost, harking back to Classical pastoral in one way, more directly invoking the biblical garden, may serve to illustrate this:

[. . .]

This is an uncharacteristically mythopoetic moment for Frost. The myth is that of the imprinting of consciousness onto nature, not a visual one of, say, double exposure, or overlay of transparency that might fulfill technologically a wholly imagined Romantic device, but an aural one? "Be that as may be, she was in their song," and surely only because of the heightened power of eloquence in call or laughter, not weeping, the very sounds of which drop, like tears, into the ground. Hereafter, the poem says, nature would exist as a meaningful communicant? this is really a totally Emersonian poem? to be listened to because human meaning would always be in it. The final couplet of the sonnet is a blend of summation and inspired, crafty hedging: "Never again would birds' song be the same," says Frost, in the line that gives the poem its title. But then he withdraws, as if the point of the poem couldn't be the establishment of a major myth; the final line domesticates the story, turning into canny praise of Eve's beauty? "And to do that to birds was why she came." But of course the poem is not about Eve as woman at all, but, in an unavowedly Miltonic way, about a part of humanity.

"Her tone of meaning, but without the words"? undoubtedly what Frost had earlier formulated, in attempting to particularize the dimension of the music of speech to which his ear was most highly attuned, as "the sentence sound." He meant the delicate but crucial modulations of phrase-stress pattern, contrastive stress, the rhetorical suprasegmentals, that not only make oral communication what it is, but which a practitioner of classical accentual-syllabic verse must be aware of. It is the music of English verse in which syntax plays a necessarily important role. "Just so many sentence sounds belong to man as just so many vocal runs belong to one kind of bird," he writes to Sidney Cox in 1914. "We come into the world with them and create none of them. What we feel as creation is only selection and grouping. We summon them from Heaven knows where under excitement with the audile imagination." The sound of sense: the music of speech, but of speech being watched, in its transcribed form, within a diagramming and punctuating and annotating grid of metrical pattern. To this degree, we all still dwell in the Romantic world of the ear, in which the song of birds is more like poetry than a Beethoven string quartet. Wordsworth's "Ode on the Power of Sound" is, of course, emphatically not about the power of music, but about the ear's larger, undomesticated vastnesses, those regions in which real poetry, rather than cultivated verse, is to be found, the realm of all the human and natural utterance, from cries of pain to shouts of discovery: the sounds of language and of the wind in trees.

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