

Judith Oster: On "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same"

It would seem that we have an enchanted Adam, who delights not only in Eve's voice, and by implication her softness, her calls and laughter, her "tones of meaning" that transcend or bypass words, but one who also delights in nature, in the songs of birds. Adam had arrived in the garden before Eve, and thus he was in a position to notice that her arrival had an effect on the birds. It was her soft eloquence, her calls and laughter, her wordless tones of meaning that became part of their song. These soft, perhaps erotic sounds were daylong; they were in concert with the birds' songs, and that is why they became forever a part of them. Since she was in their song, Adam needed only to hear the birds sing, and he would be hearing the voice of Eve as well. This influence carried beyond the particular spot where she stood; it carried to the birds "in all the garden round," a noun adjunct that suggests, in the way "compass round" does in "The Silken Tent," infinite extension in and around the garden. The sound traveled upward as well: it was carried aloft. But it was not her laughter or her calls that became part of the birds' song. Her calls and laughter were merely the carriers of her wordless "tone of meaning," her "soft eloquence." This intangible essence of Eve, then, is what entered their song.

Not only in space but through time did Eve have this influence, and in manipulation of tenses this poem extends itself almost imperceptibly backward and forward in time, creating (as did Milton) a timelessness within the poem which transcends the time-bound reality that we know Eve also to have introduced. We can assume that the "he" is Adam, since he is listening to Eve in the garden. The first sentence uses "would" as a modal, which hints of futurity even while it is the past of "will." The birds "had added" the oversound "from having heard" Eve's voice—clearly in the past and clearly putting the relationship of Eve's voice and their adding in a sequential relationship. This having been done, "she was in their song," still in the past. It is in the lines that follow that time becomes ambiguous: "her voice upon their voices crossed ("crossed" as past participle modifying "voices" or "voice" as it crossed with their voices) / Had now persisted in the woods so long / That probably it never would be lost." When is "now" we must ask? Did we not know the short term of their stay in the garden, we might be tempted to say this is an older Adam telling us that, after so long, the voices still remained "crossed." But we know how little time was spent in the garden, and we notice that not only has time extended beyond the time of Adam in Eden but so has setting changed from garden to woods. The constant common to all time and all place then is the birds' song, audible in garden and woods, audible then as now, but remarkable in that Eve's voice has remained in their song. "Never again would birds' song be the same" makes it clear that Eve's influence has been a permanent one, perhaps implying that Adam in every man in every time would hear Eve when he heard birds sing.

"Never again" is a very resonant phrase, however. One way to read it is with nostalgia for a past that can never again be recaptured. Eve's influence, as we have been told again and again before ever having read this poem, has not been simply to beautify birds' song. Eve's "influence" lost man Eden. Eve's influence introduced mortality, not only erotic pleasure. In fact, with the first couple's new-found knowledge came unsatisfied eroticism. But this poem

hints that she came (unmistakably a sexual connotation) precisely to do that, to introduce this dimension to Adam's life for worse?but also for better .

If we analyze the use of the modal "would" in this poem, we find that it is able to obscure time because it introduces a subjunctive mode not bound by time precisely because it is not used to report actual fact, past or present, but wish, fantasy, probability, or intent. We see this first of all when we examine the difference between the sentence "Never again will birds' song be the same" and "Never again would birds' song be the same." In the first we are in a factual present, looking ahead to the future; we would more likely assume from the sentence that now is best, and the future will not be as good. "Would" puts us into a past as it looks ahead into the future. Here, too, time faces in both directions, recalling "Nothing Gold Can Stay," but here there is a difference. In "Nothing Gold" ends are implicit in the beginnings; here, beginnings are implicit in an end. The hopefulness here and in "West-running Brook" may derive from the same source: the presence of an Eve and whatever meanings?literal or figurative?attach (as we explored in the previous chapter) to marriage. "Would" also implies condition: under given conditions there would be a change. If Eve influenced the birds, they would never again be the same. The sentence as it stands in the poem looks both forward and backward, and it can imply either that Eve improved life or that she "diminished" it, for while we are told that she improved birds' song, we bring to the poem our knowledge that she influenced Adam's downfall. Never again would man live in Eden, but something of Eden persists in all time, in all woods. Eve, after all, is with him "wand'ring hand in hand" in a world that lies before them.

This duality of Adam's relation to Eve is reflected in the contrasting tones, the contrasting directions and rhythms of the poem. In fact, the contrasting pulls of tone arise precisely because of these different tones and contrasting voices. There is an uncomplimentary undertone introduced into this lovely lyric of bird song. There are men who would consider the "daylong voice" of a woman to be nagging and unpleasant. Here Eve's voice "crossed" that of the birds; it persisted. There is also the aggressive quality of the expression "to do that to," and when one comes to do something to birds, it could mean that one comes with a purpose, an intent. This too is woman; but combined as it is with beauty and song, softness and sexuality, combined with nature as we see it here in garden, woods, birds, these more aggressive qualities seem to mitigate what would otherwise be sentimental. The combination seems to tie even Eve, even the Eve principle, to reality?daylong, persistent, day-to-day, long-term, but still loving reality. (One is reminded that in "My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun" what begins as less than complimentary emerges, just for that reason, as a far more sincere declaration of love than we find in many more effusive love sonnets.)

Contrasting with birds and garden and the softness not only named but implemented by means of sound?the predominance of unvoiced consonants, especially "s" and "f"; the predominance of liquids such as "r" and "l" and the semivowel "w," contrasting with the lyric, idyllic qualities of the sonnet?we find the language of argument. What room is there in such an atmosphere for words like "admittedly," "moreover," and "be that as may be," which carries with it echoes of the more usual "be that as it may" as well as the doubting, noncommittal "maybe." It takes a poet confident and sure of what he is doing to throw words like this into such an atmosphere; and it takes a good poet to succeed in that these words sound right. They sound right because they carry forward the undertone that maintains the duality of the poem, of man's position in love and in the world we inherited from our first parents. They also inject the everydayness that makes the celebration of love so real?the everydayness of Eve, the Eve-ness of everyday?and they allow us to see the humor and the self-irony of a man who persists in defending what, in actual fact, is totally indefensible.

The poem tells us what he "would declare," which expresses, as we have already noted, both a hypothetical situation and an intention. It also expresses what was habitual. What he would declare is that the birds have added an oversound to their song--Eve's tone of meaning. But he soon sees that there is something illogical in this; "admittedly" such a soft eloquence would not be heard by the birds. Well, it would be when call or laughter carried it up; that is, the more seductive, appealing sounds will act as transmitters to the birds, and it is of course that note which will remain of Eve in all future birds. "Be that as may be, she was in their song." The speaker concedes that his claim is only within the realm of possibility, even of make believe; but we also "hear" the oversound of "be that as it may," which we use when we mean: well, it's like that anyway. In either case, it is as if he says: I know it doesn't make sense, I know your argument is sounder, but even so, this is the way I see it. She was in their song.

There are only two indicative sentences in the poem, only two sentences that state fact as we are to believe it really was: (1) "she was in their song" and (2) "to do that to birds was why she came." Ironically, these two "givens" are, in light of provable fact and reason, the most difficult to believe. We can have no evidence for either; yet these are the declarations of the poem. Everything else is expressed with "would" and "could": he would declare, he could believe, only in a particular way could her voice have influenced their song, probably it would not be lost, never again would it be the same. After all, doing this to birds was her intention; it was her reason for coming. He would declare it, and he could believe it.

What everything must finally depend on, of course, is his belief that this is so. Again it is ironic that "he would declare" precedes "and could himself believe." The order of the verbs is ironic, but so is the modal "could" and so too is the emphatic "himself." (Emphasis is also added by a reading of "would" that can lend a tone of stubborn insistence to his declaration, as in "he would do it despite our warning.") He plans to declare this strange phenomenon almost as if he must do so to make himself believe it, as if he talks himself into it with his argumentative line of reasoning that finally breaks down to be rescued by belief. He has not only convinced himself, but he has given in to what his perceptions and his feelings tell him, contrary to all logic and reason. These self-deceptions are not only declared as fact but are declared in metrical regularity as opposed to the jagged rhythm of the voice of logic: "Be that as may be, she was in their song." The self-deceiving first line is also completely regular. The spondaic "birds there" and "birds' song" are picked up in the last line, which ends, nevertheless, as if in answer, in regularity as well as statement of fact: "And to do that to birds is why she came."

So we are expected to believe that Eve came to do something to the birds. In one way, it

seems absurd; in another we say, of course, she did something to the way birds sounded, to the way birds were to sound to Adam and all his descendants. She did something to affect, if not the birds themselves, then at least man's perception of birds. From the perspective of the perceiver it is all the same. Looking at the poem in this way, we see that it is no longer simply about human love and the garden of Eden but also about the way man perceives?reads?the world around him. It is also about the way Frost reads the Edenic story. It is about the power of imagination as well as the power of love. The humor in the poem comes from the gentle self-irony of the man who would declare and defend. The pull is between two voices, but it is also between two modes of hearing. We hear two kinds of voices in the poem: the idyllic and the argumentative; but the speaker also hears two voices: the voice of reason and the song of birds.

This Adam is not stupid; any deception is self-deception with his conscious collaboration. There is surely something mysterious about soft tones being transmitted to birds who "admittedly" cannot hear them all and something mysterious about such "learned" song when it is transmitted to an indeterminate future. So be it, because it is being declared by someone who knows it is in his imagination, but who believes in the truth of his imagination. Therefore this poem is about art as surely as it is about love. All tradition would be behind our agreement that no man could have taught the birds how to sing as Eve did. The upward lilt of the phrases ("eloquence so soft," "influence on birds," "carried it aloft") reinforces the lilt and softness of a lyrical female voice, the beauty and softness of an Eve. But at the same time it took an engaged listener?an Adam?to perceive it and to appreciate it, and this required two things: the capacity to love, and the capacity to imagine, to look at nature and create with her, whether a human relationship or a work of art.

There is no other paradise, and man must therefore create his "paradise within." Frost has evoked the powerful story of Eden, but he will not accept, it seems, the traditional Christian view of the Fall (again, the Old Testament Christian) or of Eve's role. Yes, Eve can be a problem, but listen to what she did to bird song. Listen to her eloquent softness, her call, her laughter. See what it all did for our powers of perception, our creative imagination. To do all that is why she came.

This poem, in showing an Adam who loves and who has the capacity to imagine, who not only makes the best of his lot but positively enjoys it, presents us with a positive and hopeful view of Adam?for all Adams.

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