

Richard Poirier: On "Good-by and Keep Cold"

Again, Frost, or what a purist would call the speaker, is in a familiar stance. He is on "the edge of the dark / And the cold." And again he is aware of "precedents" in the nature of things ("saying goodby . . . Reminds me") which can be either harmful or helpful. More than half the poem is given over to what he "does not want" to happen to his orchard. There are six negative clauses; four begin with "I don't want," and the others with "It wouldn't" and "It mustn't." On the other hand, what he does want is as emphatically stated as what he doesn't -- he wants the reality of winter cold unadulterated by any unseasonal warmth. His call here for the beneficent severities of nature -- "dread fifty above more than fifty below" -- is a piece with his blustering announcement that he is going to busy himself cutting down trees "less fruitful" than those in his orchard. The whole poem develops consistently toward his charming but chilling comparison between a freezing, dying orchard and a freezing, dying friend. Or rather it is a comparison that comes into existence, as often happens in Frost, in the act of disowning it:

I wish I could promise to lie in the night
And think of an orchard's arboreal plight
When slowly (and nobody comes with a light)
Its heart sinks lower under the sod.
But something has to be left to God.

A lot is happening in this short passage. His denial to the orchard of a status in his emotions equal to that of a freezing and dying loved one nonetheless suggests that with the latter he would know how to act compassionately. All the more so for not being the kind of man who wastes compassion on an orchard. The rightness of the position is buttressed by the wit of the last line. It pretends to mean that what is left to God is to "think of an orchard's arboreal plight." But since God expresses Himself through the variations and durations of the seasons, and since He knows, therefore, that the orchard is not in a "plight," He would hardly worry when its so-called "heart sinks lower under the sod." That, after all, is exactly what is good for it.

But the sophisticated intentions of the poem can only be grasped along with the evidence in it of Frost's metrical genius and his total absorption of English and American verse form. These are an indispensable part of his functioning voice, his poise of seriousness and wit. The poem is written in anapestic tetrameter, a meter whose history is admirably outlined by Hollander in his essay "Romantic Verse Form and the Metrical Contract" (*Vision and Resonance*, pp. 187-211). From Palgrave, Frost would have known the serio-comic use of the meter in Cowper's "The Poplar-Field," and its alternate uses both in elegiac and in satirical or comic verse by Wordsworth, Tom Moore, Hunt, and Landor, one of the poets Frost greatly admired. These two modalities are captured and held brilliantly in suspense by the enjambed first line: "This

saying good-by on the edge of the dark." It seems at this initial point like a crisis poem about death or departure. But the next line, while continuing to exploit the possibility ("And the cold . . .") gets us into the full jingle of the verse form and then to the revealed object: "good-by . . . to an orchard." Later, near the end, in lines 25-26, the same effect is gained in "I wish I could promise to lie in the night/ And think of an orchard's arboreal plight." The wonderful trickery of this, along with some similarities of phrasing, is evident also in the second stanza of the Cowper poem ("Twelve years have elaps'd since I first took a view / Of my favorite field and the bank where they grew"). Frost's choice of the form with its sing-song movement and rhymes, as in "house," "mouse," "browse," "grouse" of lines 5-8, is an especially vivid example of how he hedges his "seriousness" to serious effect. He hides his poetic allegorizing -- his commentaries on a literary history that goes back, as Hollander shows, to the drinking songs and bawdy of earlier times -- by so outrageously exploiting it as to seem almost disingenuously adroit.

Instead of ending with a cheerfully sentimental affirmation of God's mercy, the poem is a jocular and sly insider's view of God's justness, or at least the justness inherent in what Emerson calls, again, "the life of God." The poem is a joke on the whole idea of divine intercession beyond the provisions, some of them quite harsh, of already functioning arrangements. In fact, the speaker is so cognizant of the way nature works that he, and the poem, really "leave" nothing to God at all. It is the speaker who provides for the human needs in such a climate (wood and food) and who makes every provision (short of ridiculously summoning grouse, rabbit, and deer for a warning lecture) to insure an orchard cold and deserted enough for the sake of future growth.

From Robert Frost: *The Work of Knowing*. Copyright © 1977 by Oxford University Press.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Robert Frost [2]

Author:

Richard Poirier [3]

Poem:

Good-By and Keep Cold [4]

Tags:

Familiar [5]

Freezing Emotions [6]

Dying [7]

Loved One [8]

Cheerfully Sentimental [9]

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