

Robert Faggen: On "The Road Not Taken"

"The Road Not Taken" is an ironic commentary on the autonomy of choice in a world governed by instincts, unpredictable contingencies, and limited possibilities. It parodies and demurs from the biblical idea that God is the "way" that can and should be followed and the American idea that nature provides the path to spiritual enlightenment. The title refers doubly to bravado for choosing a road less traveled but also to regret for a road of lost possibility and the eliminations and changes produced by choice. "The Road Not Taken" reminds us of the consequences of the principle of selection in all aspects of life, namely that all choices in knowledge or in action exclude many others and lead to an ironic recognition of our achievements. At the heart of the poem is the romantic mythology of flight from a fixed world of limited possibility into a wilderness of many possibilities combined with trials and choices through which the pilgrim progresses to divine perfection. I agree with Frank Lentricchia's view that the poem draws on "the culturally ancient and pervasive idea of nature as allegorical book, out of which to draw explicit lessons for the conduct of life (nature as self-help text)." I would argue that what it is subverting is something more profound than the sentimental expectations of genteel readers of fireside poetry. . . .

The drama of the poem is of the persona making a choice between two roads. As evolved creatures, we should be able to make choices, but the poem suggests that our choices are irrational and aesthetic. The sense of meaning and morality derived from choice is not reconciled but, rather obliterated and canceled by a nonmoral monism. Frost is trying to reconcile impulse with a conscience that needs goals and harbors deep regrets. The verb Frost uses is taken, which means something less conscious than chosen. The importance of this opposition to Frost is evident in the way he changed the tide of "Take Something Like a Star" to "Choose Something Like a Star," and he continued to alter tides in readings and publications. Take suggests more of an unconscious grasp than a deliberate choice. (Of course, it also suggests action as opposed to deliberation.) In "The Road Not Taken" the persona's reasons wear thin, and choice is confined by circumstances and the irrational:

[lines 1-10]

Both roads had been worn "about the same," though his "taking" the second is based on its being less worn. The basis of selection is individuation, variation, and "difference": taking the one "less traveled by." That he "could not travel both / And be one traveler" means not only that he will never be able to return but also that experience alters the traveler; he would not be the same by the time he came back. Frost is presenting an antimyth in which origin, destination, and return are undermined by a nonprogressive development. And the hero has only illusory choice. This psychological representation of the developmental principle of divergence strikes to the core of Darwinian theory. Species are made and survive when individuals diverge from others in a branching scheme, as the roads diverge for the speaker. The process of selection implies an unretracing process of change through which individual kinds are permanently altered by experience. Though the problem of making a choice at a crossroads is almost a commonplace, the drama of the poem conveys a larger mythology by

including evolutionary metaphors and suggesting the passage of eons.

The change of tense in the penultimate line?to took?is part of the speaker's projection of what he "shall be telling," but only retrospectively and after "ages and ages." Though he cannot help feeling free in selection, the speaker's wisdom is proved only through survival of an unretraceable course of experience:

[lines 11-20]

The poem leaves one wondering how much "difference" is implied by all, given that the "roads" already exist, that possibilities are limited. Exhausted possibilities of human experience diminish great regret over "the road not taken" or bravado for "the road not taken" by everyone else. The poem does raise questions about whether there is any justice in the outcome of one's choices or anything other than aesthetics, being "fair," in our moral decisions. The speaker's impulse to individuation is mitigated by a moral dilemma of being unfair or cruel, in not stepping on leaves, "treading" enough to make them "black. " It might also imply the speaker's recognition that individuation will mean treading on others.

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