

Robert Faggen: On "Home Burial"

. . . In "Home Burial" a wife's angry reticence becomes a moral rebuke to what she perceives as her husband's brutal and selfish way of mourning the death of their first child; the gender hierarchy of civilized and uncivilized, ordered and chaotic, male and female, becomes remarkably fluid. The death of their child, one of the most disturbing possible events in a marriage and an undermining of a fundamental biological order, threatens the purpose of their relationship and reveals, instead of love, a void. The drama of their argument reveals the intensity of her personal interests beneath her mask of piety and the force of her husband's will beneath his postures of care and reasonableness. Their debate about the limits of grief becomes defined by gender and whether there is any common human ground on which to continue their relationship and a family.

Amy's declaration of the loneliness of death and others' inability to grieve appears to conform to the Aristotelian view that excessive grief is "unmanly," associated with women who are closer to chaotic nature than men. . . . In "Home Burial" this ancient distinction becomes complicated. Amy remains impervious to fellow mourners and provides a powerful though flawed rebuke to her husband's grief and temporary control, which may be little more than the virtue of maintaining his own power within the home. Amy becomes the relentless idealist in a world of survival demands. . . .

Though "Home Burial" focuses on Amy's need to escape the confines of the house and marriage, we learn that her husband found some of his own escape outside the house digging his son's grave, no doubt a form of relief from his wife's moral control. When the narrative begins, we find Amy in a position of metaphoric superiority, at the top of the stairs, silent and refusing her husband's gaze from the bottom. Her silence becomes a barrier she has created to torment her husband and force him into a confrontation with her fears, one of which is the physical force he exhibits as he "mounts" above her seeking to penetrate her reticence. The absence of question marks at the end of the husband's "questions" reveal the extent to which they are more accurately demands, if not threats:

[lines 1-19]

She was first the object of his gaze, and one senses that her extra looks back were intended to offset his controlling stare. The narrator tells us that she was "looking back at some fear."

Here, as in "The Witch of Coos" or "The Fear," the woman's ability to reanimate fear, while seemingly irrational, serves an important moral role, to unsettle the complacency of civil and domestic control. . . . Amy has succeeded in rousing fear in her husband, sufficient fear for him to break his own barrier of silence and demand to know what it is she sees. She denies his ability to see, and she demeans him as imperceptive and crude, becoming a "blind creature." The husband, not Amy, has been reduced to brutishness and lower mental capacity.

The husband's response to the challenge reveals part of what Amy fears: she is being used as a childbearing instrument in her husband's house. The husband "frames" the family

graveyard with the window?diminishing its size and, figuratively its import?turning it into a portrait in his family gallery. And he makes the terrifying analogy between the bedroom and the graveyard, revealing his own ability to lacerate Amy with but a few words. Love leads not only to death but to the memorial of his people:

[lines 20-29]

He refers to his own relatives in an extraordinarily cold way, nuking an analogy between their persons, "broad-shouldered," and the "slabs." The "child's mound" remains the one as yet indeterminate part of the "family plot," to which Amy has become destined to contribute. Her pain and anger bear resemblance to the feelings and actions of Laban's third wife in "Place for a Third," as she refuses to be buried with the previous two and become another of his "children in a burial row." In the death of Amy's child she sees her own death and burial as part of his family story.

Having penetrated the mystery of her fear and revealed his own capacities for cruelty and his own less than elevated motives, she erects new barriers, pleading that he desist: "Don't, don't, don't, don't," as though her words portended violence. Retreating to a posture of male reason?"Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"?the husband irritates Amy even more by referring to it as "his child." The underlying issue here on both sides is possession, self-interest, and control. She seizes control again by attacking his innate lack of ability to speak, a crudeness inherent in men: "I don't know rightly whether any man can" (rightly could refer both to her "knowledge" and to the ways of men). But I doubt that Amy believes that her husband does not know how to speak. His words and her silences speak powerfully of their individual and conflicting interests. Amy makes him dance, forcing him back on himself and demanding behavior that suits her interests. We wonder who the "someone else" was that Amy fled to after an earlier argument?a lover or comforter. No doubt Amy fears her husband's violence, revealed not only by her desire to leave the house but also by his promise not to come down the stairs:

[lines 39-44]

The narrator's observation of the husband sitting with his "chin between his fists" calls attention ominously to physical force that might have been used in the past. Amy wants her husband to bend to her demands, but she may also want to be independent of him altogether. The husband feels the strain of meeting his wife's demands of beauty, and, while he wants to please her, he also wants to remain true to his sense of self and purpose, which is inextricably bound up with his "being a man."

As soon as he asks to be "given a chance," he then veers to reducing her concerns to her sex, to her "mother-loss." Frustrated that he must "partly give up being a man / With women-folk," he suggests an "arrangement" by which he'd "keep hands off" anything she might name. Language on her part has become not a source of miscommunication but, instead, a barrier that she can erect. But words alone may not be the only failure or offense. He may well be "hands on" in other ways that are terrifying. In a couplet riddled with negatives, what seems to be a plea for no barriers, he seems on the verge of recognizing that there is no love in their marriage, only fear and competing interests:

[lines 45-55]

His maxim that "Two that don't love can't live together without them. / But two that do can't live together with them" indicates how little actual love exists without completing the dialectic with a child, both a bond and a barrier.

The husband feels the pressure of her moral judgment, pleading for her to talk about her grief "if it's something human," a phrase that barely conceals his anger at being reduced to a brute. Her sentimental unworldliness becomes to him just as inhuman. Both their excesses threaten to undermine the possibility of any domestic order and leave the question of what it means to be human balanced across gender lines:

[lines 56-67]

He emphasizes Amy's grief as particular to her sex, a "mother-loss," even while wondering whether this way of grieving may not be innate but taught, something she was "brought up" to think. Referring to her upbringing reduces her to the status of a selfish child, one who does not recognize that sacrifice (or waste) is the essence of the larger scheme. Amy retaliates by reducing her husband to a brute, his logic nothing more than a "sneer."

In recounting his digging of their child's grave, Amy demonstrates her ability to speak and characterize in a way that reinforces her husband's lack of verbal ability and, thereby, his lack of humanity. Her portrait of him depicts a coarse unfeeling laborer, associated with dirt and "everyday concerns":

[lines 71-90]

Richard Poirier notes the novelistic detail with which Amy recounts her husband's activity right down to "the stains on your shoes / Of fresh earth from your own baby's grave." More than detail, the hurling of the phrase "stains on your shoes" becomes a metaphor for her heaping sin on his soul. Her husband's response of laughing and accepting his curse echoes the urging of Job's wife to "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9), only in this situation the wife has replaced God as the moral authority. The husband feels cursed both by the loss of a child as well as his inability to make his wife understand him, something she attributes to the innate qualities of his sex.

Amy's interpretation of her husband's words in the kitchen reveals, ironically, that her husband may be far more subtle and sophisticated in expressing himself than she understands. Her question is really an accusation, and she believes not only that he would not care but that he is fundamentally incapable of caring:

[lines 91-99]

She takes his saying "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a

man can build" quite literally as some musing about the weather and fence building and fails to recognize the power of his own metaphor. The time it takes for a birch to rot represents the husband's naturalistic way of talking about what his loss means and has everything to do with what is in "the darkened parlor." Amy thinks in terms of civilization and parlor culture, her husband in terms of survival against the natural decay of elements. The birch fence is, like the child, a barrier between the threatening environment and his future as well as a barrier between himself and Amy.

Amy charges that her husband and the world are "evil" because they cannot grieve sufficiently, cannot follow the dead into the beyond. The inescapable self-interest of all human beings, or at least her husband, leads her far into the position of an ascetic Christian's denial of the world, one that would make life impossible:

[lines 100-107]

Her eloquent expression of despair?"from the time when one is sick to death, / One is alone, and he dies more alone"?reverses Jesus' words in John 11 after the resurrection of Lazarus: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the son of God might be glorified thereby." Her despair denies a facile Christianity and affirms the necessity of a heroic existential suffering similar to what Kierkegaard described in *The Sickness unto Death* as evidence of man's ascendancy over beast: . . . Amy comes close, then, to sounding like a representative not of nature but of Christian philosophy and its assertion of the distinction of man from other creatures. She sees her own being "sick to death," a sickness that is unending because "To be saved from this sickness by death is an impossibility, for the sickness and its torment?and death?are precisely to be unable to die." Though powerful, Amy's stance renders family survival impossible, a form of immoral purity as it attempts to transcend the demands of survival. She may not sound like Antigone or Cordelia, but her piety may be at least as damaging as theirs.

Her attitude describes a crisis in civilization that Freud commented on in "Our Attitude toward Death" (1915), published the year after *North of Boston*; "Consideration for the dead, who no longer need it, is dearer to us than the truth, and certainly, for most of us, is dearer also than concern for the living." Freud and Frost challenge Christian culture to conform to a conception of truth provided by science, one in which the demands of survival reign. Amy refuses to conform to manly and scientific conceptions of the limits of grief, and her war with her husband is an attempt to make the world conform to her standards and accept her authority: "I won't have grief so / If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!" Her husband must realize that failure to meet her demands will result in the dissolution of the home and his concern for furthering his people.

In treating her complaint as a form of therapy, her husband condescends to her and makes her pain seem just talk. For her to give in would be to give up being who she is, and she pushes her threat beyond "talk." Her husband's lack of tender love and rationality is unmasked in the final exchange, as her refusals push him to threaten force to keep her. Her "I won't" is met with a decidedly passionate "I will":

[lines 108-116]

The proliferation of dashes in the last two parts indicates a world of emotional reality beyond words, a world that is actively, physically threatening. The dash after "will!" indicates that she has escaped the house and brought him to taking action. The drama lacks closure or "settling down," but this ambiguity is precisely what reveals the power struggle lurking beneath moral and ethical positions.

The line between grief and madness is a fine one, and Amy's desire to escape can be seen as a response to the suffocation of servitude.

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