

Richard Poirier: On "After Apple-Picking"

The poem has become so familiar and revered that it is difficult to recognize its strangeness. But it would probably seem familiar in any case; it is a prime example of how even the very great poems of Frost can induce a kind of ease about their deeper intensities. It is a proud poem, as if its very life depends upon a refusal to justify itself by any open evidence of what it is up to. The apparent "truth" about the poem is that it is really concerned with the actualities of its announced subject. But is that "truth" even residually enough if, not thinking so, one takes the risk of burdening the poem with "more than the truth"? Brower has written meticulously about its rhythmic form, but he has not let himself feel the deeper pulsations in its metaphors. There are energies in the poem as well as a dream of potential experience that include but are passionately larger than that recorded in his otherwise useful observation that "From the opening lines, apparently matter-of-fact talk falls into curious chain-like sentences, rich in end-rhymes and echoes of many sorts" until "memories of waking fact and their sleepy distortions become impossible to tell apart" (*The Poetry of Robert Frost*, pp. 24, 25).

Once again, "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." It is a muscular and active knowing, and should not be confused with Santayana's rather too fastidious proposition that "The artist is a person consenting to dream of reality." Consent is not at issue - as if reality were propositioning us. What is required is toil and labor, the exertion of body and mind necessary to bring anything to birth. Labor, again, is both one of the unfortunate consequences of the Fall and a way of overcoming them, of transforming them into fortunate ones. The "dream" that "labor knows" in Frost's poems of work is often "sweet" because it frequently involves images of the birth or rebirth of the self, of redemption offered those who try to harvest reality.

"After Apple-Picking" is a dream vision, and from the outset it proposes that only labor can penetrate to the essential facts of natural life. These include, in this case, the discovery of the precarious balances whenever one season shifts to another, the exhaustions of the body, and the possible consequences of "falling," which are blemish and decay. When the penetration of "facts" or of matter occurs through labor, the laborer, who may also be the poet, becomes vaguely aware that what had before seemed solid and unmalleable is also part of a collective "dream" and partakes of myth. This is in part what is signified by Emerson's paradigm at the beginning of "Language" in *Nature*: "1. Words are signs of natural facts. 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit." The penetrating power of labor can be evinced in "apple-picking" or in writing or reading about it, and any one of these activities brings us close to seeing how apples and all that surround them can be symbolic of spirit. The easiness of voice movement and vocabulary in the poem will seem at odds with deeper possibilities only to those who do not share Frost's perception, following Emerson and Thoreau, that the possibilities are simply there to be encountered. When at the very outset the apple-picker remembers "My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree," he is, without any self-consciousness, committed by "natural facts" to a mythological or symbolic statement, as he is immediately thereafter in the further "fact" that the ladder is pointing "toward heaven still." "Heaven" is not the destination awaiting anyone who climbs ladders, but it can become part of his consciousness of destinations.

A version of this image will appear later in "Directive," where "The height of the adventure is the height / Of country where two village cultures faded / Into each other. Both of them are lost. / And if you're lost enough to find yourself/ By now, pull in your ladder road behind you. . . ." But this "ladder" is essentially lateral. The journey is back into time, into geological and cultural debris. Though I would not, with Helen Bacon, think that the two towns refer to the twin cults of Apollo and Dionysus, the poem lets itself be read as an attempted journey to poetic and personal sources where a self can be discovered this side of heaven. By comparison, the ladder in "After Apple-Picking" is quite graphically vertical, and it points to a destination beyond itself. It is, also, a ladder that is not "pulled in"; it is "still" - "still" there, "still" to be climbed again, and "still" pointing as if, despite its being "long," it merely directs us to a place toward which it provides the initial steps. It sticks "through" a tree and not against it.

And yet for all these suggestions, the ladder is very much a real one. The phrase "two-pointed ladder" is itself less directly metaphorical than is "ladder road" of "Directive." In a context where every word seems so much by nature to be metaphorical, "two-pointed" trembles with possibilities of meaning that adhere to its very essence. The phrase could signify metaphor itself and reminds us that for Frost metaphor was the true source and method of all thinking. Not only do we think in metaphors that are contrived for the purpose, like "ladder road", more than that, we cannot so much as use a word or a phrase without committing ourselves, often unknowingly, to metaphor and therefore to some form of unconscious "thought." Thinking in Frost is metaphoric or "two-pointed," and it directs us at last to what is beyond the metaphor, to things we cannot "know" and whereof, as Wittgenstein suggested, we should not speak.

A "two-pointed ladder" is very much like a metaphor as Frost describes it. Its two terms head in a parallel and mutually supporting direction; ultimately, however, the relationship comes to an end or leaves off; the metaphor necessarily breaks down. The progress or movement of analogy brings us to something beyond it, like faith or a belief. Metaphor, that is, both controls us and propels us into exaggerations, into the idea of God, for instance, with whom we enter into a relationship, as Frost says at the end of "Education by Poetry," in order "to believe the future in - to believe the hereafter in." As in much of Frost's prose the syntax here is aggressively vernacular and irregular, and the effect is to make the word "in" a part of the verb. By a relationship to God, about which we cannot say very much and have little to show, we can, however, try, as in "Carpe Diem," to bring the future and the hereafter "in" close, to bring it "in," as by climbing ladders for the picking of apples, from remoteness or abstraction. In this same talk - it was stereographically recorded and printed first in 1931 - Frost seems to have borrowed the image of the ladder and the sky from "After Apple-Picking" in order to talk about metaphor, about thinking, and about the hereafter or the future, the sky which waits at the end of the ladder. "We still ask boys in college to think, as in the nineties, but we seldom tell them what thinking means; we seldom tell them that it is just putting this and that together; it is just saying one thing in terms of another. To tell them is to set their feet on the first rung of a ladder the top of which sticks through the sky."

In his rambling somnolence, his driftings among the terms of his own obsessive experience, the apple-picker is "thinking" only less consciously than is the poet in his more directly exploratory use of language. From the outset the materials of the poem belong to the apple-picker: it is "my" and not "a" ladder that is sticking through the trees, and in Frost's formula the apple-picker's "saying" of one thing in terms of another is "thinking" even though he might not credit himself with doing so. Indeed, the conceptual frame of the poem, if so heavy a phrase is appropriate to it, is held together by the way "dream" gets stated in terms of waking experience, waking experience in terms of "dream." This is an occasion when the precondition

of metaphor itself seems to be that the normal distinction between dreaming and waking be suspended. Even the verb tenses of the poem contribute to this suspension: before he begins his last day of apple-picking he "could tell" while awake "What form my dreaming was about to take." It is as if he woke before work into a kind of reality that had all the strangeness of dream, and he looks to sleep after work almost in the hope of dispelling the dream:

I am drowsing off. I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight I got from looking
through a pane of glass I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough And held
against the world of hoary grass. It melted, and I let it fall and break.

There is both daring and genius in the lines that follow: "But I was well/ Upon my way to sleep before it fell." So confused are states of consciousness here that perhaps we are to think that he slept all through the day of work, perhaps he dreamed the day itself, with its "hoary grass." This grass could be real, "hoary" in the sense that it is coated white with morning frost; or it could be other-worldly grass, "hoary" in the sense of "ancient," part of a mythic world derived from the Bible and Milton. We are not to decide which is which; we are instead meant to equivocate. The larger possibilities are made inextricable in our, and in his, experience from smaller, more detailed ones. Thus, "essence" can mean something abstract, like an attribute, or even a spirit that is fundamental to winter nights, and it is also something very specific to apple-picking, the perfume of a harvest. So wonderfully does the language of the poem subvert any easy regulation that some readers might want to think of the "perfume" in Herbert's "life" or in King's "Contemplation upon Flowers" or in Frost's own "Unharvested" which emanates from a soul that has sanctified itself. So, too, with "harvest." It is called a "great harvest," and while "great" can refer to numbers - "There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch" - it soon begins to accumulate other than quantitative implications in its linkage to the word "cherish," the phrase "not let fall," and the reminder, in the suddenly exalted phrasing of "struck the earth" (when the word "ground" might have been used), that the ladder was pointed not at the "sky" but "toward heaven." The phrasing has a Marvellian reticence, only a bit less pronounced than in "The Silken Tent" where the "central cedar pole" is "its pinnacle to heavenward."

The apple-picker (and Frost) seems almost reluctantly involved in these implications. Perhaps that is one reason why he is "overtired" of a harvest "I myself desired." The intensity of labor has brought him in touch with a vocabulary of "apples," "trees," "scent," "ladders," "harvests," of ascents and descents that make it impossible for him not to say one thing in terms of another. To speak of apples is to speak of the Fall and the discovery of the benefits from it that both require and repay human toil. The only explicitly metaphorical statement in the entire, highly metaphoric poem - the only time the apple-picker tries directly to generalize his experience ("One can see . . ."), and the only spot where he admits to a sense of audience ("As I describe . . .") - occurs at the end:

One can see what will trouble This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is. Were he not
gone, The woodchuck could say whether it's like his Long sleep, as I describe its
coming on, Or just some human sleep.

It is appropriate to the whole intention of the poem that where the apple-picker sets out wakefully to accomplish what he has all along been doing in a daze, unconsciously - to make

metaphors and to generalize on his experience - the result is a tangle of confusions. He is a successful "poet" only when he does not try to be. Obviously, the "woodchuck" could not "say" anything, and its capacity to make a metaphoric discrimination between its own and human sleep is rendered comic by the speaker's ascription to himself of the power only to "describe" the coming on of sleep. "Just some human sleep" sounds at first like an unfortunate infusion of the coy Frost - one of those calls for a trivially self-deprecating irony that reveal at times his peculiar embarrassment with the power of his own sincerities. But the line is saved from disingenuousness, just barely, by the "fact" that in his overtired state the apple-picker might indeed want a sleep equivalent to the hibernation of a woodchuck rather than a "human sleep." His sleep will be human precisely because it will be a disturbed, dream- and myth-ridden sleep. Human sleep is more than animal sleep for the very reason that it is bothered by memories of what it means to pick apples. After that famous picking in the Garden, human life, awake or sleeping, has been a dream, and words are compacted of the myths we have dreamt of the fall and redemption of souls.

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