Mark Richardson: On "The Road Not Taken"

The ironies of this poem have been often enough remarked. Not least among them is the contrast of the title with the better-remembered phrase of the poem's penultimate line: "the [road] less travelled by" (CPPP 103). Which road, after all, is the road "not taken"? Is it the one the speaker takes, which, according to his last description of it, is "less travelled"—that is to say, not taken by others? Or does the title refer to the supposedly better-traveled road that the speaker himself fails to take? Precisely who is not doing the taking? This initial ambiguity sets in play equivocations that extend throughout the poem. Of course, the broadest irony in the poem derives from the fact that the speaker merely asserts that the road he takes is "less travelled": the second and third stanzas make clear that "the passing there" had worn these two paths "really about the same" and that "both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black." Strong medial caesurae in the poem's first ten lines comically emphasize the "either-or" deliberations in which the speaker is engaged, and which have, apparently, no real consequence: nothing issues from them. Only in the last stanza is any noticeable difference between the two roads established, and that difference is established by fiat: the speaker simply declares that the road he took was less travelled. There is nothing to decide between them. There is no meaningful "choice" to make, or rather no more choice than is meaningfully apparent to the "step-careless" politician of Frost's parable of decision in "The Constant Symbol."

Comical as "The Road Not Taken" may be, there is serious matter in it, as my reading of "The Constant Symbol" is meant to suggest. "Step-carelessness" has its consequences; choices?even when they are undertaken so lightly as to seem unworthy of the name "choice"?are always more momentous, and very often more providential, than we suppose. There may be, one morning in a yellow wood, no difference between two roads?say, the Democratic and the Republican parties. But "way leads on to way," as Frost's speaker says, and pretty soon you find yourself in the White House. As I argue throughout this chapter, this is the indifference that Frost wants us to see: "youthful step-carelessness" really is a form of "step-carefulness." But it is only by setting out, by working our way well into the wood, that we begin to understand the meaning of the choices we make and the character of the self that is making them; in fact, only then can we properly understand our actions as choices. The speaker vacillates in the first three stanzas of "The Road Not Taken," but his vacillations, viewed in deeper perspective, seem, and in fact really are, "decisive." We are too much in the middle of things, Frost seems to be saying, ever to understand when we are truly "acting" and "deciding" and when we are merely reacting and temporizing. Our paths unfold themselves to us as we go. We realize our destination only when we arrive at it, though all along we were driven toward it by purposes we may rightly claim, in retrospect, as our own. Frost works from Emerson's recognition in "Experience":

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. But the Genius which, according to
the old belief, stands at the door by which we enter, and gives us the lethe to drink, that we may tell no tales, mixed the cup too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday. If any of us knew what we were doing, or where we are going, then when we think we best know! We do not know today whether we are busy or idle. In times when we thought ourselves indolent, we have afterwards discovered, that much was accomplished, and much was begun in us. (Essays 471)

Frost's is an Emersonian philosophy in which indecisiveness and decision feel very much alike—a philosophy in which acting and being acted upon form indistinguishable aspects of a single experience. There is obviously a contradiction in "The Road Not Taken" between the speaker's assertion of difference in the last stanza and his indifferent account of the roads in the first three stanzas. But it is a contradiction more profitably described—in light of Frost's other investigations of questions about choice, decision, and action—as a paradox. He lets us see, as I point out above, that every action is in some degree intemperate, incalculable, "step-careless." The speaker of "The Road Not Taken," like the politician described in "The Constant Symbol," is therefore a figure for us all. This complicates the irony of the poem, saving it from platitude on the one hand (the M. Scott Peck reading) and from sarcasm on the other (the biographical reading of the poem merely as a joke about Edward Thomas). I disagree with Frank Lentricchia's suggestion in Modernist Quartet that "The Road Not Taken" shows how "our life-shaping choices are irrational, that we are fundamentally out of control" (75). The author of "The Trial by Existence" would never contend that we are fundamentally out of control?or at least not do so in earnest.

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