

Reuben A. Brower: On "The Oven Bird"

. . . The poem opens with what first sounds like flat prosaic statement,

There is a singer everyone has heard . . .

but the line rides on the expected thrust of later lines, and before it ends, it melts imperceptibly into iambs. But?we must always be saying 'but' of this poem?as we are lapsing into a regular beat, the meter flutters slightly in 'everyone' before settling down. The next line begins unexpectedly

Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird . . .

The opening monosyllable is stressed doubly for sense and meter, the comma further lengthening the pause; the word is out of the familiar metrical and grammatical order, and very casual, almost rude in tone. But 'Loud' is followed by two echoing poetic compounds, and the third line is back in the swing of iambic verse, though a bit roughed up by alliteration and t-d-s sounds?almost a tongue-twister:

Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.

This odd talking-song, so deftly rude, is central to the growing form and to the attitude reaching a climax in the final line?the troubling sense of diminishedness, of things being less than they were. The poetry is not in this idea alone, but in the metaphor of loss-and-song expressed 'in all but words' through many sorts of indirection. The song in the poem is not just any oven bird's song, but the singing made by the poet's words. It is very common?'everyone has heard' it?and not charming or poetic, but 'Loud.' It renews the spring song of 'other birds' ('Tree trunks sound again') only to remind us that summer is a tenth as good as spring, that the 'petal-fall' anticipated the approaching 'other fall.' More conventional birds, like the orioles and thrushes, do not sing in mid-summer. But the oven bird's song really isn't a song, as the language keeps insisting: he 'makes . . . trunks sound' (he hammers and drums), 'he says that . . . he says . . . he says . . . he knows . . . he frames . . . '?a most explanatory bird. (As Frost says of prose without rhythm, it is 'declare, declare, declare.') If we are familiar with the 'teacher-teacher' call of the oven bird, we get the point sooner; but even without knowing the bird we hear its teaching in the paradox of song-not-song renewed in many fine poetic stresses. The metaphor is always there underground and implicit, the quality of the poem

depending on the unobtrusiveness of this half-apprehended but surely heard meaning. Anyone who has walked in dry July woods will remember how the metallic refrain of the oven bird bores into ears and mind.

The metaphor is also active in the dramatic voice, which is very much in harmony with 'all-but-ness' and which resists easy reduction of the poem to 'Ah, summer!/?spring's faded!' The poet's rhythm is always being steadied by prose statement, and his grammar is of the plainest. In the wager of 'one to ten,' where we might expect 'ten to one' in summer's bounty, and in the playing with various 'falls' his subtly amused tone comes out clearly enough. The restraining quality of his speech goes finely with the language he has used of the bird's song and with the question he frames in the end. But the poet outdoes the bird: he manages in not singing to sing. Tempo and feeling increase as the rhythm rides with surprising force through full stops and with what Edward Thomas beautifully called 'a quiet eagerness of emotion.' Readers who see in the poem a symbol of Frost as poet or a veiled *ars poetica*, should note that the symbol is not the bird but the poetic art, the 'feat of words' as a whole. But that further metaphor is only touched on: as in the best of Frost, lightness is all.

The figure implied in 'The Oven Bird' of talking song and of unobtrusive metaphor embodied in rhythm and tone as much as in statement and image, of a growth from observation (Frost's moment of 'delight') to felt truth is not only a formal pattern, but also the forming of a revelation of which the meaning is the unfolding poetic event.

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