Frank Lentricchia: On "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things"

I am claiming Frost as a central modern--as central as Wallace Stevens, though few would be ready to grant that much--and "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" as a centrally modern poem; one of his subtlest treatments of the problem of personal salvation through the redemptive act of imagination.

The poem opens with the evocation of a familiar symbol and with an attempt by the speaker to suppress a pervasive funereal attitude toward his circumstance:

The house had gone to bring again To the midnight sky a sunset glow. Now the chimney was all of the house that stood, Like a pistil after the petals go.

The barn opposed across the way, That would have joined the house in flame Had it been the will of the wind, was left To bear forsaken the place's name.

The effort to blend the emotions that attend the witnessing of a house's destruction with what one is likely to feel while watching a lovely sunset cannot be expected to succeed when the one attempting such a union of disparates is a figure in a poem by Robert Frost.

In the middle two stanzas the self in the poem indulges his memory of things past--specifically of the "teams that came by the stony road / To drum on the floor with scurrying hoofs." His feelings appear to become excessive, for the moment, particularly in the lines about the barn that remains and the birds that live in it:

The birds that came to it through the air At broken windows flew out and in, Their murmure more like a sigh we sigh From too much dwelling on what has been.

The speaker saves himself from sentimentalism by taking back his incipient romantic predication of interdependence of the human and natural realms.

For them there was really nothing sad. But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept, One had to be versed in country things Not to believe the phoebes wept.

But if skeptical and self-ironic treatment of romantic attitudes is what makes Frost's poem centrally modern, then perhaps we need not read far beyond certain well-known Victorian and fin-de-siècle expressions of similar attitudes toward man's relationship to nature.

There truly is a solid individual talent at work in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," but the whole performance is brought off with such deceptive ease that we tend to miss the display of virtuosity. Frost's tack in this poem is to manipulate (rather quietly)
perspectives on nature and time. His major differentiation is between kinds of memory: it is
only the human mind, he suggests, that is capable of the enormous leap backwards in time.
The curse of human memory is that it alone is capable of recalling a past that can never
return, that has been destroyed utterly and irrevocably by the fire. "Bird-memory" has little
grasp of a human past. Human beings flash across the scene of bird-awareness but
(blessedly) the grooves of impression are rarely made: only the larger features of a scene and
the broad patterns of seasonal change are retained. The phoebes belong to a separate order
of reality and "for them the lilac renewed its leaf."

Returning again to the poem's opening stanza, the lines "The house had gone to bring again /
To the midnight sky a sunset glow" evoke the image of the dramatic persona as one who is
consciously assuming something other than his human perspective, for it is from the
perspective of the bird's awareness that the sudden redness in the night sky can be correlated
to a sunset glow. Contrarily, in the penultimate stanza, the line "The dry pump flung up an
awkward arm," though given from the perspective of the phoebe is actually the speaker's. In
the first instance the speaker's attempt is to mitigate the facts of destruction by viewing them
as a natural happening; while in the second instance he attempts to blend human and bird
perspectives on nature by attributing to the bird humanizing powers. Both are acts of
sympathetic imagination which may be modestly valued as acts which lead the self into the
fictive world where no ontological discoveries are made, but where the precious state of
serenity is restored, where enclosure is regained and the burden of the human awareness of
temporality is lifted:

Now the chimney was all of the house that stood, Like a pistil after the petals go.

The self in the poem attempts to link human artifice and nature in a poetic figure. His
comparison of the chimney with the pistil of a flower "after the petals go" raises the image of
the rebirth of the artificial human enclosure: the house will come back even as the flowers
shall bloom again. But such expectations cannot be satisfied, and one versed in country
things knows that very well. The simile compels ironic consciousness: an awareness of the
image of the destroyed house as transmuted in the figure and a simultaneous awareness of
the impossible-to-traverse gulf between human artifice and nature's flowers. Destroyed
houses regenerate themselves only in the illusions projected in the poet's language, not in
reality; the value (and disvalue, as we saw earlier) of enclosures is guaranteed by an act of
the mind or not at all, and this constitutes knowledge of poetic things.

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