

Katherine Kearns: On "The Witch of Coös"

In "The Witch of Coös" only the woman/wife/lover/mother/witch can hear the bones' chalky progress upstairs, while her husband never "seem[s] to hear them," even as he rousts himself reluctantly from bed to help shut the skeleton in the attic. He only humors his wife's hysteria, but just as Frost's own mother funded him with magical stories, the "witch" has, over forty years' time, given her son an intimate knowledge of the night her buried lover wandered upward. The poem is antiphonal, with mother and son speaking parts labeled with their names. The son has appropriated his mother's tale and tells it with great relish even though he admits that, when it happened, "I was a baby: I don't know where I was." Of the skeleton, he says, "It left the cellar forty years ago / And carried itself like a pile of dishes / Up one flight from the cellar to the kitchen. . . ." His metaphor, domestic and feminine as it is, is probably originally his mother's, although it also represents his own feminized, maternally oriented vision. It supports, too, as do the mother's images of the skeleton as "like a chandelier" and "a chalk-pile," the crucial interdependence of visual and aural components, a macabre sound of sense. This is, clearly, a story he has got by heart, a narrative imbued with not only the sight but the sounds of bones that are "like the dry rattling of a shutter" in a house that is otherwise sealed tight, shutters closed and locked.

The pair remain in narrative accord until the astonishing disjunction of line 135:

Son.

We think they had a grave down in the cellar.

Mother.

We know they had a grave down in the cellar.

Son.

We never could find out whose bones they were.

Mother.

Yes, we could too, son. Tell the truth for once.

They were a man's his father killed for me.

The son is willing to tell the story as if it has nothing to do with him, as if the murdered man is not probably his own father, as if his mother is not, the whole time they are telling the story, fishing around in her button box for a finger bone she saved from the night the skeleton rose up. His (nominal) father could never hear the bones; the son can hear them clearly as long as they have nothing to do, finally, with him.

This is a familiar dynamic within Frost's poetry but for the son's presence: the women who can

see beneath the skin to the grinning memento mori and can hear the disturbing cacophony of bone on bone are juxtaposed with the men, like the witch's husband, who can see and hear nothing. It is not, in "The Hill Wife," the husband who feels the stranger waiting in the woods but the wife; in "The Fear" it is the woman who hears in a stranger's footsteps the specter of an angry, abandoned lover, and who sees a man's face in the bushes, while the man can only say, "I didn't see it"; in "Home Burial" it is the grieving mother who looks out the window at "some fear" that her husband can't see ("She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see, / Blind creature . . ."). This kind of pairing often necessitates a third party who may represent a more balanced view, one that sees more rationally than the feminine and more insightfully than the nonpoetic masculine. In "The Witch of Coös," the brief, dry voice of the "visitor" - "I verified the name next morning," he says - is ostensibly closest to the poet's, as both are meant to be perceived as outsiders to all this madness and violence. But the son's voice may also be seen as the poet's voice as he translates himself out of complicity in this tale of sex and violence by making his "story" about strangers. The son, in his forties, is the very crucial center of this story, just as is the infant son of "Home Burial." He is the probable proof of his mother's infidelity, a baby when the lover is killed, and whether he is legitimate or not he can no more know the truth than the reader can know it. As living evidence, he becomes the goad for murder, caught forever in the knowledge that one of his "fathers" killed the other to keep from killing his mother. In this Oedipal struggle the son has achieved a pyrrhic victory, for both fathers have died and he lives alone with his mother in a sealed-up house. If the mother in "Home Burial" wants to enter the grave of her son, this son has entombed himself with his mother, whose identity as "witch" is a metonym for her capacity for wanton behavior. And yet he tells the story as if it has nothing to do with him.

Clearly drawn to recapitulate just such stories of lovers, murdered, abandoned, or escaped, Frost nonetheless feels it incumbent upon him to mitigate the appetitive impulses he documents. He disperses the lyric voice - the mother, the son, and the skeleton all bear testament to love and its painful consequences - while he infiltrates the enclosed environment with the stranger's psychoanalytic, listening presence. The son and the mother in "The Witch of Coös" are almost parodic reifications of this instinct for simultaneous revelation and containment: they have locked the doors to the basement, to the attic, and to the outside. They have limited their view and their audience absolutely and, except late in this telling of the story, have purified their narrative of spontaneity so that it becomes spellbinding, lethal in its ability to subvert temporality and, with temporality, rational "meaning. One listening to this tale comprehends the facts of infidelity, madness, and murder aesthetically, induced to a reverie in which the significance of the story is momentarily erased. One reclaims its meanings only in retrospect and only by force of will, for the often repeated story has become litanic, appropriating the individual words to the rhythmic whole. The fact that it is "told" by a witch and her son enhances its trancelike quality; the fact that Frost himself appropriated the tale from an old history of Coös county affords him the safe distance from which to have them tell it. Only at the end of the poem does the narrative chant break momentarily, when the mother says abruptly, "Tell the truth for once." The rattle of the button box, bone buttons and finger bone against metal, is like some primitive rhythm instrument that reinforces the beat. Thus the mother and son have repeated their shared erotic past without its specific horror, making each recounting a ritualistic event rather than a revelation - and recreation - of the actual guilt such a story should invoke. This is not to say that the story is without impact but to suggest that its blank verse cadences and its macabre humor, measurable evidence of a kind of emotional amnesia, contain and therefore qualify the madness as surely as does the sealed-up house.

Such lyric control is essential, for the witch and the mother's boy who reveal their story only

within the locked enclosure of the house and for the poet; the "feminine" voice, which may reveal the maddening secrets of desire, must remain insulated for its own safety as well as for others'. Job's wife, another alleged witch, persistently asks in "A Masque of Reason" why "women prophets should be burned as witches, / whereas men prophets are received with honor," why, although "God's had / Aeons of time . . . still it's mostly women / Get burned for prophecy, men mostly never." The answer lies, of course, in what Frost believes that femality knows, for by traditional masculinist terms its knowledge is of anarchic truths whose powers to subvert rationality must be silenced, burned into nothing. Job's wife again reveals this dichotomy between masculine sight and feminine insight, whereby the bones either are simply not there or are tangibly there to be felt, seen, and heard. When the Devil enters the scene in "A Masque of Reason" he is as diaphanous as a sapphire wasp because "Church neglect / And figurative use have pretty well / Reduced him to a shadow of himself." Yet unlike the husband, who takes this wispy figure lightly, the wife says, "He's very real to me / And always will be." It is crucial for the poet to obscure his own prophetic femininity, which, against church doctrine and common poetic use, sees evil as quite real and even as provocative. Job's wife, for example, likes Satan's voice; "That strain again!" she cries. "Give me an excess of it! / As dulcet as a pagan temple gong!" She begs him to stay, she promises to go with him at twilight, and she reaches out and takes his hand. Superficially at least, Frost's must be the voice of the prophet, controlled, virile in its moderation, and relatively safe from attack, to insure against this willingness to court the devil's favor.

Throughout his poetry Frost thus exploits the potential of sound to circumvent or supersede stated meaning and to defuse explosive emotions, using complex countervoices that are reified in "The Witch of Coös" in the figures of mother, son, bones, and stranger; thus he walks the boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity. "The Witch of Coös" makes, in fact, a suggestive model for the excavational imperatives Frost's poetry thus imposes. The triad of speakers, the trileveled house, and the mobile skeleton ascending from cellar to attic predict the complex permutations of sound and meaning to be found throughout Frost's poetry. Sound, stated meaning, and subtext coexist, often in apparent contradiction to one another, and there is always a sense in which a given listener may be excluded from hearing the noise that is most crucial to meaning. As in "The Witch of Coös" the subtext (mother-woman-witch), the stated meaning (son), and the virile oversound (adult male stranger) may be paralleled to uncontrol, the pretense of control, and control. Yet if the maternally fixated son is sprung from the poet's mind, so too is the poet a son as well. Product of what he would define both as masculine and as feminine impulses, Frost here displaces his feminine and maternal identities so that they emerge in mediational constructs: the "witch" becomes a speaker whose "otherness" allows her both behaviors and insights that the man of moderation must repudiate in himself; the "son" who may not be a man until he alters his identification with the mother is a virtual hermaphrodite, a closed system whose intimate knowledge of "femaleness" is predicated on his equally intimate Oedipal participation in the sins of the fathers. The lover's skeleton is the memento mori, a noisy, tragicomic rhythm box of failed desire for those who can - or will - hear it. This skeleton is the perfect Frostian emblem for eviscerated lyricism, the animated lover who can neither speak nor otherwise make love. It is impossible to disentangle these elements from one another, of course; voices heard by the poet, they also come from him.

. . . .

Frost's skeleton/sound box in "The Witch of Coös" is at once a most tangible thing, relatively indestructible and immutable as natural parts go, and a most immaterial specter, a projection

of buried guilt. Frost employs its dual and oppositional identities as symbol and object to pit meaning against sound, for as a symbol it is noiseless and as a skeleton it grates and rattles, scraping against itself with every step it takes. The skeleton actually appears visually to the woman only on the ground floor between cellar and second story. In this middle zone between the nether part of the house, which signifies desire, and the attic, which signifies madness, the bones make an appearance, but at the other levels they manifest themselves only by sound. Frost thus literalizes the interactive relationship between the aural and the rational - visually verified - apprehension of a given "reality." What the eyes may see - or not see - is only part of the picture, which also incorporates noise from the visceral/appetitive/cellar and the cerebral/inspirative/attic.

Like Paul's wife, who materializes from the merest pith to move briefly in bodily form through time and space before disappearing, the skeleton moves momentarily through the medium of the ground floor, locus of more rational behaviors than those found in either the cellar in which the murder has occurred or in the one finished bedroom upstairs. Its passage gives only a glimpse of the visual, consciously recognized version of its reality. In this it would seem to be one of the multitude of things in Frost's poetry that are, like the leaves that fall or the seeds that sprout, on the way to some other definition of themselves, and yet it is in a most fundamental way different from these other natural artifacts. It can move and lose pieces of itself, but it cannot regenerate or metamorphose: it is a hard, dead thing, and its original definition as a man suggests its obdurate formalism. One of the few mobile things in Frost's poetry that cannot generate through metamorphosis its own series of significances, it is a comically static construct. It becomes at one point, in fact, a "scribble," as if Frost plays on its identity as a poetic device gone dead: the remains of the lyric figure, in fact. Frost masterfully exploits the skeleton's dual nature as a densely tangible object and as a symbol of the woman's guilt - a supernatural/psychic/hysterical manifestation that is sound without substance. He takes this complex totem that is simultaneously so tangible and so nebulous, so symbolic and so real, and shakes it up the stairs, down the central hall, and up into the attic; its sound and his sound effects thus control the poem's effect despite the horrific truth of the story from which the sounds derive.

The bones first manifest themselves by their noise alone, coming haltingly up the cellar steps "The way a man with one leg and a crutch, / Or a little child, comes up": both the metrical pattern of trochaic inversions here and the visual image predict an ironic truth - that this lover divested of appendages, sexual and otherwise, is impotent, more a sound and sight of pathos than of terror. The sound of them on the stairs starts the woman wondering how the bones are "mounted." This is a pun that suggests immediately multiple levels of meaning, as "mounted" has inescapable sexual connotations in keeping with the bones' past as a lover (and in keeping with the use of the term in "The Witch of Grafton"), connotations of a dead thing "mounted" for display, and connotations of one who mounts, or ascends upward, as the skeleton does as it heads atticward. In fact, the woman imagines the skeleton specifically as mounted "like a chandelier," bones hanging like prisms, and this meaning is also to some extent confirmed as the skeleton spits out fire and has smoke in its sockets, like an electrical fixture shorting itself out (so much for enlightenment). When it comes toward the woman with hand outstretched "the way he did in life once," we may imagine it to recapitulate the seduction, which this time the woman repels, breaking off the hand (this time symbolically repudiating the penis and thus proving that the man is in effect "dismounted") and falling backward away from the skeleton. Inescapably, too, and oppositely, we may imagine this imploring stance to have been repelled once before as the woman has allowed her husband to kill her lover. (The ambiguity of her saying that the bones are "a man's his father killed for

me. / I mean a man he killed instead of me" is interesting.) The significance of the skeleton is extremely variable, even contradictory: a symbol of past appetite, it sounds like stacked and emptied plates; a symbol of desire, it is metaphorically missing its leg and literally missing its hand, both clear metonymic references to the lost penis. It is an almost comically disintegrative structure whose meanings may be altered even retroactively.

Invested with multiple meanings, the skeleton begins immediately to disperse as a visual artifact - its leg has become a "crutch," the "hand" shatters into "finger-pieces." Its St. Vitus dance movement down the hall becomes the verification of its function as an image of ambivalence (the woman is both frightened and pleased to look at "him"; "he" wants outside but settles for the attic); the bones "go every which way in the joints" as they move down the linear hall, becoming a figure of the contradiction between impulse and conscious intent. The poet holds this jangling construct together prosodically, however, playing off its sound with an assertive formal control. The line "And set off briskly for so slow a thing" shows a perfection of controlled sound, as it embodies the "brisk" slowness of a skeleton whose "sk-sk" sounds ("like a chalkpile") are reified in the "s" alliterations of this line, in the one-syllable words grinding against each other and insisting upon the reader's own halting movement among juxtaposed consonants, and, in small, in the very sound of the word "briskly," whose meaning of "quickly" or "energetically" is less valid than its more Joycean aural suggestions of a word made from "bone," "gristle," and "skeleton." Frost, it is implied, may shake this box and make it sound any way he pleases - like a pile of dishes, a chandelier, a chalkpile, a loose shutter.

In yet another inversion of meaning, the skeleton "going every which way in the joints" is said to look like "lightning or a scribble / From the slap I had just now given its hand." Here the skeleton as signification becomes a "scribble," not a word; itself handless, it may not, in either the Marxist or the poetic sense of writing oneself to wisdom, make its own meaning. It in fact becomes not meaning but potentially the thing by which meaning is inscribed, the chalk itself, scribbling in the dark. Again embodied in the "sk" sound, this scribble of random movement is on its way to erasure, for in the full light only the sound confirms its existence as it becomes white lines on a white sheet. If, as William James suggests, an attempt to see "inside" to where the meanings are is "like trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks," this rack of bones "embodies" the paradox of such a pragmatic nihilism. It is a metaphorical construct made of the written word that may be "seen" only in the darkness inside one's head. It is a white scribble of chalk against black like snow-white branches up a black trunk, lightning against a black sky, and as such it is intimately associated with the poet himself, whose own hand holds the pen that must scrawl across the paper when jarred. The bones melt to nothing in the light, but locked behind the attic door they rattle like loose shutters, a reminder of portals once opened and since locked tight. They become that thing which constantly recedes from the vision, visible only peripherally at the edge of the light, but heard inside the head like chalky fingers brushing one's skull despite the "headboard" used to block its reappearance. Whether the skeleton actually exists as a thing or whether it is the cacophonous white noise inside the darkness of a madwoman's head/house, it is a complex figure of the way Frost invokes sound against meaning. His skeleton, daring one to take it seriously, may not by its very nature be made light of. It is simultaneously comical and dreadful, the very sound of nothingness, the mark made by a nonexistent hand.

As the skeleton/symbol would suggest, a paradoxical literalness emerges from Frost's consciously dichotomous use of sound and meaning, as he so frequently chooses language that eschews the abstract for the sensually tangible: the bones, the buttons, and the box, for example, make an alliterative noise as words and an actual noise as things brought together

in "The Witch of Coös." One finds, in fact, that when Frost deviates from his own stated preference for the concrete, shapely correlatives by which one "say[s] spirit in terms of matter," he exhibits a spatial confusion that affects even his poetic structures. . . .

The poetic spell, like the narrative spell in "The Witch of Coös," is always on the verge of breaking.

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