Richard Poirier: On "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

As in "Desert Places" the seasonal phase is winter, the diurnal phase is night, but, . . . the scene, we are reminded four times over, is a wood. Woods, especially when as here they are "lovely, dark and deep," are much more seductive to Frost than is a field, the "blank whiteness of benighted snow" in "Desert Places" or the frozen swamp in "The Wood-Pile." In fact, the woods are not, as the Lathem edition would have it (with its obtuse emendation of a comma after the second adjective in line 13), merely "lovely, dark, and deep." Rather, as Frost in all the editions he supervised intended, they are "lovely, [i.e.] dark and deep"; the loveliness thereby partakes of the depth and darkness which make the woods so ominous. The recognition of the power of nature, especially of snow, to obliterate the limits and boundaries of things and of his own being is, in large part, a function here of some furtive impulse toward extinction, an impulse no more predominate in Frost than it is in nature. It is in him, nonetheless, anxious to be acknowledged, and it significantly qualifies any tendency he might have to become a poet whose descriptive powers, however botanically or otherwise accurate, would be used to deny the mysterious blurrings of time and place which occur whenever he finds himself somehow participating in the inhuman transformations of the natural world. If Wallace Stevens in his poem "The Creations of Sound" has Frost in mind when he remarks that the poems of "X" "do not make the visible a little hard / To see," that is because Stevens failed to catch the characteristic strangeness of performances like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." And if he has Frost in mind when, in the same poem, he speaks of "X" as "a man / Too exactly himself," it is because he would not see that Frost's emphasis on the dramatic and on the contestation of voices in poetry was a clue more to a need for self-possession than to an arrogant superfluity of it.

That need is in many ways the subject of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." As its opening words suggest--"Whose woods these are I think I know"--it is a poem concerned with ownership and also with someone who cannot be or does not choose to be very emphatic even about owning himself. He does not want or expect to be seen. And his reason, aside from being on someone else's property, is that it would apparently be out of character for him to be there, communing alone with a woods fast filling up with snow. He is, after all, a man of business who has promised his time, his future to other people. It would appear that he is not only a scheduled man but a fairly convivial one. He knows who owns which parcels of land, or thinks he does, and his language has a sort of pleasant neighborliness, as in the phrase "stopping by." It is no wonder that his little horse would think his actions "queer" or that he would let the horse, instead of himself, take responsibility for the judgment. He is in danger of losing himself; and his language by the end of the third stanza begins to carry hints of a seductive luxuriousness unlike anything preceding it--"Easy wind and downy flake . . . lovely, dark and deep." Even before the somnolent repetition of the last two lines, he is ready to drop off. His opening question about who owns the woods becomes, because of the very absence from the poem of any man "too exactly himself," a question of whether the woods are to "own" him. With the drowsy repetitiousness of rhymes in the last stanza, four in a row, it takes some optimism to be sure that (thanks mostly to his little horse, who makes the only assertive sound in the poem) he will be able to keep his promises. At issue, of course, is really whether or not
he will be able to "keep" his life.


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