

Peter D. Poland: On "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep"

Robert Frost's cryptic little lyric "Neither Out Far nor In Deep" remains as elusive as "the truth" that is so relentlessly pursued in the poem itself. The poem is very much "about" this search for truth, and scholars, for the most part, persistently maintain that such effort is both necessary and noble, adding slowly but inexorably to the storehouse of human knowledge. Suggestive though such an interpretation might be, it distorts Frost's intentions--as a close examination of the curious image of "a standing gull," located strategically at the very heart of this enigmatic work (lines 7-8, its literal and thematic center), will reveal.

As "the people" stare vacantly seaward in search of "the truth," mesmerized by the mysterious, limitless sea, they closely resemble standing (as opposed to flying) gulls. Never directly stated, this comparison, so crucial to the poem's meaning, is clearly implied, and it works very much to the people's disadvantage. For the gull is doing what comes naturally, staring into the teeming sea that is its source of life (that is, of food), and it is merely resting from its life-sustaining labors. "The people," implies Frost, in literally and symbolically turning their backs on their domain, the land, to stare incessantly seaward, are unnatural. Their efforts are life-denying in the extreme.

Frost underscores the life-denying nature of their mindless staring by introducing not a flock of standing gulls, but a single gull only--surprising in that standing gulls (or, more accurately, terns, which typically station themselves en masse by the water's edge) are rarely found alone. The solitary gull points up just what "the people" are doing and how isolating and dehumanizing such activity is. So absorbed are they in their quest for "truth" that they have become oblivious of all else but their own solipsistic pursuit. They have cut themselves off from the land world and all that it represents (struggles and suffering, commitments, obligations, responsibilities) and from one another as well. They have become isolates, like the solitary gull that they resemble. Furthermore, Frost emphasizes not the bird itself but only its reflected image in the glassy surface of the shore; it is the reflected image that is the object of our concern, for it bears significantly on "the people" themselves. In an ironic version of Plato's Parable of the Cave, these relentless pursuers of truth have willfully turned their backs on the only "reality" they can ever know--the land world and all that it represents--and in so doing have been reduced to insubstantial images, shadowy reflections of true human beings engaged in genuinely fruitful human endeavor. Nameless, faceless, mindless, they have become pale copies of the real thing.

All of this adds up to one inescapable conclusion: "The people" are indeed "gulls"--that is, "dupes." In their search for ultimate reality they have been tricked, cheated, conned. It is all a fraud, insists Frost (for all that they do see is the occasional passing ship mentioned in lines 5 and 6), and he clearly holds their vain efforts in contempt. As the final stanzas make dramatically clear, they are wasting away their lives in a meaningless quest, for whatever it is and wherever it might be, "the truth" is surely not here. In short, they can look "Neither Out Far nor In Deep." So why bother?

The poem cries out for comparison with Frost's most famous work, his personal favorite, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," wherein the seductive woods--"lovely, dark and

deep"--recall the mysterious sea of "Neither Out Far nor In Deep." But the narrator of "Stopping by Woods" realizes how dangerously alluring the woods are. He realizes that he has "promises to keep," that he can not "sleep" in the face of his societal obligations, and so he shortly turns homeward. "The people" of the present poem, however, continue to "look at the sea all day," seduced by its deep, dark, mysterious depths. Turning their backs on the land world, their world, they have violated their promises; they are asleep to their human responsibilities, as their comparison to the reflected image of a solitary gull suggests. For "gulls" they surely are.

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