Robert Kern: On "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same"

Frost evokes that substratum, much later in his career, in "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" (1942), a poem that provides a good example of what might be described as his more advanced modernist thinking?advanced, that is, beyond imagism?even as it demonstrates the extent to which his modernism continues to be bound up with his notion of sentence- sounds. It also demonstrates, I would argue, a modernism less or differently qualified than that projected in some of Frost's essays and letters, insofar as the poem raises problems of reading and interpretation that are normally less obtrusive or visible on the surface of his texts. While we do not quite encounter the "formal dislocation" of Eliot or Pound here, we are still presented with a speaker who, like Eliot's Gerontion or Tiresias, bridges great gaps of time and seems both ancient and modern, simultaneously one of us and an intimate of Adam in the garden of Eden. This quality, moreover, casually revealed in the speaker's own sentence-sounds, is completely taken for granted in the poem.

In several ways, in fact, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" is a curious mixture of apparently unrelated motives and effects. For one thing, it is a sonnet. For another, despite its innocent guise of a pleasant "just so" story, it actually constitutes something like a meditation on origins, both linguistic and poetic. Set in Eden, scene of origins par excellence, the poem nonetheless imagines a time when a kind of fall seems already to have taken place, when Adam and Eve have already become aware of their difference from nature. Like Milton, however, Frost does not view this event entirely in terms of loss; it is, rather, the beginning of something else.

Here Adam is presented as the author of a myth about the human appropriation of nature, or the absorption, the transformation, of nature into language?an event which gives rise to the nostalgia of the poem's title even as it marks the beginnings of a full human awareness of nature. "Never again would birds' song be the same," says the speaker, although, by the poem's own logic, what "birds' song" was like before its transformation could not, strictly speaking, have been either knowable or nameable. In this sense, the speaker's nostalgia is misplaced; the poem elegizes the loss or absence of what Adam or the speaker could know only as loss or absence. Clearly, a break in continuity between Adam and Eden has occurred, a break signalled by both his nostalgia and his myth-making. At the same time, however, there is a sense in which that myth-making, and perhaps poetry itself, are intended as compensations for the sense of loss, imaginary as it may be. To the extent that Eve came, as the poem's last line suggests, in order to humanize nature, it is to her coming that we owe whatever knowledge of nature we have, along with myth, poetry, and this very poem.

But, the poem's complexity is not only thematic; it also lies in the manner of its telling, particularly, in the relation of its speaker to Adam, whose thinking is reported to us in an apparently noncommittal indirect style that seems at odds with myth in its tentativeness and in
its almost fussy reliance on terms that belong to logical discourse (itself, perhaps, a sign of the 
fall). Who, we must ask, is speaking here? As the poem proceeds, it becomes increasingly 
difficult to separate the speaker from Adam, to distinguish quotation from narration. Only the 
tenses of the verbs remind us that we are listening to a mediated discourse, a description of 
someone else's thinking; and in the last line of all, which could reasonably be understood as, 
either Adam's or the speaker's, even that indication disappears. If the speaker begins at some 
distance from Adam, allowing for the possibility of an ironic account, one in which modern 
skepticism exposes or at least stands apart from primitive belief, such a gap narrows 
considerably, if not completely, by the end of the poem, where the speaker seems fully 
involved in Adam's vision. On the other hand, the speaker is careful to suggest that Adam 
himself is not entirely committed to what he nevertheless "would declare," and we have to 
wonder if the speaker, in speaking for Adam, is being more or less diffident about his myth 
than Adam himself would be. In other words, how faithful a version or translation of Adam's 
own language is this speaker providing (not a trivial question about a poem by Frost, famous 
for his remark that poetry is what gets lost in translation)? Do such terms and phrases as " 
Admittedly," "Be that as may be," and "Moreover" reflect the attitudes of Adam, or the 
speaker, or both? And does the rational tone that they convey work ultimately to undermine or 
to signal an acceptance of Adam's myth? In any case, the mythic is being viewed here, it 
would seem, from a decidedly "fallen" point of view, one characterized not by visionary or 
imaginative certainty but by a cautious and reasonable consideration of possibilities.

Adam's vision itself, of course, is focused most centrally on what the poem calls Eve's "tone 
of meaning" and its influence upon the birds. "From having heard the daylong voice of Eve,"
we are told, the birds in the garden "Had added to their own an oversound, / Her tone of 
meaning but without the words." By "tone of meaning" here we can understand, precisely,
Frost's sentence-sound. It is a kind of pure intonation, a substratum of speech that can 
apparently cross over from human beings to birds and be reproduced by them in a way that 
thereafter becomes meaningful to human ears, or at least perceptible as "song." This crossing 
over can take place, however, only because it is not meaning but sound that the birds pick up 
and convey. In Frost's conception, one which plays an interesting variation on traditional 
notions of linguistic origins, a language of spoken words is preceded or underlain by a 
language of sounds without words, and like most notions of an original or ideal language, this 
one is both prior to actual speech, and so free of the problems of signification, and somehow 
communicative nevertheless. This is the language that Adam hears as an "over-sound" in the 
voices of the birds. Appropriately, since the poem is a sonnet, this language seems to be a 
language of love, of "call or laughter," in which meaning is conveyed by tone without the need 
for words. Strictly speaking, though, it is not meaning but the sound of meaning, the sound 
of sense, that Adam hears. What he responds to or recognizes in the sound is a meaning 
already identified with it in his relationship with Eve.

For the poem is not about the origin of language so much as it is about its humanizing power, 
its capacity to separate nature from itself and make it the reflection of human meanings. In 
this sense, in narrating the event of Adam's "discovery" of birds' song, the poem's speaker is 
locating the origin of a lyric tradition, the very tradition in which his poem participates by 
imagining that Eve is "in their song"; and again, it is Eve herself, by her coming, who has 
precipitated this event and who therefore stands as the ultimate cause not only of myth and 
poetry but of the human passage from nature to culture. In arriving at this realization in the 
poem's final line, the speaker seems, in addition, to be aware that what Eve has done to the 
birds she has also, in some sense, done to him?that he and his language, even with its " 
Admittedly" and "Moreover," are equally the results of her naturalizing/humanizing act. Thus
the poem is not simply about Adam's myth; it is about itself in relation to that myth, and its final line, however obliquely, offers the speaker's awed recognition of the connection, of the way his poem is implicated in the very tradition whose origin it describes. What makes the poem modern, beyond the fact of the problematic nature of its speaker and his curiously indirect discourse, is precisely this sense of its connection with poetic origins, its speaker's sudden apprehension of the continuity of his own utterance with the mythic origin of poetic utterance in his own account of it.

Frost's stance in the poem, finally, with respect to myth and the primitive, is perhaps not unlike T. S. Eliot's attitude toward The Golden Bough. Frazer's great book, Eliot suggests, "can be read in two ways: as a collection of entertaining myths, or as a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation." Frost's poem, it seems to me, can similarly be read as an entertaining myth or as a revelation of the kind Eliot describes, a revelation of continuity. What I am suggesting, though, is that it is precisely the latter reading that allows for location of the poem in a modern context, one in which the poet discovers that his poem, and his very language, are conditioned if not caused by history. This is not, to be sure, the modernism of absolute beginnings, of Pound's "Make it new," but its other side?the modernism of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (or, for that matter, of Pound's own question, posed in a letter of 1908, "Why write what I can translate out of Renaissance Latin or crib from the sainted dead?"), in which the writer comes to recognize that his task involves a struggle with meanings already inscribed in language. Indeed, to work in terms of this recognition may be just what Frost means by "the old fashioned way to be new."


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