

H. A. Maxon: On "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same"

Like "The Silken Tent" that appears eight poems before it, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" is so quiet as to seem almost a whisper. There is a sense of relief that accompanies early readings of this poem mainly because it follows "The Most of It," one of the darkest treatments of human isolation to be found anywhere in Frost. Even to hear Frost read the poem (he does on PBS's *Voices and Visions* videotape) there is a sweetness, a lilting absolute lyricism that is too delicately balanced and certain of itself to be fragile. Also like the previous sonnet, it is masterful and perhaps even deceiving, for rarely is anything completely what it seems in these poems.

The poem develops by quatrains (even though it is stichitic in form), and the first two, forming a kind of octave, are knitted together by a single sentence that exists in both quatrains. Quatrain one establishes the influence of Eve's voice upon the songs of birds. Quatrain two says that a "tone of meaning" is also there, a slight addition to the first contention, but still an addition.

Lines nine through twelve could be considered the beginning of a sestet, with the more insistent "she was in their song" signaling a turn. Or it might be considered yet another addition to the building already in progress: she influenced their song; she provided meaning; she was too long an influence to be lost. If this reading is accurate, then the couplet turns on the idea that it wasn't merely happenstance that this occurred. It was part of the plan from the beginning, hence an answer seemingly out of "Design."

Two possible readings arise from this uncertainty. If there is an octave and a sestet, then the last line of the octave suggests a purely accidental influence on the birds. "When call or laughter carried it aloft," would indeed contradict the very direct final statement of the couplet, "And to do that to birds was why she came." The "that" of the closing line becomes suspect: what is "that," a purely accidental, undesigned influence on birdsong, or a deliberate, designed influence, an elaborate plan orchestrated by a designer to forever have the guardianship of humanity, proclaimed by God, be stamped even on the voice of birds, "a thing so small"?

I don't believe there is a correct way to read these lines. Both make sense. Both can be supported from a prosodic and conceptual point of view. And both readings are possible thanks to other problems introduced into the poem from the beginning.

Part of Frost's theory was that poems lead to "clarification[s] of life." But seven of the thirty-seven sonnets ask questions that never get answered, and many more (such as this one) raise questions that cannot be answered because Frost provided mixed clues, if any. Clarification, then, means that we are thinking clearly, seeing all points of view simultaneously and asking the right questions to keep all of this in focus. This does not mean we ask questions that lead to definitive answers. We simply ask questions that allow us to keep from being disillusioned by our unknowing. This is a tough equation, but we can accept ambiguities because life is ambiguous, and poems are about life. They show us a new way of seeing what

we already knew.

For a poem that appears so quietly certain of itself and straight-forward in its presentation, this is a mighty convoluted piece of work. But wait!

Two questions come immediately to mind, and these in themselves raise questions that are not, and cannot be, answered given what we have to go by. Question one: Who is "He"? There seem to me three possible answers, any of which can and do skew the reading of the poem. These readings are complementary but mutually exclusive.

Given the reference to Eve, the first possible speaker is Adam. If the speaker is Adam, then he appears to be saying that men are capable of good, of being a positive influence on the world (nature). The historical prospective argues somewhat against this identification of the speaker?it has "persisted in the woods so long." Yet still, who would know better?

God, perhaps? If God is the speaker (and He has spoken elsewhere in Frost), then we read a positive influence by Eve on the birds. But this, of course, must be counterbalanced, and this counterbalance occurs in the pun on Eve (darkness), which takes Adam's reading and stresses that along with the positive, evil was also picked up (however innocently) from the serpent. In this case there is a suggestion that the now-voiceless serpent has insured an evil influence by first going through Eve, thence to the birds through her. A circuitous route, to be sure, but one not denied by the poem. This reading is encouraged, in fact, by the very general "Her tone of meaning." Nowhere are we told if this tone is good or evil, if we are to read this with joy or with the resigned voice of one who sees the evil in the world and knows it cannot be stopped because evil will always find a way.

Not Adam? Not God? Who then? The third possibility seems to me to be the poet himself. Perhaps this is an appreciation of birds' songs, or natural beauty, a celebration of the creative influence of man on nature. In the "tone of meaning" then we have another restatement of Frost's poetic theory of the "sound of sense": "Her tone of meaning but without the words." After all, "The Oven Bird" offers much the same line: "The question that he frames in all but words." In other words, he has done it before, why not here, now? No reason. In the post-Edenic world we need to seek for something of our own making to praise, this reading suggests.

Which voice? Which speaker? The sonnet is sufficiently open to allow for any of these choices and sufficiently closed to omit the possibility of some sort of randomness as occurs in "Design." This is not coincidence, nor is it a random speaker. With randomness comes a whole new set of questions (Where does "He" come by his knowledge? is the first and foremost) that absolutely cannot be answered. The poem stumbles and self-destructs in the face of such a possibility. There may be another possible speaker, but it is not a random one or one designated an Everyman.

"Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" is connected to other sonnets in several ways. The form is one way. The Shakespearean format, whether one sees Frost sticking to it or not, seems less important, however, than some other connections.

The poem is clearly connected to "The Oven Bird" by way of the "sound of sense." It is also connected because of the Eden/Eve references. In this way it is also connected to "Unharvested." Although there is no pattern or dominant image (other than the references to the biblical fall), the power of each of these poems to summon the others is strong.

Likewise, "Never Again . . ." powerfully recalls the three previous bird sonnets?"The Oven Bird," "Acceptance" and "On a Bird Singing in Its Sleep." This is not a fourth bird sonnet per se, but it does call into question the certainty with which some statements are made. All three of the bird sonnets teeter uncertainly on the question of safety, the future, the present, for all of them depict frail creatures in a harsh world. This momentary, self-assured step into a fanciful world, gently but forcefully influenced by a woman's voice, is a far cry from the real world, where survival reigns and niceties of modulated "tones of meaning" hold no sway. Taken as an irregular but logical next poem, "Never Again . . ." seems to lean toward the harsher readings suggested above and away from the gentler readings that would force it to depend too heavily on the other three without, perhaps, the resources and strengths to stand alone.

In many ways it is easy to see why critics have read this poem as a fairly straightforward appreciation by Robert Frost of Kay Morrison after her years of service as secretary. It is a poem that is "the quietest and most discreet of his sonnets" (Pritchard 237), a poem that possesses "delicacy and firmness" (Pritchard 237), yet without some very deliberate digging it does not yield up a great complex of meanings. Perhaps, as with "The Silken Tent," we want these to be sonnets of wisdom as well, an aging poet's earned clarity, a poet "made whole again beyond confusion," a poet who, for the rest of us, can recognize that "Truth is Beauty," and say it elegantly, unambiguously and freshly. And perhaps that is just what he is doing?but I don't think so.

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