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Robert Frost's Conversational Style

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Robert Frost would seem to be the ideal poet for this year's *Connotations* topic: "The Poetics of Conversation in 20th-Century Literature." Frost has written many poems with speakers engaged in conversation like "The Death of the Hired Man" and "A Hundred Collars" from *North of Boston*.[1] He has written a number of plays, *A Masque of Reason* and *A Masque of Mercy* (and several more in his uncollected works), and he has always been interested in distinctive New England speakers who are highly characterized and who function like dramatic characters. In terms of poetic technique, Frost favors the iambic pentameter line, with its connotations of Shakespearean blank verse, ideally suited to dramatic speakers. But Frost also uses the iambic tetrameter line that Andrew Marvell found so supple in the seventeenth century. Frost's pentameter and tetrameter lines are sometimes rhymed as couplets, showing his affinity with witty, eloquent, epigrammatic-like statement of such a poet as Pope in the eighteenth century. In addition, Frost cultivates a refined conversational diction and a syntax that follows speech rhythms and patterns.

I could enumerate more derivations in Frost's conversational style, but the point is that this style doesn't try to imitate the inconsequentialities of spoken discourse. Frost is not at all like David Mamet or Harold Pinter, although these two dramatists are probably just as far from the realities of everyday conversation as Frost. We need to establish as an assumption that conversation, or the semblance of conversation, in poetry is radically different from the language that we ourselves speak or that we hear others speak in public. Like dramatic dialogue, Frost's conversational style is an artfully fabricated imita-

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tion of ordinary conversation. Frost may have had an especially acute ear for New England speech because he was born in San Francisco and spent his early years there.

I would like to begin my talk with a fairly early poem, "The Runaway" from *New Hampshire* (1923). I heard Robert Frost read this poem a number of times, so that my account is obviously influenced by this reading. Frost was notorious for making small revisions while he read, but I don't remember any significant variations for "The Runaway." The poem is written in blank verse and is about a young colt who has run away from its native stall and is acting in a very skittish manner. The horse is specifically a Morgan. Following Frost's own reading, the poem is highly onomatopoetic, with the sound of the words and the rhythm of the speech imitating the sense of the poem. For example, the last line, "Ought to be told to come and take him in," has ten monosyllables which mimic the sound of the frightened colt's hooves as he "mounts the wall again with whited eyes."

Onomatopoeia is an often discussed abstract ideal of poetry. Much, of course, depends on the reading to make the onomatopoeia effective. I always mistakenly thought that the final line was repeated twice, with the second time giving the sense of a quiet echo. Perhaps I heard Frost himself read it that way! It's a coincidence that the poem right next to "The Runaway" in *New Hampshire* is "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which ends with the repetition of the final line, "And miles to go before I sleep."

Onomatopoeia as a poetic concept is problematical because sounds are language specific. In English the rooster cries "cock-a-doodle-do," whereas in French it is "cocorico," in German "kikeriki", in Spanish "quiquiriqui" (much like the German), but in Yiddish it is "kookerikoo." Clearly the rooster in the barnyard makes none of these sounds, and the stage direction in *Hamlet* for "one to crow" to indicate the rising sun is entirely different from the sounds recorded in dictionaries. For example, another onomatopoetic line in "The Runaway" is "He dipped his head / And snorted at us," which is mostly monosyllabic. The onomatopoetic effect probably comes from the verbs

"dipped" and "snorted," but I wouldn't want to press this argument too closely.

The poem identifies a "We" as the observers of the events in "The Runaway": "We stopped by a mountain pasture to say, 'Whose colt?'" In the middle of the poem, however, "I" speaks six lines beginning "'I think the little fellow's afraid of the snow.'" The anapestic "Of the snow" gives a special emphasis to *the* snow rather than just snow, as if it is a big snowfall, what is called in the first line "the snow of the year." The conversational effect is helped by a consistent elision, as in "fellow's afraid," Isn't," "He's," "It's," "He'd," "didn't," and "can't." The speaker continues:

> "He isn't winter-broken. It isn't play
> With the little fellow at all. He's running away.
> I doubt if even his mother could tell him, 'Sakes,
> It's only weather.' He'd think she didn't know!
> Where is his mother? He can't be out alone."

There are a number of metrical irregularities in these lines, as in "He isn't winter-broken. It isn't play / With the little fellow at all." After "winter-broken," the caesura emphasizes the non-iambic pattern, which is echoed by the stress-pattern of "With the little." In the representation of the colt's mother, Frost introduces a playful anthropomorphism. She speaks the only really colloquial word in the poem, "Sakes," which is a country form of "for God's sake," or "land sakes." But the mother personified is made to speak in an offhand, gnarled, and gnomic style: "Sakes, / It's only weather," as if the change in weather—the snowfall—can fully account for the colt's erratic behavior. Frost continues the personification in the colt's imagined response to his mother: "He'd think she didn't know!" This is the only specific exclamation in the poem, and it characterizes the colt as a headstrong, rebellious child chafing at parental control.

The 21-line poem concludes with "I" speaking the final three lines, which represent an aphoristic summing up:

> "Whoever it is that leaves him out so late,
> When other creatures have gone to stall and bin,
> Ought to be told to come and take him in."

Of course, if the colt is running away, there is no "Whoever" to represent agency and purpose, but this is like many other Frost poems in implying that there is some sort of Fate or Nature that causes seemingly random events. It clearly indicates purpose in the universe because "Whoever" badly needs advice: "Ought to be told to come and take him in." Something needs to be set right in nature. The little Morgan colt has been left out in the snow "so late, / When other creatures have gone to stall and bin." Presumably these creatures are the domestic animals of the Peaceable Kingdom. Someone—"Whoever"—looks after them and "Ought to be told" how to right an obvious wrong.

Another aspect of the poem's conversationality is its ironic, mock-heroic tone, something very familiar in Frost's poetry. The poet seems self-conscious about rendering ordinary happenings of rural life in epical terms. For example, "We heard the miniature thunder where he fled" is comic in its mingling of great and small. Thunder can hardly be miniature. The commotion of the runaway colt that immediately follows the six-line speech of "I" in the middle of the poem is made both grandiose and ludicrous by the use of unheroic details:

> And now he comes again with clatter of stone,
> And mounts the wall again with whited eyes
> And all his tail that isn't hair up straight.
> He shudders his coat as if to throw off flies.

The colt's immature tail that isn't yet hair and the fly image in the last line to indicate the horse's twitching mark a pretension to epic behavior that belies the clatter of stone and the mounting of the wall with whited eyes. The tone of the poem deliberately miniaturizes its youthful protagonist, who is not yet capable of bringing off the grand gestures to which he pretends.

"The Death of the Hired Man" from *North of Boston* (1914), but written much earlier, is one of Frost's best known poems, a dramatic, dialogue poem written in blank verse. It has a sharp emphasis on narrative as it tells its dramatic story about the return of Silas, the hired man, to the farm of Mary and Warren. Most of the conversation is between Mary and her husband Warren, with Mary represented as sympathetic and Warren as skeptical. The blank verse is supple and moves easily, and goes together with definite syntactical indications of conversation. These are mostly marked by dashes for abrupt breaks in the syntax. For example, Mary says to her husband:

> "When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,
> Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,
> A miserable sight, and frightening, too—
> You needn't smile—I didn't recognize him—
> I wasn't looking for him—and he's changed.
> Wait till you see."

The dashes follow Mary's train of thought—they are really isolated exclamations that indicate Mary's surprise and her lack of a definite purpose. We even have a specifically dramatic effect—"You needn't smile"—bringing Warren's reaction into Mary's discourse. "Rowe's" is obviously the name of a store in town otherwise unidentified. The pentameter beat is fairly regular with a few exceptions like "Huddled" in the second line. The conversational style shows strong emotions in the highly characterized speaker.

There are many other examples of broken syntax marked by dashes to give the effect of conversation. For example, Mary is talking again:

> "Warren, I wish you could have heard the way
> He jumbled everything. I stopped to look
> Two or three times—he made me feel so queer—
> To see if he was talking in his sleep.
> He ran on Harold Wilson—you remember—
> The boy you had in haying four years since."

Mary interpolates her thoughts in parenthetic statements within her narrative account as in "he made me feel so queer" and "you remem-

ber." The breaks are essential to indicate the speaker's self-consciousness and her awareness of the person to whom she is speaking. Again, some trochaic feet come at the beginnings of lines as in "Warren" in line 1 and "Two or three times" in line 3. Frost uses colloquial diction as in "jumbled" and "he made me feel so queer," and even more emphatically in "He ran on," meaning that Silas spoke extensively about "The boy you had in haying," "had in" meaning hired to do the haying. Mary says that she "stopped to look" to see if Silas was talking in his sleep when she means literally that she stopped to listen. Frost exercizes a continuous sense of displacement to jar us away from what we expect to hear onto a particularly dramatic and highly characterized narrative.

It is interesting how Silas is brought into the poem through indirect discourse about his relation to the college boy Harold, who has been hired in the summer to help with the haying. Silas is vividly represented in Mary's recollection:

> "He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
> He studied Latin like the violin
> Because he liked it—that an argument!
> He said he couldn't make the boy believe
> He could find water with a hazel prong—
> Which showed how much good school had ever done him.
> He wanted to go over that."

That's a very colloquial line: "Because he liked it—that an argument!" implying Silas' sense of superiority to a mere college boy saying foolish things. "That an argument" is short for "Is that an argument?" or "Is that a real and thoughtful argument?" How could someone possibly say he studies Latin like the violin? How silly! Silas boasts of his abilities as a dowser—to find water with a crooked hazel branch, a divining rod, which is an intuitive skill superior to mere school learning. "Which showed how much good school had ever done him" is a long line slowed down by the contemptuous spondee of "good school."

Silas is represented as an artist in loading the hay wagon, and this is Warren's only positive stanza in the poem:

> "He bundles every forkful in its place,
> And tags and numbers it for future reference,
> So he can find and easily dislodge it
> In the unloading. Silas does that well.
> He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
> You never see him standing on the hay
> He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself."

Silas is a poet of hay-making. The alliterative fifth line, "bunches like big birds' nests," is very slow and emphatic with four continuous accents: "like big birds' nests." This is a rural metaphor of exaggeration, since the largest possible bird's nest is considerably smaller than a forkful of hay. Warren is characterized as a kind of gentleman farmer, like Frost himself, in the line "And tags and numbers it for future reference," as if Silas were a scholar assembling note cards for a research project.

Mary ends this segment about Silas's history on a doleful note:

> "Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
> And nothing to look backward to with pride,
> And nothing to look forward to with hope,
> So now and never any different."

It is elegiac in tone, anticipating the tragic ending. The two lines, "And nothing to look backward to with pride, / And nothing to look forward to with hope," are a contrast turned into an exact parallel, capped by the emphatic final line: "So now and never any different." The spondee "So now" ends Mary's speech with a fateful, deterministic note—it can never be any different than it is now, there is no possibility of change.

The best known and most quoted lines of this poem are Warren's statement shortly after the lines we have just quoted: "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in." This homely, aphoristic, monosyllabic enunciation of a moral truth is the climax of a discussion with his wife. Mary begins the topic:

"Warren," she said, "he has come home to die.
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

To which Warren replies: "'Home,' he mocked gently." Warren has strong reservations about Silas, which Mary tries to answer:

"Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course, he's nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail."

The image of the stray hound is strikingly grotesque, considering Mary's compassion for Silas, but she is trying to establish the rock bottom of moral responsibility. In answer to her husband's "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in," Mary makes a final proviso, "I should have called it / Something you somehow haven't to deserve." This whole exchange illustrates Frost's conversational style at its best. It is homely, imitating the banalities of actual speech, as in "Something you somehow," but it also develops a dramatic context of growing fatality that anticipates the end of the poem. It envelops the reader in its moral purpose, which is essentially a definition of what "home" is. Warren's "They have to take you in" is developed by Mary's disclaimer, that home "is / Something you somehow haven't to deserve." This counters Warren's basic argument in the poem that the dying Silas is unworthy of being taken in. The moral seriousness of the poem is emphasized by the plain and earnest conversation between husband and wife.

Another element in the poem is the lush romanticism about moonlight that influences what Mary says. This occurs as a prelude to the debate about the meaning of "home" we have just quoted:

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it
As spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,

> And if she played unheard some tenderness
> That wrought on him beside her in the night.

The moonlight is part of the emotional climate of Mary's argument, as are the morning-glory flowers and vines that hang like a harp's strings. Again, the striking metaphor is an effective evocation of a tenderness—tender is the night—that Mary wants to call up in the husband who sits beside her in the darkness. Mary is represented as a musician in the moonlight, playing the "harp-like morning-glory strings." This segment is an emotional interlude before their climactic conversation about the meaning of home.

There is a final echo of this passage at the very end of the poem, when Mary sends Warren to see Silas:

> "I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
> Will hit or miss the moon."
> It hit the moon.
> Then there were three there, making a dim row,
> The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

There is surprising assonance and consonance in that row of five monosyllables: "Then there were three there"—a daring effect in the conversational style, almost a tongue twister. The final image is painterly and static: the dim row of the moon, the little silver cloud, and Mary. The news of Silas's death follows right afterward.

I'd like to look now at a very different kind of poem, a late poem called "Directive," from *Steeple Bush* (1947). It is full of imperative directions to the reader: "Make yourself up a cheering song," "pull in your ladder road," "make yourself at home," "Weep for what little things could make them glad," and the climactic last line: "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion." The poem is a directive from the poet to the reader about what he needs to do to achieve personal salvation, to "be whole again beyond confusion." "Confusion" has strong Shakespearean and Miltonic connotations of total chaos. We remember that in "The Figure a Poem Makes," that prefaces Frost's *Collected Poems*, he speaks of a poem as "a clarification of life," "a

momentary stay against confusion." It is clear from this context that the clarification a poem exerts works temporarily against confusion. That's why even though a poem begins in impulsive delight it "ends in wisdom."

"Directive" is a witty poem with a characteristically detached, amused, and ironic narrator, who involves the reader in his mythic, fairy-tale-like directions. It is written in Frost's favorite meter, iambic pentameter blank verse, which is relaxed and conversational. It is a memory poem about an abandoned house, an abandoned farm, an abandoned town (or two towns), and, more importantly, an abandoned children's playhouse.

The poem has striking images of daily life. The mood of "loss / Of detail" is "Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather." In other words, the sharp detail of the present has been gently effaced like the lettering and carvings on marble tombstones. This establishes an elegiac tone. The past is recreated as if it were an archaeological fiction. The road has "Great monolithic knees"—presumably large boulders—as if it should have been a stone quarry, or set in a stone quarry. The narrator represents himself as an untrustworthy guide, "Who only has at heart your getting lost," an amusing, self-referential detail. The glacier is personified as a sculptor:

> The ledges show lines ruled southeast northwest,
> The chisel work of an enormous Glacier
> That braced his feet against the Arctic Pole.

The poem proceeds by homely images that figure in the poet's directive to the reader, who is drawn into a lost world of at least twenty years ago, with sharply indicated details of the country scene, like "pecker-fretted apple trees," or old apple trees whose bark is filled with symmetrical woodpecker holes. The reader is paradoxically given directions for a time when "you're lost enough to find yourself":

> pull in your ladder road behind you
> And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.
> Then make yourself at home.

"CLOSED" is a road sign, but it is a toy road, a ladder road, that can be pulled up as in a child's game. The poem is pressing on to its seemingly mystic, or religious, or mythical conclusion.

The real scene is juxtaposed against the memory scene, and the reader is enjoined to weep

> for the house that is no more a house,
> But only a belilaced cellar hole,
> Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.

Frost pursues comfortable domestic images like the imperceptibly closing hole in bread dough that has been kneaded by hand. And the cellar hole of the house that has disappeared is festively bedecked—it is "belilaced," a Frost coinage. The poem is an elegy for time past, but also a triumphant elegy leading to a resurrective conclusion.

The final powerful image is of the mystical cup, a goblet the poet has stolen from the children's playhouse:

> I have kept hidden in the instep arch
> Of an old cedar at the waterside
> A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
> Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,
> So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.

The old cedar tree is personified as having an instep arch in its imaginary shoes. The tone is amused and childlike, but the poet invokes the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend as represented by the broken drinking goblet, a child's plaything from long ago. It is under a magical spell under the protection of Saint Mark. The rhythm of the poem seems to rush on in a wave of colloquial alliteration of "s's":

> Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,
> So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.

"So can't get saved" is like a child's sweeping assertion. The concluding lines are strong and apocalyptic:

> Here are your waters and your watering place.
> Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.

The Poet speaks in prophetic tones, but that's not how the poem began.

What tentative conclusions can we draw about Frost's conversational style? We started with the assumption that the feeling of conversation in poetry is an artful effect contrived by the poet to promote an illusion of ease, naturalness, and fluidity. The homely, colloquial touches, therefore, are more a product of poetic construction rather than what Wordsworth, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads,* called "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." But this is an unsatisfactory dichotomy because the poet's art, when successful, creates the convincing impression of the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. It is the old paradox of Art improving on Nature, which, when well done, is more natural than raw Nature itself.

We may note, first, that Frost moves very freely in the iambic pentameter of blank verse (and sometimes in tetrameter). All three of the poems we have discussed are in iambic pentameter. As Shakespeare demonstrated, the blank verse line is a natural expression of speech rhythms in English, which itself tends toward iambic feet. But Frost, like most poets who use blank verse, has many substitutions for the iambic foot, patterns of alternating stress. He sometimes breaks the speech rhythm abruptly with parenthetical exclamations represented by dashes in the punctuation. Second, the diction seems simple and monosyllabic, unadorned and pure in the sense of the avoidance of rhetorical flourishes. Frost generally uses learned, polysyllabic words only for comic effect. The diction passes for New England speech, yet some of Frost's attempts to imitate a rural, farmer's talk seem arch and self-conscious, like the colt's mother in "The Runaway" saying, "Sakes, / It's only weather."

Third, Frost's figurative language tends to be drawn from nature, with similes and metaphors of a homely and domestic quality. This is, of course, the greatest illusion of all because the images are so artfully applied to the subject of the poem. Is Frost a keen observer of the flora and fauna and the natural features of the New England landscape? He certainly makes every effort to give this impression, but we should

remember that he is also a close student of Latin poetry. Finally, everything we have said so far contributes to a characteristic Frost tone of amused and ironic detachment that, surprisingly, sometimes issues into gnomic, epigrammatic, even hortatory and sermonistic statement, especially at the end of poems. Frost seems to be seeking some conclusive summing up, often of a moral or philosophical nature. This is not exactly conversational except as the poet succeeds in creating the impression that he is only a homespun Yankee thinker, offering reflections like the village cracker-barrel philosopher.

I am very influenced by the way Frost read his own poems, which seemed so appropriate for him as a public figure. But we know from Frost's turbulent biography that he took great pains to fashion himself as the perfect speaker of his poems. In his frequent readings, he dealt with the public not only in speaking—and improving on!—his own written poems, but also in introductions, answers to questions, and in general commentaries with the same whimsical, colloquial, and eloquent style so evident in his texts. There is a special, magical irony in the way Frost created himself as the nostalgic New England bard, the spokesman for a mythical rural America that most auditors thought had vanished long ago.

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NOTE

[1]I am quoting Frost from *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949).