

Following Frost's "Directive": The Poem as Obstacle Course

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In a *New York Times* interview with Milton Bracker, Robert Frost declares: "Every poem is a voyage of discovery. I go in to see if I can get out" (" 'Quietly Overwhelming' " 15). Certainly, getting out of "Directive" becomes a "voyage of discovery"—a voyage, quest, or verbal obstacle course of syntax and paradoxical statement. And to compound matters, "Directive" presents difficulties for the reader not only syntactically but thematically as well.

The poem begins with the description of a time "made simple by the loss / Of detail."¹ The first line, "Back out of all this now too much for us," contains a strong echo of Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much with Us," suggesting the Romantic desire for an escape to a more primitive, simpler time. Peculiarly, the time mentioned in "Directive" is not "simple" because it is a *simple time*, not elemental in the sense of having occurred before the trappings of civilization, but elemental because it has *lost* details due to the elements: fire ("burned"), water ("dissolved"), and air ("broken off"). Time in "Directive" is less pre-Fall and more post-Apocalypse; it is a time "like graveyard marble sculpture" (4), the narrator explains, thus dispelling any foolish notions about circumventing death. The reader soon learns that this time contains a "house that is no more a house," a "farm that is no more a farm," and a "town that is no more a town" (5-7). House, farm, and town possibly stand for family, work, and society—the lost details. Lost, too, is the reader; for in addition to the verbal stumbling blocks, impediments exist in the rhythm as well. Although the first seven lines share a ten-count measure, the scansion is different in each line—tricky footing indeed. Throughout the different stages of "Directive," the rhythms continue to vary subtly, and this irregular scansion contributes greatly to the feeling of poem as verbal

endeavor. The highly irregular and halting rhythm of lines one through seven is duplicated in the irregular syntax of this first sentence. The sentence's core is *a house there is*, but after four lines of qualifiers, the puzzled reader still asks, *where?* The initial "Back . . . / Back . . ." seems an attempt to summon the physical presences of the house, farm, and town, but once the images are formed, Frost systematically dispels them with three paradoxical phrases: "a house that is no more a house," a "farm that is no more a farm," and a "town that is no more a town" (5-7).

The voice in this first section of the poem (1-9) is that of a kind of seer-narrator, and he announces the availability of a guide "Who only has at heart your getting lost." In lines ten and eleven, the voice changes (in mid-sentence) from that of the enigmatic narrator to that of the reassuring, though garrulous, guide. The diction shifts from the solemn and unsettling mention of "getting lost" to the casual, gossipy talk of "knees the former town / Long since gave up pretense of keeping covered." The guide takes great care to enumerate the perils to be found along the route, only to minimize them with folksy chatter.

The reader-traveler now encounters a long section (8-33) where the theme of poem as verbal obstacle course becomes even more pronounced. All of this folksiness smacks of nervous tension and only causes the reader to tread more carefully. From the very start of the journey, the reader is prepared for pitfalls upon learning that the road seems "as if it should have been a quarry" (10). Furthermore, this road has "knees" that the town was "keeping covered." Covering knees is a matter of decorum—form, but the town did not have *real* form, only "pretense." To keep the traveler on track and in line, there are compass directions, "lines ruled southeast-northwest" (15). These lines are the "chisel work" of an "enormous Glacier." The term "chisel work" not only reinforces the idea of *real* craft or form, as opposed to the *pretense* of the town, but when the traveler remembers that the directive lines are the result of the Glacier "That braced his feet against the Arctic Pole," that "chisel work" can possibly be seen as the work of Frost himself, a poet more than a little concerned with form and one who enjoys interspersing references to his name (e.g., "Glacier" and "coolness") in his work. Nor are the perils of this journey confined solely to the road's surface, for the guide mentions "the serial ordeal / Of being watched . . . by eye pairs" (20-22). He may be facetiously referring to the scrutiny of Frost's critics. As Richard Poirier explains: "From the late twenties until his death in 1963, Frost regarded himself as the necessary enemy of two forces in American cultural life . . . the political left and the modernist literary elite" (226). In

addition, Elizabeth Sergeant quotes Frost as telling her about "Directive":

This is the poem that converted the other group. The one these fellows have taken to build my reputation on. The boys [followers of T. S. Eliot] call it great. They have re-established me. This is great and most of the rest, trivia. (394)

Such ambiguous references to Frost's literary career continue as the greatly onomatopoeic phrase, "sends light rustle rushes to their leaves" (24), describes the young woods' excitement at seeing the traveler. "Charge that to upstart inexperience" (25) the traveler is told. Twenty years ago they were not there; and now, "They think too much of having shaded out / A few old pecker-fretted apple trees" (27-28). In this instance, Frost's reference seems at once both sexual and literary if one remembers that 37 years earlier the narrator of "Mending Wall" spoke of himself as being "apple orchard" (47). Also interesting is Frost's choice of the plural possessive, *woods'*, where the singular, *wood's*, would work as well. In this instance, as in subsequent ones, the poem's semantic path frequently veers toward the allegorical. In any event, the traveler is exhorted not to mind "them," but to make "up a cheering song of how / Someone's road home from work this once was, / Who may be just ahead of you on foot" (29-31). The "who," one suspects, is Frost; "on foot," the metrical foot, among others. These discomfiting features of the roadway, while enhancing the sense of place and immediacy, similarly enhance the sense of perplexity for the reader. They waylay the reader into false leads, dead ends, and mental detours. They trip him up and hinder his movement through the poem.

In line 36, the voice once again changes; this time the change is from guide to priest. Thus far, the poem has resembled the quest pattern of departure and confrontation of dangers; now, the archetypal process of withdrawal from the world takes place. No longer is the voice casually chatty; the tone is now that of a priest instructing an initiate in the meaning of the sacred mysteries. Just as the first vocal transition occurred in mid-sentence, so, too, does this one. A perceptible change in diction becomes evident between the priest's voice, filled with Biblical overtones, commanding, "if you're lost enought to find yourself" (36), and the more casual tone of the guide's voice following the enjambment, ". . . yourself / By now, pull in your ladder road behind you / And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me" (36-38). By placing the vocal transition in mid-sentence and mixing the diction between formal and informal, Frost

skillfully adds to the confusion of the reader who is experiencing the poem as verbal endeavor.² The rites continue as the reader-initiate is first ushered past the ruins of innocence, "the children's house of make-believe" (41), and then past the endeavors of real life, the house with its cellar hole "closing like a dent in dough" (47).

At long last, the initiate is told his "destination" and "destiny": "A brook . . . / Cold as a spring as yet so near its source" (50-52). Helen Bacon sees these lines and the earlier ones that mention the "two village cultures" as references to the cults of Apollo and Dionysus and the Spring of the Muses (645). Surely this is straining too far to reach the muse, for the muse is much closer. This brook, as does "Hyla Brook," represents Frost's personal muse. Frost himself comments to his friend, Theodore Morrison: "People miss the key to the poem: the key lines, if you want to know, are 'cold as a spring as yet so near its source, / Too lofty and original to rage.' But the key word in the whole poem is source—whatever source it is" (Morrison 79). If Frost is the "lofty and original" source, then "the valley streams that when aroused / . . . leave their tatters hung on barb and thorn" (53-54) are probably his contemporaries.³

Another reminder of the quest-like nature of this poem, a "broken drinking goblet like the Grail" (57), is hidden at the waterside. The goblet is "Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it, / So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't" (58-59). Frost often refers to Saint Mark's comments about speaking in parables.⁴ In an interview on "Meet the Press," he makes a connection between parables, metaphors, and his poetic craft: "These things are said in parables (that is, poetry, figures of speech) so the wrong people cannot understand them, and so get saved."⁵ The goblet becomes, then, as S.P.C. Duvall notes, a "metaphor for poetry, or more narrowly, a metaphor for metaphor: the form and container of the perennial and limitless source" (487). But if we can identify Frost as the source ("cold as a spring"), then the traditional climax of the journey becomes merely another instance of the reader's encountering a verbal barrier. In "Directive," rather than showing the reader the way, Frost has his way with him.

The poem ends in great solemnity with a combination benediction-invitation: "Here are your waters and your watering place. / Drink and be whole again beyond confusion" (61-62). The jarring juxtaposition of the staid, "drink and be whole again," against the absurd, "watering place," destroys the sense of exclusiveness that "CLOSED to all but me" earlier suggests. If the "watering place" is near, can be herd be far behind? These final lines are very likely a reference to the gospel of John,⁶ and readers familiar with Frost will also recognize a reference to his famous

remark that "a poem is a momentary stay against confusion" ("The Figure a Poem Makes" vi). Has the reader come all this way for a "momentary" wholeness? Richard Poirier sees Frost's trait of explicating himself, his turning in on his own work, as an "example of the self-conscious and self-cuddling mode" (100). Frost does indeed turn back into his own work; his poems are filled with images of starting out and turning back; and frequently, he makes oblique references to his own name and to his poetics. Poirier is correct, of course, to see this as a fault in "Directive," and he notes that the poem is much overrated (99-100). Even Marie Borroff, who sees "Directive" as "powerful and viable," admits that it is "flawed in part by the arch-avuncular pose of the elderly Frost . . ." (53).

Certain of Frost's comments about his work suggest that he is aware of these traits in his poems and does not consider them faults but virtues to be cultivated. As he tells us, he is ever on his guard against the type of reader "who stands at the end of a poem ready . . . to drag you off your balance over the last punctuation mark into more than you meant to say . . . such presumption needs to be twinkled at and baffled" (qtd. in Perkins 249). In the case of "Directive," Frost has quite possibly been setting a trap for critics eager to see the Spring of the Muse, Apollo, and Dionysus in "the height / Of country" (33-34) and for graduate students eager to see critics in the "eye pairs" (22). Philip L. Gerber views this constant "twinkling" as Frost's refusal to come down on any one side of an issue. He sees the poet starting out in quest of the transcendent only to halt and turn back (Gerber 67). Likewise, it seems that in "Directive," Frost and the reader halt and falter somewhere *this* side of confusion.

If covering the terrain of the poem is rough going syntactically, it is just as difficult to maneuver thematically. One wonders just how much of Duvall's "perennial and limitless source" (487) a "broken goblet" can hold. David Perkins speaks of this thematic evasion in terms of Frost's irony; and in all fairness, he notes that Frost preferred to call it balance (249). However, Frost achieves his "balance" at the reader's expense. Hopes are raised with the mention of the "height of the adventure" (33) and the "height / Of country" (33-34) only to have them dashed following the medial caesura with "Both of them are lost" (35). And his two parenthetical asides, "(We know the valley streams that when aroused / Will leave their tatters hung on barb and thorn.)" (53-54) and "(I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)" (60), are literally inside jokes.

Frost blends facetious asides, abrupt changes in diction, halting syntax, and self-explication with elements from American

folklore, fairy tale, and from chivalric and Christian traditions and forges a stylistic and thematic whole that is highly ironic. In "Directive," the irony resembles Plato's conception of it in the *Republic* where it has the meaning of "a glib and underhanded way of taking people in" (Cuddon 335). Each time the poet seems to be encouraging, urging the reader on toward the fulfillment of the quest, he then sticks out his foot (metrical or otherwise) and trips the reader up. So the reader cautiously picks his way through the verbal minefield of "Make yourself up a cheering song of how / Someone's road home from work this once was" (29-30) only to have "Who may be just ahead of you" (31) explode in his face. The ambiguous advice, "if you're lost enough to find yourself / By now, pull in your ladder road behind you" (36-37), (safe at last, the reader thinks) is contrasted with the restrictive, "And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me" (38) (oh, no, alone with him). Encouraged to be comfortable and to "make yourself at home," the reader finds only uneasy discomfort in "the only field / Now left's no bigger than a harness gall" (39-40). For where the reader expects something cozy like *nutshell*, Frost presents the image of raw pain. The "shattered dishes" (42), the admonishment to "weep" (44), and the gaping ruins of the house, "a belilaced cellar hole" (46), possessing a life of its own, "slowly closing like a dent in dough" (47)—a staff-of-life image to be sure, but hardly in palatable form—all of these can be viewed as examples of Frost's skillfully ironic treatment of the rites of initiation. If the reader has been on a quest, it has been a mock-quest. The trip and the joke have been at his expense.

In the same interview where Frost speaks of a poem as a "voyage of discovery," he says: "The glory of any particular poem is once you've tasted that arrival at the end" (" 'Quietly Overwhelming' " 15). If this is so, then as the roadweary reader of "Directive" completes the verbal obstacle course, arrives at the end, and prepares to fill the goblet (albeit "broken") from the brook and to "drink and be whole again" (albeit momentarily), he would be well advised to pause, remember the source of that water, and brace for the bitter, chilling taste of irony.

Despite the hints and promises of knowledge in the poem's beginning, "Directive's" path yields nothing. Despite the cryptic references to hidden insights, the poem blisters the reader's attempts to understand the point of the journey. For the journey, in the final analysis, amounts to nothing more than a verbal scavenger hunt; the reader is left with an assortment of images that never pull together. "Directive" is a text which refuses to give up its meaning. Each reader is forced to make his own meaning, his own sense from the syntactical map that Frost presents. It is a little wonder then

that such diverse critical opinions of "Directive" exist. Borroff and Bacon see the poem as an example of Frost at his best, his most enlightening. Poirier and Gerber, on the other hand, insist that it leads nowhere, that the directions are garbled because of Frost's refusal to finally *say*. "Directive" does not direct; it may go so far as to misdirect. Certainly it confuses. And whether the poem's verbal obstacles are a result of Frost's "twinkling" at or sporting with his reader, or whether they are a result of his own lack of direction, his lack of philosophical certainty is of little consolation. Completing the obstacle course that is "Directive" does not result in gained insights but rather in a sense of relief that the verbal endeavor is finally over.

Notes

¹ All quotations from Frost's poetry are from the *Complete Poems of Robert Frost*.

² Bieganowski's observation that the different personas are the thin disguises of the poet going through the terrain of language (43-44) induced me to map the terrain from the reader's eyes.

³ See Poirier's discussion of the juvenile nastiness that characterized Frost's attitude toward Pound and Eliot (228-29).

⁴ Frost apparently has in mind the scripture from Mark 4:11-12: "And he said unto them, 'Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables.'" (I quote from the King James Version for this and subsequent Biblical references.)

⁵ The "Meet the Press" panel consisted of Laurence Spivack, Inez Rob, Clifton Fadiman, David Brinkley, and Ned Brooks. A transcript of NBC's 23 Dec. 1956 broadcast appeared 30 Dec. 1956 in the *Boston Sunday Globe* and is reprinted in Lathem.

⁶ John 4:13-14 is Jesus's conversation with the woman at the well: "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst."

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