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“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”: A Burkean/Ecocritical Reading”

Man is
the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal
.....
separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own mak-
ing
.....
and rotten with perfection. (Burke 1, 2, 4, 5, 7)

Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” elucidates Burke’s theory of “Man” as being “rotten with perfection” and shows how “perfection” (16), as an internal motive, is an ecocritical disease in the mindset of twentieth-century modern man¹, an era marked by advancements in technology and industry. Few scholars have analyzed Robert Frost’s poetry from a Burkean perspective; the last to do so was Richard Poirier who, in 1982, examined the Emersonian influence in Burke’s theory of words and their relation to reality. My paper instead, uses a combined approach of ecocriticism and Burke’s theory of man in his essay “Definition of Man.” Kenneth Burke (1897 – 1993) was a literary and social critic of the twentieth century. During the Depression, Burke experienced first-hand the devastating effects of a society unchecked by its own technological and industrial advancements. Within Burke’s early works, such as *Counter-Statement* and *Permanence and Change*, William Rueckert and other Burkean scholars have argued that ecocriticism as a field of study was founded.

Reading this poem from the vantage of Burke’s theory of man, the unnamed speaker is driven by “perfection.” It is an internal will and force that keeps the speaker unsettled in the few moments that he stops to watch the woods fill up with snow. This internal will is made evident as he consciously strives after the “promises” of tomorrow — “promises” he has “to keep.” From an ecocritical standpoint, this pastoral poem reveals modern man’s indifference and detachment from nature; the poem is symptomatic of humanity’s materialistic relationship with nature. Only the speaker, horse, and owner of the woods are written about in personal terms. Everything else, such as the “woods” and “frozen lake,” is described as impersonal and inanimate objects that exist for ownership and pleasure of viewing.

Frost’s words and poetic descriptions work to impose a unique image and feeling in the reader; the poem is full of subtle dichotomies that create tensions which at the end of the poem prompts the unnamed speaker to push on, and gives the reader a sense of conclusion. Although clear signs of separation between the speaker and nature exist, I believe that through the silence and inaction of the speaker a symbiotic relationship and ecological harmony with nature is perceived possible for humanity. Yet for this to occur, the “promises” we make for the future must include a greater understanding and appreciation of our relationship with, and responsibility toward, nature.

HUMAN PERFECTION as ENTELECHY

In order to understand the meaning of Burke's assertion that "Man is . . . rotten with perfection" (16), it is important to note the influence that Aristotle's idea of "entelechy" had on Burke; Burke himself acknowledges this influence in "The Definition of Man":

. . . the Aristotelian concept of the 'entelechy,' the notion that each being aims at the perfection natural to its kind (or, etymologically, is marked by a "possession of telos within"). . . . we are confining our use of the principle to the realm of symbolic action. (17)

In short, man has an internal will, or "telos" (teleology), that Burke considers a key factor in his defining attribute of man. Man is, as Burke exhorts, driven to "perfect" his own state of being through the realm of "symbolic action" (a Burkean term that refers to the use of language with a purpose or intent). What then is the "symbolic action" found in this poem? A close analysis of the form and language is required in beginning to formulate an answer to this question.

FROST'S FORM

In his biography of Robert Frost, Jay Parini writes: "'Stopping by Woods' represents the *perfection* of Frost's art in the straight lyric mode, his 'best bid for remembrance,' as he told Louis Untermeyer. He remarked to Reginald Cook that it contained 'all I ever knew'" (my emphasis 212). To my knowledge, no scholar has unearthed the fact that the form of the poem is written as a "Rubaiyat,"² also referred to as "Omar Khayyam quatrain" (Cuddon 612). This is an ancient form of Persian poetry written in quatrains of tetrameter or pentameter. The traditional form of an "interlocking rubaiyat" has a rhyme scheme AABA, BBCB, CCDC, and a final quatrain of DDAD (Turco 106). Frost slightly modifies this form with a DDDD rhyme scheme in the final stanza. The last four lines become enthematic of the modern era — the rhyme is repetitive, persistent and unrelenting — thus giving the poem its momentum:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep. (13-16)

In this final stanza, an unquestionable will is exerted in the speaker's words for pushing on. He has "promises to keep"; whether they are for his family, friends, himself, or work, we are never fully told. Yet to the unnamed speaker, these "promises" are more important than the time spent in the woods. These "promises" reflect the uncompromising internal drive that Burke characterizes as "perfectionist."

LANGUAGE as TELEOLOGICAL

Similar to man's drive for perfection, language, as Burke describes it, is also inherently motivated by a teleological drive for "perfection"; its very existence and utility is designed to most accurately name, explicate, elucidate, and describe a given reality. This teleological quality embedded in language influences man's "use," "mis-use," and "making" of it. As mentioned earlier, man, already being driven by an internal motive for perfection, uses language as a means to attain that end. Yet the language and vocabulary a person chooses to use will simultaneously motivate him or her by defining what those "means" and "ends" will be. Put another way, the

words we use to talk about the environment will have a motivating force in our fulfillment of that language. Therefore, if we have a detached and materialistic vocabulary for describing the environment, we will be motivated to fulfill the implications of that vocabulary.

In an article titled “Perfection and the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons, Teleology, and Motives,” Barry Brummett explains Burke’s philosophy: “the vocabularies that people use are capable of extension and elaboration, and the motive to extend and elaborate to the limit of a vocabulary is perfectionist” (86). Brummett suggests that the diction, nomenclature and terms we choose to use, have a motivating and perforce-like drive in our actions for fulfillment. As Brummett implies in his article’s title, our symbol systems have the ability to motivate men to total annihilation, specifically by the way in which we talk about “nuclear weapons.” In other words, to talk about nuclear weapons as a viable national defense strategy leads us to fulfill this national defense option, even at the cost of total annihilation. Similarly, in Encounters with Kenneth Burke, William Rueckert describes the deleterious import of man’s “use,” and “mis-use,” of language on the environment: “it is humans’ capacity for symbolic action that makes it possible for them to study, master, manipulate, transform, and destroy ecosystems” (174). This notion of language as symbolic motivator is expressed by Burke himself: “There is a kind of ‘terministic compulsion’ to carry out the implications of one’s terminology” (19). In essence, the way we talk and write about nature will create motivating “implications” in our relationship with nature. In this poem, Frost’s vocabulary displays a detached, impersonal, and materialistic view of nature that can be regarded as symptomatic of the “perfectionist” will internal to humanity in the modern era, which has allowed men to justify the destruction and consumption of natural resources as the necessary means for the advancements in technology, industry, and overall “progress.”

SEPARATION IN FROST’S WORDS

Frost’s language, particularly his choices in words, is both concrete and opposing in its descriptive articulations. Figuratively speaking, if words were paint and poems paintings, this poem would be a modernist piece of broad brush strokes — things are as they are with underlying tensions of black and white. The poem contains subtly demarcated dichotomies that act to impose tension, which culminates in the repetitive couplet at the end of the poem. It is the repetitive couplet at the end of the poem, “the miles to go,” which cuts through these binary opposites and brings the reader a sense of fulfillment, a sense that in this world of black and white, right and wrong, night and day, there is restful “sleep” at the end of the journey, but one must strive to get there.

The first dichotomy is found in the separation of civilization and nature, the “village” in opposition to the “woods.” This separation sets up a barrier that preoccupies the speaker’s thoughts. Nature, in the mindset of the speaker, is demarcated by boundaries of ownership:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow. (1-4)

This idea of separation and ownership is later strengthened when the speaker stops and notices that there is not a “farmhouse near.”

The second dichotomy is found in the binary opposites of life and lifelessness. The rider, “horse,” and owner of the “woods” are the only things described in personal terms. In contrast, nature is depicted as inanimate and lifeless. The “woods” and “frozen lake” are simply written as “fill[ing] up with snow.” It is noteworthy that the horse is given the personal pronoun “He” and is personified as “He” seems to “ask” whether “there is some mistake.” Upon consideration, the horse becomes a means to an end for the speaker. The horse is essentially the rider’s vehicle for attaining the “promises” that are “miles” away. With this in mind, the horse becomes an extension of the speaker’s own thoughts in the anticipation of pushing on and moving forward. The horse never really “ask[s] if there is some mistake,” it is only the speaker’s thoughts projected onto the horse:

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
.....
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake. (5-7, 9-10)

This personification and projection of thought magnify the separation between the speaker and his surrounding natural environment. He, with his horse, or rather vehicle of “progress,” appears to be the only living things around — the only other sound is that “Of easy wind and downy flake.” (12); this idea of silence and sound is another dichotomy found within the poem.

One of the last opposing elements of the poem is found in the setting, which takes place on “The darkest evening of the year,” an implied winter solstice⁴ as opposed to a summer solstice. All of these dichotomies act as verbal polarities that help to create a tension within the poem, which is ultimately resolved by the speaker in the final stanza, in the striving to keep his “promises.” The repetitive couplet in the final quatrain cuts through the binary elements of the poem and brings a sense of closure. The reader is subtly told by the poem that in a world of black and white, mine and not-mine, nature and civilization — “sleep” is the ultimate reward at the end of the journey.

CONCLUSION

As humanity continues to journey on, questions arise as to how nature is supposed to be regarded. How are we to “progress” and simultaneously preserve ecological harmony with nature? Frost’s poem, specifically in how we read its tempo and structure, partially answers these questions. The rhyme scheme, like the structured background beat of a drum that keeps a 4/4 tempo of a musical piece, is played out within an iambic tetrameter rhythm — unstressed, stressed, unstressed, stressed The tempo of Frost’s poem is smooth and free flowing, due in part to the colloquial tone of voice Frost creates in his choice of words. This tempo and tone creates a feeling of ease and peaceful serenity. The end-stopped lines, at the end of each stanza, give the reader a feeling that the speaker, narrating the event in present tense, takes little pauses between explicating his experience of “stopping in the woods.” It is as if the speaker is somehow absorbing the moment of just being in nature. In these momentary pauses of reflection, Frost shows us how we reconnect with nature. In these moments, humanity comes to understand that he, like every other creature, is a part of this ecosystem, and with conscious

awareness of this fact, we can begin to work towards a “promising” relationship of balanced needs — both of humanities and natures.

Notes

¹ In parts of the paper I retain the use of “man” to refer to “humanity,” merely to maintain consistency with Burke’s own usage in “Definition of Man.”

² This form gained literary prominence in 1859 when Edward FitzGerald published his English translation of Omar Khayyam’s poem entitled “Rubaiyat,” written between the late eleventh and early twelfth century (Sufistic Quatrains of Omar Khayyam). Literary figures such as Swinburne, Rossetti, Twain, Riley, T.S. Eliot, Pound, and many others read Fitzgerald’s “Rubaiyat.” (See A. J. Arberry’s The Romance of the Rubaiyat and also Vinnie-Marie D’Ambrosio’s Eliot Possessed: T.S. Eliot and FitzGerald’s Rubaiyat).

³ The line may allude to the “Rubaiyat,” which was written by Omar Khayyam who was renowned as an astronomer/poet. The setting of the original “Rubaiyat” takes place on the New Year, which also may account for Frost’s description of a winter solstice setting.

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