

ROBERT FROST AND BIRDS

MAXWELL C. WHEAT, JR.

Poet Robert Frost, whose 100th birthday anniversary occurs March 26, 1974, is famous for poems like those about a boy swinging on "Birches" and a little horse who "must think it queer" to have its master "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

But the reader also hears the music of birds in his poetry. They sing or sound in his poems just when you would expect to hear them outdoors — in the spring, in the morning, and in the enchanting transition time of dusk. Sometimes they even break the silence of night as in the poem, "On a Bird Singing in Its Sleep." Here

"A bird half awakened in the lunar moon
Sang halfway through its little inborn tune."

Caws, clucks, twangs, twitterings and even the whir of wings are heard through much of his work. For these, together with song, comprise bird music.

It is music that arouses feelings. With it Frost can make the reader enjoy again the delicious anticipation that come from hearing the first avian notes of spring and morning. He can bring on the sweep of poignancy that is felt from the last bird sounds of dusk and fall. It is music that outdoors or in his poetry inspires contemplation — even philosophy. Birds are "Our Singing Strength," Frost says in a poem of that title:

"In spring more mortal singers than belong
To any one place cover us with song.
Thrush, bluebird, blackbird, sparrow, and robin throng;
....

Well, something for a snowstorm to have shown
The country's singing strength thus brought together,
That though repressed and moody with the weather
Was none the less there ready to be freed
And sing the wildflowers up from root and seed."

The migrating birds in this poem had to press together in what bare spots they could find during a spring snowstorm. Late wintry weather sweeps into several of Frost's spring poems just as storm fortune often overtakes people when their lives seem headed for brighter days. Frost is drawn by these vernal snowstorms and uncertain days as in "Two Tramps in Mud Time" when

"A bluebird comes tenderly up to alight
And turns to the wind to unruffle a plume

His song so pitched as not to excite
A single flower as yet to bloom.

It is snowing a flake: and he half knew
Winter was only playing possum.
Except in color he isn't blue,
But he wouldn't advise a thing to blossom."

But there is exultance at the prospect of spring finally taking possession of the earth. He shouts in "To the Thawing Wind,"

"Come with rain, O loud Southwester!
Bring the singer, bring the nester;"

In "A Prayer for Spring," he pleads joyfully

"Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.

....

And make us happy in the darting bird
That suddenly above the bees is heard,
The meteor that thrusts in with needle bill,
And off a blossom in mid air stands still."

Frost is poignantly aware of the final audible signs of autumn. It is as though he is not sure another spring will come — an ancient, primitive fear of people dependent on the earth. In "The Last Word of the Bluebird," a poem written as though to a child, a little girl named Lesley (same as that of Frost's daughter) is sent word by her departing bluebird that

". . . perhaps in the spring
He would come back and sing."

During "A Late Walk" in fall,

". . . when I come to the garden ground,
The whirl of sober birds
Up from the tangle of withered weeds
Is sadder than any words."

As if one fall was not enough, Frost is reminded of another in the vibrant call of "The Ovenbird" for which he names his poem. This warbler still tunefully calls out in the middle of summer when the other warblers have quieted. But its music recalls that the spring flowers have fallen — an omen of the final fall when the leaves will go too.

The ovenbird's call is like the melancholy that briefly comes across one's mind in the midst of a wonderful occasion as a reminder that it will eventually have to end. The bird's music is a touch of the finale before the finale.

"There is a singer everyone has heard
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-Summer is to spring as one to ten
He says the early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;
And comes that other fall we name fall."

Frost is acutely aware of so much absence of bird music in winter. Once in a while he hears birds calling such as the chickadees after a storm in "Snow."

"They will come budding boughs from tree to tree
Flirting their wings and saying Chickadee,
As if not knowing what you meant by the word storm."

However, not even a faint "tsip" note is heard from the Slate-colored Junco in "The Wood-Pile."

"A small bird flew before me. He was careful
To put a tree between us when he lighted,
And say no word to tell who he was
Who was so foolish as to think what *he* thought.
He thought that I was after him for a feather —
The white one in his tail;"

The reader can sense the frozen hush that has come over the landscape and the soul when the poet longingly remembers a bird he heard and saw that previous summer in "Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter."

"The west was getting out of gold,
The breath of air had died of cold,
When shoeing home across the white,
I thought I saw a bird alight.

In summer when I passed the place
I had to stop and lift my face;
A bird with an angelic gift
Was singing in it sweet and swift.

No bird was singing in it now.
A single leaf was on a bough,

And that was all there was to see
In going twice around the tree."

Seasons came naturally into Frost's poetry just as they did on his various Vermont and New Hampshire farms. Mostly these properties were residences for a man farming at poetry. But for a decade beginning at the turn of the century and starting with 200 Wyandotte eggs which he hatched, farms at Methuen and Derry, New Hampshire, were homes for a man farming at poultry. He learned that he had to deal with the seasons like winter when he had to bed down his chicken coops with protective leaves.

Morning and evening were also important to the chicken farmer as they came to be for the poet farmer. Certain chores were performed at these times like starting the fire and collecting the eggs in the morning. Certain feelings became linked to these times of day like the excitement of life getting started at dawn. In fact, an early riser is out doors even before the beginning of the dawn bird chorus in "The Valley's Singing Day."

"The sound of the closing outside door was all.
You made no sound in the grass with your footfall,
As far as you went from the door, which was not far;
But you had awakened under the morning star
The first song-bird that awakened all the rest."

Dusk intrigues Frost. Darkening fields and edges of woods, the rising full moon and bird music in the evening draw him. He feels enchantingly alone and pensive as in "Waiting:"

"What things for dream there are when specter-like,
Moving along tall haycocks lightly piled,
I enter alone upon the stubble field,
From which the laborers' voices late have died,
And in the antiphony of afterglow
And rising full moon, sit me down
Upon the full moon's side of the first haycock
And lose myself amid so many alike.

I dream upon the opposing lights of the hour,
Preventing shadow until the moon prevail;
I dream upon the nighthawks peopling heaven,
Each circling each with vague unearthly cry,
Or plunging headlong with fierce twang afar;"

Dusk is one of the times when nature seems most inviting. The evening scene can be so enchanting. But is it too enchanting for the civilized person who is used to regular, everyday scenes that are understandable.

Is nature too real and beautiful to experience for more than a brief period? This compelling question is invoked in the poem "Come In" by perhaps the most mystical of all evening music — thrush music.

"As I came to the edge of the woods,
Thrush music — hark!
Now if it was dusk outside,
Inside it was dark.

Too dark in the woods for a bird
By sleight of wing
To better its perch for the night,
Though it still could sing.

The last of the light of the sun
That had died in the west
Still lived for one song more
In a thrush's breast.

Far in the pillared dark
Thrush music went —
Almost like a call to come in
To the dark and lament.

But no, I was out for stars:
I would not come in.
I meant not even if asked,
And I hadn't been."

It is the paradox of Robert Frost that he takes something like a star — something that does not have a song.

Poetry quotations from "Complete Poems of Robert Frost, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1967

333 Bedell Street, Freeport, New York 11520