Tradition and Transformation: Frost's "Home Burial" and the Poetics of Mild Transformation

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Abstract:

In negotiation with the modernist literary agenda, Frost wrote his *North of Boston* and strived to publish it in London at a time when American publishers mostly aligned with the then-new trend of modernism. When the book won Frost both national and international acclaim – as it was favorably reviewed by Ezra Pound, one of the pillars of modernist poetry – Henry Holt hastened to win the prerogative of becoming Frost's first American publisher. Endeavoring to understand the book's special character, the present article sheds light on "Home Burial," one of the narrative pieces in *North of Boston* which shows Robert Frost at his best as both traditionalist and innovator. A study of the poem's poetic structure, narrative design, and language will seek to explain how the New England poet, thanks to the special strategy he adopts – what this article calls 'poetics of mild transformation'– managed to reconcile the old with the new without wholly surrendering to the dictations of modernist poetics.

Keywords: Modernist; Traditionalist; Mild Transformation

Introduction

It was in London that Robert Frost had to seek publishers for his *North of Boston* at a time when American editors favored European modernism (Hart 2017, 157) and considered Frost's verse old-fashioned and traditionalist (Sharpe 2007, 10; Bloom1999, 11). Indeed, as Bloom in his *Twentieth-century American Literature* (1985, 1484) provokingly puts it, "Frost might have had the Nobel Prize if so many New York critics hadn't gone whoring after European gods." Rendering homage to the New England local flavor, the book's 1914 London publication by David Nutt thus came to announce the birth of Frost's accredited poetic career after years of non-recognition home (Sanders 2011, 13). The poet's dream of success soon started to materialize and Henry Holt warmly accepted to be Frost's first American publisher (Dickstein 2010, 95). Among *North of Boston*'s most challenging pieces, "Home Burial" has hitherto invited special attention owing to its remarkable psychological insight and poetic expertise.[1] Through study of its poetic structure, narrative design, and language, the present article purports to explicate how the poem equally dramatizes the Frostian tricky relations with the poetics of the age showing the poet thinking his way through tradition and innovation, producing, in the meanwhile, what this article considers Frost's own brand of modernism, his politics of detached engagement, resulting in *poetics of mild transformation*.

1. Structure and the Poetics of Mild Transformation in "Home Burial"

As he compares Larkin to Frost and to fellow poets of the same era, Waterman (2014, 14) highlights aspects typical of their poems which "immediately promise a story or anecdote, and open in a chatty register." In most of these, he adds, "a strong sense of narrative intimacy immediately pulls reader and writer together in shared experience as audience and story-teller, or listener and speaker" (Waterman 2014, 15). As this section purports to explain, the structure of Frost's "Home Burial" proves the poet to be an eminent 'traditionalist modernist'.

The poem opens with what might resemble an exposition moment whereby the reader is introduced to the narrative's two protagonists and to the spatial setting: the stairs where the main action would take place. The first seventeen lines part/stanza depicts an initial tension-fraught situation. Significantly, in this section exposition and complication seem to overlap as the characters ramble up and down the stairs without managing to overcome the predicament that cripples their thoughts. That the circular structure of the narrative shows the couple ending where they began testifies to the piece's modernist flavor (Sheehan 2002, 158) and despite the reversal of their respective topographic positions by the end of the episode – Amy, the wife, has descended the stairs while her entreating unnamed husband has mounted them – no real progress is made and the spouses still fail to reach any reconciliation what so ever.

Resisting closure, the narrative halts and leaves the husband's questions unanswered as Amy persistently denies his ability to appropriately speak of their child's decease. Responding to his words by the negative modal 'don't' (as in "don't," "Don't, don't, don't, don't" (L.32), "You don't" (L.20), "You don't know how to ask it" (L.45)), 'can't' (as in "You can't because you don't know how to speak (L.75)) or 'couldn't' (as in "You *couldn't* care!" (L.101), she ceaselessly challenges her husband's capacity to 'see' or 'speak'. This highlights the piece's anti-closure, an aspect of modernist poetics (Vogel 2009, 129). In fact, the poem's narrative does not conclude; it just ends, giving birth to what Gioia (2014, 78) calls Frost's "innovative ... dramatic narratives."

2. Narrative Design and the Poetics of Mild Transformation in "Home Burial"

In many respects original, the poem still shows aspects of traditional narrative verse, a feature Frost seems to have willingly kept alive in his work so as not to lose touch with the majority of readers. Indeed, despite the high modernists' growing disparagement of popular verse, Frost knew that he needed for his success the support, not of the few among the intellectual modernist elite, but, rather, of the large reading public, those he called "the general reader" (Sanders 2011, 19). Meanwhile, he endeavored to enact his special poetics of smooth transformation.

Indisputably, aspects of traditional narrative like third-person narration, dialogue, and blank verse are present in "Home Burial." Frost preferred, for that matter, to stay considerably faithful to the tradition of the turn-of-the-century-fireside poets – Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, and Holmes, among others – who enjoyed wide appeal to American individuals, families, and institutions (Kete 2011, 31). This tradition provided poetry that spoke the regional tongue of

American New England farmers and valorized the local community's ethics, what Buell (2001, 112) describes as "the vision of a regional Yankee culture past its apogee, however admirable for wit, stoicism, and rectitude."

Of the most prominent pieces in *North of Boston*, "Home Burial" revisits the marital life theme equally central to other pieces in the book – like "A Servant to Servants," "The Death of the Hired Man" and "The Fear" – and to pre-modern fireside domestic narrative poems. As it depicts a climatic episode in the life of a bereaved couple, "Home Burial" seems to act out the metaphorical burial of a home no longer prone to reanimation. It shows Amy, the wife, utterly incapable of pardon as she could not forget her spouse's burial of their deceased child in what he describes as "[t]he little graveyard where my people are" (L24). Nor could she accept to forgive his ultimate return to everyday concerns. Her fixation on the memory of the husband's grave digging transformed the act into something of a crime.

Now, the very choice of the narrative mode can tell of Frost's adherence to the fireside tradition (Kilcup 1998, 195). Indeed, this poem of his obliquely tells the story of a broken marriage via conversation and action. Though minimal, this action is based on symbolic postures whereby fear, misunderstanding, despair, disappointment, and psychological distance are movingly staged via the two characters' movements up and down the stairs. The window, the bedroom, the family graveyard, and the door all acquire symbolic functions as they suggest, each, a knot in the thread of the poem's narrative. These sub-locales endow the setting with special complexity. They equally color the narrative with the subjective significance of the different spots. The latter, thus, grow into different frames wherefrom action is perceived by the telling voice(s), an aspect evocative of modernist poetics' multiplicity of point of view (Childs 1986, 139).

Indeed, amidst the most dramatic of narratives in *North of Boston*, "Home Burial" also makes proof of Frost's innovative capacity to blur the lines between a poem and a play (Shiojiri 2014, 94). After a burning conversation dramatising a wife and husband verbal and physical confrontation, a closing tableau anchors the conflict at its white heat and makes the narrative chunks read much like stage directions that specify the postures, positions, facial expressions, and speaking tones of the characters. Thus, although essentially narrative, Frost's "Home Burial" cannot be read as fairly traditional.

Further, the piece tacitly manages to negotiate with the tradition of regional domestic narratives as it transcends its generic belonging to it by appearing as both dramatic (dialogue-based) and lyrical (musically alliterative and highly subjective) despite its narrative nature. This generic complexity is liable to make of the poem a modern dramatic narrative, a lyrical narrative, and, to a considerable extent, a dramatic lyric, a hybrid type showing the poet's dexterity and his poetics of smooth transformation whereby the passage from the traditionalist to the modernist mode appears soft, detached, and never irretrievable.

Additionally, although a third-person narrative, the poem fails to fully materialise the objectivity of omniscient narration; Amy's voice prevails over the piece's separate chunks and even

the husband seems to be described from her own vantage point ("She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,/ *Blind creature*" (L16-17; emphasis added). Ultimately, when he desperately tells her: "There's something I should like to ask you, dear," she interrupts him saying: "You don't know how to ask it." His subsequent call for her: "Help me then" is, significantly enough, utterly ignored.

Thus, depicting a rural household predicament after the death and interment of a firstborn, Frost's narrator seems to have lost objectivity and balance and to have, on many occasions, become the spokesman of the female protagonist, the bereaved mother. In this respect, studying what she calls "Frost's complex feminine measures," Kilcup brings to the fore "Frost's affirmation of a feminine voice in poetry and the echoes, sometimes clearly deliberate, that this voice elaborates of a prior sentimental tradition" (1998, 21).

Notably, the poem ends with the dramatic inconclusiveness of a situation made desperately enigmatic. Fleeing the verbal impotence of her husband, Amy is very likely leaving home to join "someone" that might, after all, turn out to be just as incapable of linguistic efficiency. Understandably, the piece heavily relies on interrupted dialogue, on few stage direction-like narrative interventions, and, above all, on silence – whether through dashes or through topographical spaces between unevenly lengthy speeches. All these aspects create a fresh narrative identity and mildly bring this piece closer to modernist poetics.

3. Language and the Poetics of Mild Transformation in "Home Burial"

In his *The Living Moment*, Jeffrey Hart (2012, 16) contends that "Frost was a concealed modernist" and attempts to unveil modernist aspects marking the poet's verse. For all its pertinence, such a claim fails to do justice to the poet's complex relationship with the modernist movement. In what follows, emphasis will be put on the language of "Home Burial" so as to show how it displays what this article claims to be Frost's malleable ties to both traditionalism and modernism. Accordingly, it will be claimed that Frost's poetics relies on politics of 'detached engagement' (Stamburk 1999, 534) whereby the language of a poem like "Home Burial" would appear modernist enough to the few who, just like Pound, wanted poetry "to make it new"[2] while seeming adequately traditionalist to the conservative reading public for whom Frost devised "old ways to be new" (Baym 1973, 278).

Undeniably, the first decades of the twentieth century saw the slow yet steady move to a fresh poetics, the so-called "new verse" or "free verse" (Silkin 1997, 6). And while "American proponents of free verse emphasized its American roots and often cited Walt Whitman, Edgar Allen Poe, or both as its originators" (Churchill and Jaffee 2012, 310), its opponents denigrated its foreign origins and insisted on its being in continuity with European imagist and decadent movements (ibid). Suspicious of its motives, some "critics [even] saw th[is] self-centered poetry (and the self-gratifying poets) as a threat to the social order, a threat that implied moral corruption and sexual decadence" (Churchill and Jaffee 2012, 312). A heated debate about the future of poetry thus ensued and made it somehow necessary for poets and critics to take sides with one of the two camps.

Here, Robert Frost chose not to follow Pound's "new ways to be new." Fervently denouncing the modernist free verse, he once told his rival poet Sandburg: "I'd as soon play tennis with the net down as write free verse" (qtd.in Hall 1983, 172). Yet, as this article contends, Frost did not utterly swim against the tide; conscious of what Henry Hart (1983, 237) calls "his insecure position in a literary landscape dominated by the high modernists," Frost tactically preferred "the old ways to be new" (Gerber 1966, 80) and made the language of his poetry the very token of gradual change via his 'sound of sense', a 'Frostian' theory which "Home Burial" seems to neatly bring to fruition.

By displaying a hot scene of conjugal dispute in a country home, the poem contributes to the overall effect *North of Boston* creates and pays homage to the rustic people of Derry, New Hampshire (Sanders 2011, 3). The piece equally reads faithful to the late nineteenth century tradition of regional poetry (Hoffman 2001, 5). In fact, employing mundane language, it shows lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter; and while its narrator uses Standard English – the formal language of an educated voice – for the purpose of comment and description, the couple converse in the informal New England *local vernacular*. Remarkably, the linguistic idiom employed in this narrative makes use of various techniques whereby the floor is given to the characters to speak their minds, or so it seems.

As Frost would have it, blank verse is likely to valorize the Yankee dialect discernible from the austere diction of questions like "What is it you see / From up there always—for I want to know'" (L6-7), from the many carry-over lines showing the characters' intense emotion, and from the abundant – and often double – caesura as in the husband's "I will find out now—you must tell me, dear" (L12) and the wife's "Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!" (L46-47). Proud of its impact, Frost maintains,

> [t]here are the very regular preestablished accent and measure of blank verse; and there are the very irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation. I am never more pleased than when I can get these into strained relation. (*Selected Letters* 128)

These aspects make the poem read like a piece of unrhymed metrical verse abiding by traditional standards of prosody, standards that remind of the American fireside tradition (Burns 2002, 217), on the one hand, and of English canonical figures, on the other.

Indeed, the poem sounds musical despite the absence of rhymes. This blank verse quality whereby unhymed lines of iambic pentameter would create their own tune owing to their rhythmic pattern has always been distinctive of great poets like Shakespeare and Wordsworth (Hobsbaum1996, 17). In "Home Burial" Frost endeavors to be a legitimate rival of these, it seems. Certainly, as Kemp (1979, 156) defensibly claims,

> Frost's control of rhythm and sound in these supposedly prosaic lines might have impressed even such consummately musical poet as Edgar Allan Poe ... Frost deserves to be seen not as opponent or apostate to the nineteenth century masters, but as a successor – when he wanted to be – capable of rivaling their achievement.

Understandably, therefore, Kemp praises the poem's music notably heard in "the symmetrical sonorities of line 77 (*roll* and *hole* at the beginning and end of the line, *down* and *mound* in the middle)" (Ibid).

Now, the poem sings various secreted melodies through the traditional auditory effects it employs. Throughout, many words alliterate as in "*H*e" and "*h*er," "*s*aw" and "*s*tairs," "*b*ottom" and "*b*efore," "*s*aw" and "*s*tarting." Additionally, many are repeated – most remarkable among which are "*see*," "*what*," and "*don't*." The outcome is tuneful verse mimicking the music of conversational Yankee dialect, an aspect Gioia (2014, 80) considers a token of Frost's own version of modernism.

Taking into account Klarer's claim (2004, 15) that in the heyday of modernism, "Pound, ... so vocally presented himself as ... innovative ... [for his] Poundian hallmarks ...of unusual vocabulary, complex constructions, heavy use of allusion, integration of foreign languages, and fractured dialogue and setting," it grows explicable that Frost did not find it easy to market his own version of innovative poetics which uses "a more relaxed prosodic structure, not free verse so much as a highly effective and flexible blank verse" (Cooper 2014, 90).

Commenting on Frost's attitude to modernism, Beach (2003, 14) insisted that "Frost's relationship to the modernist movement in American poetry was a rather distant one." Nevertheless, he maintained that

> it was [Robinson's] fellow New Englander Robert Frost who would make the decisive break from the inflated style of Victorian and genteel poetry. Where Robinson's poems remain highly "literary" in their diction and syntax, *Frost adopts the idiosyncratic, colloquial, and locally inflected voice of the New England farmer ... [He] advocated what he called the "sound of sense" ... [which] allowed him to introduce a rural New England dialect that had never been used in poetry before*. (Beach 2003, 13; emphasis added)

Frost used, for that matter, simple language and simple syntax, and avoided literary diction and style. Famous for his abhorrence of the modernist experimentation with language and rhythm, Frost managed to create his own poetics of mild transformation.

Exemplifying the New England poet's "sound of sense," "Home Burial" does, thus, acquaint the reader with Frost's special brand of iambic pentameter adjusted to the tones of the Yankee idiom. With its rural intonation, its sudden pauses highlighted through caesura, and the breathless emotionality of its run-on-lines, the poem gives the reader access to what the poet calls the "vocal imagination" (Frost 1995, 789) communicating, as it were, the sad melody of a marriage failure and depicting the understated tone of austere Yankee idiom. No fun can the conversation of the couple bring; just the tension and grief of a home about to be entombed with the partners' mounting estrangement.

In many other ways "Home Burial" strikes the reader with the passionate immediacy of its language which smoothly integrates modernist techniques of fragmentation, ellipsis, and

juxtaposition (Gioia 2014, 81). Take, for instance, Amy's nervous retort: "Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!/ I must get out of here. I must get air/ I don't know rightly whether any man can" (38-40). Starting with the fragment "Not you!", this reply juxtaposes the contrasting interrogative and exclamative clauses (Oh, where's my hat? I don't need it!), thereby highlighting the female 'hysterical' reaction to the husband's tentatives of expression. The last word ("can") brings to the fore the indeterminacy of the ellipsis and mostly highlights the likely failure of any masculine figure to adequately communicate. Equally salient in this respect are the dashes of the last lines (L116-120) dramatizing the fragmented speeches of both husband and wife whose conflict reaches an irretrievable zenith by the end.

As negatives succeed one another to create what Hammond (1996, 110) describes as a "journey ... of negatives" and Phelan (2004, 627) calls a "wrenching lyric narrative" of high emotional intensity, the piece emerges as remarkably oral, and distinctly modern. Most prominent of these negatives are the famous "don't, don't, don't, don't" which Amy uttered as her husband realised the true source of her grief: "the child's mound." Statements like "I don't know," "I can't say, "I don't like," "I'm not, I'm not," "A man can't speak of his own child that's dead" all bear explicit negation showing the husband's torment and absolute confusion. However, somehow suggesting the grimness and uncertainty of a pessimistic modernist tone, these negatives are still capable of alluding to other alternatives whereby meaning remains postponed and the poet's engagement stays flexible as his poetics heralds a preference for mild transformation.

Conclusion

As has been argued in this article, "Home Burial" transcends the old-fashioned repetition of obsolete patterns and thus provides a sample of Frost's "old ways to be new." This was achieved by displaying the Yankee poet's 'sound of sense', his innovative anti-closure structure, and his novel verse form: the dramatic narrative. However, whether through its use of the iambic pentameter, of traditional structural narrative moments, or of a domestic narrative paradigm, Frost's "Home Burial" appears to have paid tribute to tradition in the heyday of modernism and to have realized the poet's wish to make his passage to a new poetics a distinguished show of mild transformation.

Endnotes

1. In the last years of the twentieth century, the works of some distinguished critics like Randall Jarrell (1999 [1962]), Seamus Heaney (1996), and Joseph Brodsky (1996), among others, emphasized the poem's powerful rendering of the female character's emotional experience. Similarly, famous Frost scholars – including Frank Lentricchia (1975), Richard Poirier (1977), Katherine Kearns (1994), Fagan (2007), and Faggen (1997, 2001, 2008) endeavored to shed light on the work's special character as a wrenching piece of remarkable psychological insights.
2. See Ezra Pound's *Literary Essays* where the doctrine of "Make it New" is preached.

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