

A CRITICAL GLANCE AT "ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT"

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Acquainted with the Night

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain — and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;
And further still at an unearthly height
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

—Robert Frost
1928

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Poetry was once defined by Robert Frost as "what gets lost in translation."¹ This is an apt definition since poetry, with its subtle nuances, its cadences and skillfully constructed, body, is not translatable. This is one reason why critics often differ in their opinions about the "meaning" of given poems. Furthermore, a good poem can lend itself to several equally valid interpretations. This ambiguity is a result of the very nature of the poem and of its medium: words. Words are charged with meanings and connotations, several of which can be acceptable within a specific context.

Frost's poem "Acquainted with the Night" is a case in point. This apparently simple, narrative poem is deeper than it seems upon superficial reading. Charles B. Hands, commenting on Frost's poetry, writes that:

... a closer reading of those poems frequently will reveal layers of meaning which force an entirely different reading of the poems. In short, the poetry of Frost frequently contains what might be called an element of terror.²

Following the same line of thought, Elizabeth Isaacs notes that:

His is a deceptive simplicity, and because of this, his subtle mastery of metaphor may often be missed by the casual reader who takes him for a forthright poet dealing only in statement of fact.³

The reader's problem is one of probing beyond what first meets the eye. Careful scrutiny discloses some divergent, but equally possible, interpretations.

Yvor Winters calls "Acquainted with the Night" one of

¹ John Hall Wheelock, *What is Poetry?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 19.

² Charles B. Hands, "The Hidden Terror of Frost," *English Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 8 (November, 1969), p. 1162.

³ Elizabeth Isaacs, *An Introduction to Robert Frost* (Denver: Allan Swallow, 1962), p. 75.

Frost's best poems.⁴ Laurence Perrine⁵ and Wallace Martin⁶ both agree with Winters that the general mood of the poem is one of melancholy, desolation and isolation. The use of such symbols as "night" and "rain" in the first stanza, easily associated with sadness, distress, cheerlessness, lack of faith and similar negative emotions, establishes the mood from the very beginning. The first statement conveys the impression of hesitation and struggle. This is accomplished through the skillful use of long vowels in the accented beats, and of a trochee followed by an iamb which place the emphasis on "I" and "One." After this vacillation, the line continues to a fast moving iambic ending. "The irregularity and slowed rhythm of the first two feet emphasize the difficulty of the seeker," indicates Isaacs.⁷

The first stanza is formed by three short, simple, end-stopped statements, parallel in syntax. This structure results in a sense of almost hypnotic monotony and matter-of-factness. A melancholic reminiscence is evoked by the verb tense and the images of the rain and darkness.

According to Elizabeth Isaacs, the use of the present-perfect tense suggests "finality of the past as well as potentiality. . . for the future."⁸ Nonetheless, in the book *The System of English Grammar*, Ralph B. Long and Dorothy R. Long state:

...the present-perfect tense most characteristically places predications within periods of time that end at the moments of speaking or writing.⁹

Furthermore, the present-perfect tense is linked to the present and can not be divorced from it. Since the present-perfect indicates an inconclusive period of time, it is often used to imply a lifetime up to the moment of enunciation. Hence, although the "I have" clauses suggest action that occurred in the past, they do not

⁴ Yvor Winters, "Robert Frost: Or, the Spiritual Drifter as Poet," *Robert Frost, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. James M. Cox (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 78.

⁵ Laurence Perrine, "Acquainted with the Night," *The Explicator*, 25 (February, 1967), item 50.

⁶ Wallace Martin, *The Explicator*, 26 (April, 1968), item 64.

⁷ Isaacs, op. cit., p. 106.

⁸ Isaacs, loc. cit.

⁹ Ralph B. Long and Dorothy R. Long, *The System of English Grammar* (Glenview: Scott, Forsman and Company, 1971), p. 234.

exclude the possibility of the action continuing in the present. The speaker may still be "acquainted with the night" and still "walk out in rain — and back"; he may still "look down the saddest city lane," outwalk "the furthest city light," and pass "the watchman on his beat."

The same sense of external desolation reflecting back on the man who notices it can also be detected in other Frost poems, such as "Desert Places," "Come In," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "The Road Not Taken" and "Into My Own." Searching for self in "Into My Own," man goes out alone and embraces doom. Man must encounter evil before he can truly know Truth. As Frost tells us in "A Passing Glimpse," "Heaven gives its glimpse to those/Not in position to look too close."

The use of the word "acquainted" in the first line is interesting. In *The Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language* the verb "to acquaint" is defined as "to make familiar or to inform." As a noun, "acquaintance" is "knowledge of a person acquired through a relationship less intimate than friendship." *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* provides us with similar information. It defines the verb as "to furnish or give personal, experiential knowledge" of something or someone. It is also "to make one know a thing." The noun is entered as "personal knowledge of a person or thing, which results from being acquainted; —implying more than recognition but less than fellowship, friendship, or intimacy." Consequently, the word denotes slight personal involvement, little intimacy or closeness. It is simple familiarity—a detached form of knowledge. Within the context of the poem, it signals a series of detached, objective experiences with the inner darkness. This same sense of impersonal detachment will reappear in the poem, as we shall note further on.

In line two, the feeling of desolation and sadness strikes the reader again. Going out in the rain accentuates the loneliness and melancholy; returning in the rain transmits despair and futility. The depressing situation is unchanging. As the solitary walker focuses on his spiritual anguish, he ignores his physical discomfort.

Likewise, the outwalking of "the furthest city light" in line three heightens the sensation of desolation while placing the poem in an urban setting. The speaker has left behind "the confines of civilization, the last vestiges of urban men and their secure lights."¹⁰ As Joseph H. Friend comments, the community's

¹⁰ Isaacs, loc. cit.

lights are "its defenses against the surrounding darkness."¹¹ Thus the walker finds himself alone and unprotected from the evil dark about him. Yet he finds himself in this situation through his own choice, for walking is a self-motivated, self-initiated action.

Furthermore, this experience of walking out and becoming acquainted with evil and desolation can make the speaker happier as he comes upon some truth, as W.G. O'Donnell believes.¹² "Man longs for reasons, ultimately for a Reason."¹³ Other poems by Frost in which the theme of man's quest appears are "Birches," "Directive," "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" and "For Once, Then, Something."

Still another element implicit in the poem is that of universality. Not only does the poet speak to himself and to us, expressing his personal thoughts and emotions, but his is also the voice of Everyman. The poem "becomes a universal elegy for mankind's aspirations as well as one man's personal lament."¹⁴ Although the poet employs the personal pronoun "I" he reaches a level of universal experience, as O'Donnell perceives.¹⁵ In other words, all men at some time in their lives have been "acquainted with the night." This is what John Hall calls the fourth voice of poetry.¹⁶ It is an impersonal voice speaking through the poet in great moments of "unconscious divination"; it is the voice of an older, wiser Self in which all men are included.

The second stanza shows a change in the poem's structural pattern. Although the fourth line parallels the previous three, being an end-stopped statement rhyming with line two and having syntactical symmetry with the previous stanza, the fifth line of this second stanza breaks away from the pattern. Enjambment contrasts with the end-stopped lines while a new rhyme is introduced at this point. By making the fifth statement twice as long as the previous four, but equally simple in structure, the poet

¹¹ Joseph H. Friend, "Teaching the Grammar of Poetry," *College English*, 27 (February, 1966), p. 364.

¹² W.G. O'Donnell, "Robert Frost and New England: A Revelation," *Robert Frost, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. James M. Cox (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962) p. 53.

¹³ Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), p. 44.

¹⁴ Isaacs, op. cit., p. 106.

¹⁵ O'Donnell, op. cit., p. 56.

¹⁶ Wheelock, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

develops a rising effect. Frost breaks away from the monotony of the "I have" clauses; the reader is hurried on to finish the statement. The hypnotic effect of the previous lines gives way to curiosity as the reader ponders what it is that he is "unwilling to explain."

When we endeavor to clarify the meaning of these lines, we chance upon some interesting points. First, the use of "looked" in the fourth line instead of "walked," "passed," "strolled" or some similar word is suggestive. While these last three words indicate direct involvement, an entering into and passing through a given place or situation, the word "looked" denotes observation, examination, glancing and detached curiosity, *The Heritage Illustrated Dictionary* defines the verb "look" as "to employ one's eyes in seeing", "to turn one's glance or attention", and "to face in a specified direction". Consequently the word implies a willing, conscious act with little emotional involvement. It is the action of a spectator, of one who remains outside and observes. Thus, again, the reader encounters the sense of objective detachment implied in the first lines.

In the fifth line, the walker meets the only solitary figure mentioned in the entire sonnet—a watchman. This lonely figure is the vigilant guardian who spends his nights watching over the sleeping citizens. He is a protective element against the surrounding evils that thrive in the night.

The act of dropping his eyes, "unwilling to explain," indicates the speaker's reluctance or inability to give a clear, precise reason for his nocturnal walk. Furthermore, he moves away, passing the watchman, hence consciously leaving behind the company and protection offered by the watchman. This seems risky and inadvisable. On the contrary, most men have sought protection rather than face the night. They have provided themselves with a watchman; they have provided themselves with artificial light to dispel the outer darkness. Yet man-made light "is not bright enough to keep us unaware of the 'heartless and enormous Outer Black'."¹⁷ Despite man's aversion to the darkness, the lonely walker knowingly and willingly goes out to meet the night, goes to find desolation and evil. This willing confrontation with evil is an example of how,

For Frost, the attempt to see clearly, and from all sides, requires a willingness to confront the frightening and the appalling in even its darkest forms.¹⁸

Continuing to break away from the structure of the first stanza, the third changes the rhyme so that it has no rhyme in common with the first. Beginning at the seventh line, a long-drawn-out statement takes form and continues until the couplet. These is an interruption at line ten, a momentary pause for breath at the semi-colon, before continuing for three more lines. These run-on lines build up a sense of suspense, of hurried excitement, which contrasts sharply with the monotony of the first four lines.

An examination of lines seven to nine yields the same feeling of detachment discovered before. The term "stopped the sound of feet" is most striking. The speaker's action is automatic, impersonal and completely devoid of self-will. The speaker disassociates himself from his own bodily motions. The repeated "st" sound hushes the reader and leaves him waiting in suspense. While lines eight and nine convey a sensation of sinister influences, at the same time they augment the impression of the speaker as spectator. A cry, not from any loved human voice, but from some unknown, unrecognizable, disembodied source, comes to him "over houses from another street." Joseph H. Friend states that "the 'interrupted cry' from a distance conveys unstated messages with many possible meanings to an unintended ear."¹⁹ Such an interrupted cry in the silence of the night must be highly impressive and will naturally draw one's immediate attention. Since the cry comes from a distance, it tends to increase the sense of detachment implicit throughout the sonnet. The solitary hero hears and reacts to the cry but is not involved.

Some contradictory opinions have arisen concerning the third stanza. Gone is all trace of syntactic symmetry with the first stanza. Yet, while lines ten and twelve both rhyme with line eight, line eleven rhymes with the first line of the sonnet. Thus a gradual return to the beginning of the poem has commenced.

Line ten informs us that the distant cry does not call the speaker back or even bid him farewell. The cry is not meant for

¹⁸ Laurence Thompson, *Robert Frost* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 19.

¹⁹ Friend, loc. cit.

¹⁷ Haytt Howe Waggoner, *The Heel of Elohim* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), p. 45.

him; it has nothing to do with him directly. It is not intended as an influence upon him. The sound causes him to stop and listen. Involuntarily and automatically, he takes notice, despite the apparent irrelevance to his life. We can infer that those things around us exert some influence upon us, even when we are not directly involved. Thus a detached encounter with evil and desolation will leave its impression on us.

Through structure and context, the sonnet has been building up to its climax in lines eleven to thirteen. These are the most significant and most powerful lines in the entire poem. They are also the most debatable.

Two contrasting interpretations have been given of the "luminary clock" in line twelve. Laurence Perrine insists that it is a tower clock with a lighted dial.²⁰ As supporting evidence for his viewpoint, Perrine indicates that although time may be calculated from the stars or moon with the aid of an almanac and the necessary skill, the sun is the natural time-keeper. But even the use of the sun is an imprecise method of telling time. Furthermore, the poem's clock "proclaims" the time; that is, speaks it loudly and clearly. Hence, it must follow, claims Perrine, that the reference must be literal. The word "proclaimed," however, is not necessarily, or exclusively, literal. It is defined in *The Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language* as "to make something plain; to indicate unmistakably." Therefore, the proclamation may be a way of indicating clearly that the "time was neither wrong nor right." The possible meanings of this expression will be dealt with shortly.

Another piece of evidence offered by Perrine to substantiate his interpretation lies with the word "one." As a result of the use of this word, he feels it unlikely that the clock is a reference to a star. He argues that it is unnatural to have only one star illuminating the night sky and that its very shape does not resemble a clock. Moreover, the moon can not be intended since, as the critic observes, at most it looks like a clock without hands. Within the context of the poem, this last argument seems unjustifiable. There is no reference to suggestion of the hands of a clock.

Still another "proof" presented by this same critic rests on the adjective "unearthly," used in the description of the clock.

²⁰ Perrine, loc. cit.

According to Perrine, if the clock is a figurative reference to a celestial body, then "unearthly" must be taken literally, and results in awkward redundancy as we don't usually think of the stars or moon as "unearthly." However, if there is a literal clock, then the adjective is figurative. Blocked out by the night, the face of the clock seems divorced from the earth, that is, extraordinarily high. Still, this man-made clock offers no moral guide to man.

The application of "unearthly" to a celestial body within the context of the poem is not redundant. On the contrary, it serves to signal just such an image. Without the word "unearthly," the literal clock would be the only meaning.

Perrine's final argument in favor of the tower clock is based on the general context of the poem. Throughout the poem, allusions to a city setting recur, as in lines three, four and nine. These repeated allusions to a city, says Perrine, "lead toward the clock as an appropriate image."²¹ We can agree on this point only if we decide to read the entire poem literally. Otherwise, the references to a city do not direct us to a literal clock.

Similarly, Elizabeth Isaacs accepts the "luminary clock" as a literal figure. She believes that the clock is an ironic symbol of man's efforts to measure and control the universe. Man-made clocks mark time as either "right or wrong according to [their] own presumptuous mechanical standards."²² The clock, with its artificial light, stands poised against the fathomless darkness. It towers above as a detached, amoral, uncompromising human mechanism. Frustrated in his search, the lonely man

. . . must go back, unsatisfied, to looking. . . at controlled, well-wound, certain understandable symbols which he knows are neither wrong nor right but are only man's compromise with relative truth.²³

Reacting to Laurence Perrine's article, Wallace Martin rejects the literal clock in favor of a figurative one.²⁴ He contends that "luminary" originally referred to a natural, light-giving body such as the sun or moon and that it continues to have an implied

²¹ Perrine, loc. cit.

²² Isaacs, loc. cit.

²³ Isaacs, *ibid.*

²⁴ Martin, loc. cit.

connotative opposition to incandescent light sources. He affirms that the figurative sense of the noun, that of intellectual, moral or spiritual light, serves to reinforce the implied irony.

There seems to be no real substantiation for this assertion. *The Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language* gives the Latin *luminare* as the origin of "luminary" and says it signifies a lamp or a heavenly body. Also, *The American College Dictionary* gives the Late Latin *luminarium*, meaning light. So the word seems to be, in its origin, equally applicable to a lamp, a man-made source of light, and a heavenly body.

Martin also draws our attention to the fact that "time" does not necessarily refer to the time indicated by a man-made clock. Time, he reminds us, is also used to refer to the cyclic time of the heavens. The expression "the time is neither wrong nor right" could, he thinks, be applied to any moment when chronological time is irrelevant to man's spiritual state.

In Yvor Winters's opinion, the clock is a "symbol of the relativism which causes his [Frost's] melancholy."²⁵ In like manner, Laurence Perrine feels that

...the clock against the sky, man-made but at an "unearthly height," strikingly proclaims the absence of authoritative moral direction, human or superhuman, in an indifferent universe.²⁶

In spite of the disagreement of Perrine, Isaacs and Martin on the interpretation of these lines, I believe they are equally right. Their arguments are not mutually exclusive, even when they may appear to be so. This ambiguity is possible because of the two levels at which the poem can be read: the literal and the figurative. Each one has a valid interpretation—granted—with its own shortcomings.

Hence, reading the poem literally, we find a man walking alone at night in a city. From another street, an interrupted cry reaches his ears and causes him to pause. Beyond the point where he has stopped, a clock with a lighted dial strikes the hour from a lofty tower. The man feels immersed in loneliness and sadness. He

²⁵ Winters, loc. cit.

²⁶ Perrine, loc. cit.

is indifferent to the time of night because its passing will not change his mood.

Implicit in the poem is man's familiarity with loneliness and evil. He is a detached observer in an indifferent, evil world where most men strive to protect themselves. The moon indicates that the moment when we become acquainted with evil and desolation it itself amoral.

In my own opinion the moon is definitely implied by the clock at an "unearthly height" because there is only one "luminary clock" mentioned; the word "one" leaps out at us because of the metrical change in the basic iambic pentameter. The moon, far above the earth, is completely disassociated from man and this reiterates the sense of detachment. The moon itself is a symbol used synonymously for a month. It also is associated with lunacy and wandering idely. What is more, the moon is sometimes associated with gazing in an abstracted manner. As Wallace Martin has already pointed out, the symbolism of the moon strengthens the irony of the situation. Man observes distractedly the surrounding evil and desolation; he wanders about without a known purpose. He can expect no moral direction from the superior, incorporeal beings who watch his fated experiences. This same concept is also found in Frost's poem "On Looking Up By Chance at the Constellations," in which man is reminded that nature holds no answers. In "Stars," the universe is pictured as amoral and indifferent to man's plight, while in "Desert Places," nature has "no expression, nothing to express." Yet again in "For Once, Then, Something," nature prevents us from knowing when "Water came to rebuke the too clear water."

Within the context of "Acquainted with the Night," "time" has several possible meanings: First, if we see it as a nonspatial continuum where events occur in apparent irreversible succession from the past to the future, then we might infer that this infinite span of time has no influence upon human behavior or upon human decisions.

In the second place, if we consider "time" as an interval on this continuum, then it appears that this interval within which man becomes acquainted with evil is neither appropriate nor inappropriate. That is, any interval of time will serve as well as any other for such an experience because evil and desolation are continually present in the world.

Finally, if we take time as an appointed or fated moment in which man comes to know evil and desolation, then we arrive at

the conclusion that man is fated to gain such knowledge. Man needs to know evil and desolation if he is to protect himself from them. Closing with the repetition of the first assertion in the poem, the sonnet is neatly framed within its created body. This rhetorical repetition not only offers a sense of finality but also of matter-of-factness. It divorces itself from the on-rushing suspense of the preceding lines and furnishes a quiet, restraining close. It is both a reiteration of the first line and a summary of the poet's theme.

With the final couplet, which breaks away from the interlocking *terza rima* preceding it, the reader is left with a sense of frustration, inquietude and discouragement. Frost offers the reader no light, no revelation other than that we must "save ourselves unaided" as he states in "Storm Fear." This need for self-discovery motivates the speaker's avoidance of all human associations during his quest. He leaves behind the cringing city; he silently passes the watchman, rejecting contact with other human beings.

In his poetry, Frost repeatedly shows the elusiveness of certitude. For example, in "For Once, Then, Something," there is a desire to "go behind" the reality of the natural world, but the attempt is thwarted. "The Bear" humorously disparages human endeavor to attain certitude through science. In "The Secret Sits," Frost summarizes the futility of the quest:

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

Before ending this commentary on the sonnet, another of Perrine's points must be answered: Perrine believes the poem is an account of many walks. This conclusion is based on the contrast between the second line and the other images of the poem. Although it is plausible that each of the incidents narrated in the poem occurs on a different night, nothing in the general context seems to indicate this. Of course, if one reads the poem literally, Perrine's idea is compatible with the tower clock image he proposes, so that the clock is not beyond the "furthest city light" but beyond "the house on another street."²⁷

Finally, an over-all look at this poem leaves us with a sense of

²⁷ Perrine, loc. cit.

great admiration for the poet. Frost has managed to make the implicit explicit: he has given a symmetrical, well-constructed body to the bodiless essence of his thoughts and feelings. Evidence of Frost's ability to make what is profound appear simple can be found in the use of eighty-seven monosyllabic words of a total of one hundred and nine in the sonnet.²⁸ Moreover, the only "literary" words used are "luminary" and "proclaimed," both of which refer to the symbolic clock. Although alliteration is used in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth lines, it is largely unobtrusive. The use of a varied iambic pentameter according to what is said is also skillfully managed. Yvor Winters is right in declaring "Acquainted with the Night" one of Frost's finest poems.

²⁸ Friend, op. cit., p. 365.

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