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"The Wind's Will": Another View of Frost and Longfellow

by JANE DONAHUE EBERWEIN

ON THE twenty-seventh of February, 1907, Pinkerton Academy in Derry, New Hampshire, celebrated a special chapel service to honor the centennial of Longfellow's birth—a day of national commemoration. The moving spirit behind the Pinkerton assembly was the new English teacher, Robert Frost, who composed a poem entitled "The Later Minstrel," saluting Longfellow as "one knocking at your heart / With perfect songs to sing,"¹ and affirming that "never bard on earth / Did wander wide as he / Who sang the long, long thoughts of Youth, / The Secret of the Sea." Frost himself had recently published a few less than perfect poems and had written to friends about his ambition to get some of his larger thoughts into shape, but he was encountering difficulties. Some years later, when he published *A Boy's Will* in England, he went back to Longfellow's "My Lost Youth" for a title reflecting the overall semi-autobiographical design he finally recognized in his early poems.

The title allusion appealed to both English and American audiences with its homage to the most widely popular American poet, and it acknowledged Frost's roots in a New England literary tradition sharply at variance with Ezra Pound's literary circle with which Frost found himself uncomfortably associated. It suggested, too, the poet's ironic awareness of his maturation beyond the adolescent posturings of many of these poems. The gloss he provided for the table of contents underscored the basic lesson of the youth's emergence from pastoral isolation into a somewhat regretful acceptance of adult relatedness to the larger community.

From this perspective, then, the Longfellow allusion in the title may be taken as a nostalgic reflection on "the long, long thoughts" of youth. It also supports the theme of poetic vocation which runs through the book and suggests the creative potential of youthful dreaming.²

1. Lawrance Thompson records the Longfellow service in *Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), p. 328, and reprints "The Later Minstrel" in his notes, p. 563.

2. These associations between "My Lost Youth" and *A Boy's Will* have been investigated by several Frost critics: Donald T. Haynes, "The Narrative Unity of *A Boy's Will*," *PMLA*, LXXXVII (1972), 452-464; Lewis H. Miller, Jr., "Design and Drama in *A Boy's Will*," *Frost: Centennial Essays* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1974), pp. 351-368; and Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years*, ch. 29, pp. 392-415.

Frost's critics have generally focused attention on the nostalgic aspects of Longfellow's refrain, "A boy's will is the wind's will, / And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts,"³ but other implications of the suggestive Lapland song deserve complementary study. The boy and his long thoughts relate to Frost's book in obvious ways; but so, when one thinks of them, do will and wind.

In Longfellow's poem, the wind from the ocean brings exoticism and adventure to the quiet coastal town, awakening the youth to other countries, other styles of life. It brings battle noises and bugle calls, warships and Spanish sailors; it refreshes the spirit with faraway magic and music—including the Scandinavian melody of the famous refrain. For Longfellow, at least in retrospect, the boy's will and the wind's are the same.

Not so for Frost, at the beginning of his volume. For him, wind is a threat and a despoiler. It strips trees, rips into houses, and forces the poet to seal tight his windows. (The plethora of window images in the book provides a clear measure of the youth's need to barricade himself against the wind outside.) It confronts the young lovers with forceful evidence of their vulnerability. The boy and his bride may will a quiet pastoral idyll, but the wind determines otherwise. It makes its strongest impact in a series of storms, marking the progress of the natural year and the process of the boy's maturation.

The first and most humbling is the winter blizzard of "Storm Fear,"⁴ which "works against" the lovers "in the dark," pelting them with snow. Personified as "the beast," it calls them outside to certain destruction. The poet matches his won't power against its will and somehow survives the onslaught, but he has learned how vulnerable his little household can be when matched against the force of nature. Shaken in his arrogance, he acknowledges "my heart owns a doubt / Whether 'tis in us to arise with day / And save ourselves unaided." Immediately following "Storm Fear," however, comes the whimsical "Wind and Window Flower," in which the winter wind figures as the blustering, improbable lover of the windowsill houseplant. She too, however, prefers the security of "firelit looking-glass / And warm stove-window light" (p. 11). She remains housebound while he blows onward, and the romance develops into nothing more than the poet's imaginative attempt to overcome his fear by humanizing and trivializing natural force.

His greater confidence expresses itself in "To the Thawing Wind," an enthusiastic welcome to the spring storm which washes away the winter snow, cleanses the muddy landscape, and turns the poet out of doors. In this case, the wind's will and the boy's will correspond in their urge

3. "My Lost Youth," *The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1886), III, 41-44.

4. "Storm Fear," *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), pp. 9-10. Unless otherwise indicated, further quotations from Frost's poetry refer to this edition and will be annotated in the text.

toward renewal. He prepares for summer recreation, picking rose pogonias in the meadow "Where winds were quite excluded, / And the air was stifling sweet" (p. 13).

The return of fall, however, confronts him again with the challenge of winter and raises the probability of conflict between wind and boy, nature and man. The poet's maturation reflects itself in the calm attitude of "Now Close the Windows," where he seals himself against the wintry sounds outside but still chooses to watch from his window to observe the "wind-stirred" beauty of the landscape (p. 25). When the torrents finally come in "A Line-Storm Song," he invites his bride to "come forth into the storm and rout / And be my love in the rain" (p. 27). No longer competing with the wind, he is happy to join it—leaving the sealed-in security of his farmhouse fortress to start along a muddy road which will leave him, two poems later, back at the edge of town. Like the sea breezes in Portland, Frost's wind finally summons the poet into the wider world of human conflict and achievement.

Will, of course, is as important a concept as wind—more obviously so in Frost's poems than in Longfellow's. There is a real conflict in *A Boy's Will* between the youth's volition and his intellectual and emotional powers. There are also conflicts between his will and the purposes of those who criticize his life and between his willfulness and his bride's. The boy's will needs discipline, if he is to mature.

His willfulness asserts itself in the first poem, "Into My Own," where he expresses a wish for endless isolation from his former friends and a conviction that his pastoral experiment can only confirm his preconceptions: "They would not find me changed from him they knew— / Only more sure of all I thought was true" (p. 5). Experience, however, raises doubts about his assumptions. He learns respect for his lover's sometimes opposing displays of will and acknowledges, teasingly at first, his obligation to submit to others' rights. Whereas he had enjoyed the melancholy pleasures of the Ghost House, with only passing concern for the dead owners buried beneath it, he yields to his bride's whim in "Asking for Roses" by requesting a spirit's permission to gather her wildflowers. Still later he learns, in "A Tuft of Flowers," that even some of the people he has rejected share his appreciative habits of mind. By the end of the book, the youth's initial willfulness has mellowed into an adult self-assurance, no longer threatened by the need to respond to other people.

His will gradually establishes a more natural balance with his other mental faculties: emotion, reflected in his fear of the storm, his pleasure in work, and his troubled love relationships; and intellect, raising doubts about "all he thought he knew." His intellectual development is not caused by logical reflection, however, but by the imaginative reveries Longfellow associated with the coastal wind. Lacking exotic influences from overseas, Frost's young man stimulates his imagination with

visits to the Ghost House and reflections on legendary beings: fairies, elves, Pan, the Demiurge. Where Longfellow had derived lessons of courage from reverberations of "the sea-fight far away" and from images of the bulwarks, fort, and captains' graves, Frost drew on his mother's romantic Scottish traditions for "In Equal Sacrifice" and developed the personal mythology of "The Trial By Existence" with its theory of chosen celestial commitment to the challenges of ordinary human life. His imagination, then, confirmed the wind's unwelcome injunction to purposeful, constructive activity. Although his heart still rebelled, he reluctantly agreed "To yield with a grace to reason, / And bow and accept the end" (p. 30) of his self-imposed exile.

The boy's will and the wind's coincided for Frost when he found a way to respond to the world outside himself through imagination. His maturation resulted from his discovery of a poetic vocation: a purposeful use of his reveries. But the ideal of the poet to which Frost aspired in *A Boy's Will* was a special one—only indirectly anticipating the distinctive voice he would achieve a few years later in *North of Boston*. His poetic model was the later minstrel, the title by which he had saluted Longfellow in his centennial tribute. The minstrel would celebrate great achievements, encourage his auditors to displays of courage. He would bring aesthetic delight to an otherwise grim world. He would continue and communicate the traditions of his people. He would be a singer, gracing his words with a variety of tunes. Longfellow had accomplished these things in American poems recalling "minstrel days of old," and he had even summoned back the old Scandinavian scops in the Lapland refrain of "My Lost Youth." The poems in *A Boy's Will* reflect a sense of the poet as minstrel which Frost may have derived from Longfellow as well as from the Scottish and English poets whose songs had fired his childhood imagination. The ways in which these poems differ from Frost's more characteristic later work demonstrate the effect on him of this minstrel ideal.

Most obviously, the poems in *A Boy's Will* show off the poet's metric dexterity to an extent he would never try to repeat. Like Longfellow's songs, their forms and sounds are intended to give pleasure by showing off the minstrel's skill. Frost even indulged in archaic diction to imitate the sounds of traditional ballads, echoed in "Love and a Question," or romances, as here in "In A Vale":

But all came every night with the mist;
 And often they brought so much to say
 Of things of moment to which, they wist,
 One so lonely was fain to list,
 That the stars were almost faded away (p. 15)

Later, of course, Frost would prefer metrical understatement. He would also repress his early delight in the legendary beings who appear repeatedly in this first book. All three poems from the original edition which

he deleted from later collections reinforce this minstrel idea of poetry. "Asking for Roses" is a lightly melodic bit of whimsy in which two lovers pay ritual tribute in archaic language to the spirit lingering around a deserted house. "Spoils of the Dead" tells of fairies discovering and playing with a man's decaying body. "In Equal Sacrifice" relates the desperate heroism of the Douglas, who battles the Moor on his way to the Holy Land—losing his life in the struggle and even sacrificing the gold-encased heart of Robert the Bruce:

The heart he wore in a golden chain
He swung and flung forth into the plain,
And followed it crying "Heart or death!"
And fighting over it perished fain.⁵

Even the gloss to the original table of contents reflects the poet's chivalric mood with entries such as "The youth is persuaded that he will be rather more than less himself for having forsworn the world" and with its acceptance of the need for ritual as an early step toward maturation. The original book, then, reflected a sense of poetry more like Longfellow's than later editions suggest.

Frost's titular allusion, therefore, accomplishes more than setting a nostalgic tone or introducing a theme of maturation. It clarifies central issues in the youth's struggle for an integrated personality, it adds an element of plot to the narration by introducing a conflict between the boy's will and the wind's, and it suggests a distinctive sense of poetic values. Like Longfellow's old Lapland melody, and unlike most of Frost's more famous poems, the songs of *A Boy's Will* may be variously described as "wayward," "mournful," "sweet," "fitful," "fatal," and "strange and beautiful." For Frost, however, the poetic manner of this book represents "longings wild and vain" as much as "prophecies." He would grow beyond the minstrel ideal of poetry, returning, like Longfellow to Portland, only for occasional sentimental refreshment.

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5. "Asking for Roses," *A Boy's Will* (New York: Henry Holt, 1915), pp. 27-28. "Spoils of the Dead" and "In Equal Sacrifice" also appear in this book, the first American edition.