THE MEANING OF BEING A SWINGER OF BIRCHES

Sema Zafer SÜMER *

Robert Lee Frost voiced the twentieth-century conflict between reason and unreason, doubt and faith. He could doubt without denying; believe without affirming; see the bad without wishing sentimentally to make it better. Frost's poetry is modern in its complexity of thought and in its awareness of the confusion of belief and the fragmentization of earlier human values. Life, as Frost saw it, is full of apparent paradoxes. It is tragic and hilariously comic, beautiful and ugly, chaotic and unified. Like most modern poets, Frost leaves much unsaid. His apparently simple poems often turn out to be rich in hidden meanings. In his poems every word carries a particular weight of meaning. For example; in his poem, **Birches**, the weighty description of the ice-storm which requires twenty lines are vital to an understanding of the speaker's desire to be a swinger of birches.

Birches has been one of Frost's best known and most widely valued poems from the time of its first publication in the **Atlantic Monthly** in August 1915 and its reprinting in William Stanley Braithwaite's **Anthology of Magazine Verse for 1915**. **Birches** is a dramatic lyric in which the inner-most feelings of the persona are given. It is also a poem of experience in which the innocent and emotional persona or mask grows up and becomes an experienced and rational being by going through conflicts.

Robert Lee Frost begins his poem with a description of nature in concrete terms:

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* S.Ü. Fen- Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü Araştırma Görevlisi

When I see birches to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
As ice storms do ....." [1]

We see that the persona is in the forest, an enigma of life. Although it is really difficult to bend the branches of birches down, they are very close to the ground and in a way the poet makes us think or be a questor of a truth and urges us to ask a question: Who might have bent them down? He wishes a boy, a swinger of a birches, to bend them down, but then he understands the impossibility of that as he is naive boy, an ignorant and inexperienced one. It is impossible for him to tame nature. Only the ice storms are strong enough to subdue them.

Harold Bloom, a professor of the humanities, in **Modern Critical Views on Robert Frost**, comments on the first part of the poem:

> *Birches* ***begins by evoking its core image against the background of a darkly wooded landscape. The pliable, malleable quality of the birch tree captures the poet's attention and kicks off his mediation. Perhaps young boys don't bend birches down to stay, but swing them they do and thus bend them momentarily. Those "straighter, darker trees" stand ominously free from human manipulation, menacing in their irresponsiveness to acts of the will. The malleability of the birches is not total, however, and the poet is forced to admit this fact into the presence of his desire, like it or not. The ultimate shape of mature birch trees is the work of objective natural force, not human activity. Yet after conceding the boundaries of imagination's subjective world, the poet sees not to have constricted himself but to have been released.*** [2]

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[1] S.Whicher and L. Ahnebrink, **Twelve American Poets**, p.92

[2] Harold Bloom, **Modern Critical Views on Robert Frost**, pp.29-30

Not only Bloom but also another literary critic, Elaine Barry stresses the lines which are largely devoted to a description of the effect ice-storms have on birches:

> ***The starting point of this poem is the image of birch trees that are bending back toward the ground instead of continuing to grow upward. They are a common sight in New England, and Frost used them as a focus for ideas about emotional and intellectual ambivalence. After the introduction of the observed fact and a tentative statement of the speaker's fancy about the phenomenon, "Truth" breaks in "with all her matter of fact". The lines deals with the factual reason for the trees being bent. It is the winter ice storms that do it; the weight of the ice drags them down and "once they are bowed", they never right themselves." So much for scientific "truth".***[3]

As Barry mentions, in the following lines of the poem, Robert Lee Frost goes on telling us this natural process, how nature tames nature and how ice-storms bend birch branches to stay:

Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystall shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust-
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break, though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:

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[3] Elaine Barry, **Robert Frost**, pp.112-113

You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands an knees that throw their hair.[4]

As said earlier, Robert Lee Frost emphasizes the struggle between nature and nature. First it rains, then it freezes. The frozen ice is a load which creates weight and this weight bends the branches. As the wind blows these branches burdened with ice click upon each other. They turn many-colored as this movement causes their glossy surface to crack and break. The ice coatings are like crystall shells and as the sun's warmth softens them, they shatter. This sight would make one think that the inner dome of heaven had fallen. The branches heavy with ice are dragged to the ground, but they do not break. Yet inevitably nature has defeated nature because once they are bent so low for long they do not right themselves. The trunks are shaped like an arch and the leaves trail the ground even when it is not winter. They look like girls on hands and knees who have tossed their hair before them to dry it in the sun. So, this natural process illustrates the conflict of nature against nature and that a boy cannot defeat nature. Only nature can conquer nature.

Maria L.D' Avanzo, in his book **Robert Frost and The Romantics**, by comparing **Birches** with Shelley's **Adonais**, tries to explain Frost's ideas on imagination, contrarieties of spirit and matter and of thought and action, and the reconciliation involved in a fulfilled life:

> ***The white birches stand in contrast to dark woods. They describe arcs "left and right"/ Across the lines of straighter, darker trees. Nature's only heaven-pointing tree is bowed to earth in ice storms. These opposities of white and dark, arc and line, heaven and earth bespeak dualism. Frost early establishes the trees as mediators. His description is precise, brilliant.***[5]

According to D' Avanzo the key words in **Birches**- "many colored", "shattering", "dome of heaven"- point to Shelly's celebrated stanza in **Adonais** on Platonic dualism:

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[4] S. Whicher and L. Ahnebrink, **Twelve American Poets**, p.92

[5] Mario L. D' Avanzo, **Robert Frost and The Romantics**, pp.85-86.

"The One remains, the many change and pass;

Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;

Life, like a dome of many colored glass,

Stains the white radiance of Eternity,

Until Death tramples it to fragments".[6]

As he remarks that Shelley's contrarieties of mutable and immutable words, expressed in the imagery of light and dark, whiteness and coloration, eternal radiance and fragmentation, inform **Birches**. D' Avanzo, by foregrounding the similar aspects of the poems, remarks that:

> ***As the white avenue toward heaven, the birch parallels the "white radiance of Eternity!" Subtly associated with the realms of spirit and matter, it is both a member of the darker trees of earth and distinguished from them by its axial whiteness. Dragged to earth, their arcs of many colored glass confirm Shelly's image of earthly existence being a prismatic stain of eternity's white light. As they spring back heavenward after a storm, their crystall shells fragment and their natural and symbolic whiteness reappears. Like the birch, man must bow to storms; yet he aspires to the white radiance of eternity. These dualities, suggested in the weighty description of the ice-storm, are vital to an understanding of the speaker's desire to be a swinger of birches.***[7]

So, the "truth" as D' Avanzo emphasizes, is that ice storms, rather than boys, bend birches, and that the dualities of ice-storm and the sun's radiance are the matter- of- fact conditions of life.

In the next part of the poem, after the description of nature and its depiction against itself, man is depicted against nature:

Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.

But I was going to say when Truth broke in

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[6] Ibid; p.86

[7] Ibid, p.86

With all her matter –of- fact about the ice-storm
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows-
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.
One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground.....[8]

In this part, the ice storms become representative of the boy's instinctive life, his subconscious, his passions, and nature or dark forces within. Frost says that man has his own ice-storms, just like nature. The ice storms taking place in the boy are his inner conflicts, the nature he is struggling with, within himself. Only when he gets initiated, when he becomes mature; he can bend birch branches. To do so he must learn about the mysterious of his own existence, he must know his passions and control them. When he knows his biological truths and gains experience he becomes a genuine man. But the boy must do this alone. His mission is to know himself, become aware of his ice-storms and control them. Robert Lee Frost is for the rational man. If he defeats himself, he can defeat nature. Once he is initiated to manhood, he becomes as strong as nature.

Now that the boy has become a man, he can subdue his father's trees. His father's trees are his father's values, values of the past. They also symbolize the system. This system is an organic whole like trees.

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[8] S. Whicher and L. Ahnebrink, **Twelve American Poets**, p.92

Hence, the branches are symbolic of the institutions of the system of the past. After initiation; after being able to control the passions with reason, the boy can bend the branches down do stay. Thematically, he can reinterpret the past values in terms of present in the light of experience and contemporary consciousness. But he should be careful in this process. He should bend each of the branches, he should reinterpret each institution of the past. Otherwise, culture might suffer from disintegration. This is the deconstruction and reconstruction process in the poem and in the culture.

According to Reginald L. Cook, swinging on birches suggests control, skill, balance, reconciliation and a sure denovement. The play is similar to Frost's description of poetry making:

> ***No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denovement. It has an outcome.***[9]

As indicated above the act of writing poetry, like the swinging of birches is an arc of motion, ascent, and denovement. It is "play" as R.L. Frost said.

Priscilla M. Paton, in her article called **The Fact is the Sweetest Dream**, gives her own opinion about these lines of **Birches** by saying that:

> ***Why is the game of this solitary boy so appealing and poignant? He never express his feeling, whether of joy, accomplishment, or adventure. His game which leaves the birches limp, places him in no idyilic, pantheistic relation with nature, yet it redeems itself in part. The meaning of his actions is not explicit. As Frost once said in poetry "We like to talk in parables and in hints and in indirections" (Education by Poetry, p.332). Here the hints and indirections tease us to make more of the parable. At the same time, something holds us back, an adherence to fact,***

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[9] Reginald L. Cook, **The Dimensions of Robert Frost**, p.88

perhaps, to orchises or apples or birches. The tease lies in account of the boy's thoroughness and intentness in his sport. An air of dedication, purpose, and fullfillment hovers about "one by one", "over and over again", "not one ... not one". The boy has power; he subdues and conquers. He understands perfectly how to maneuver the trees and fly from branches to ground. The predicates which convey this could preface some finality. "He learned all there was" and "he always kept his poise", themselves poised at the ends of lines, evoke the mastery and freedom of one who knows "all there is" about life. But the boy's wisdom, after its fling into the air, lands on something specific: "He learned all there was/ To learn about not launching out too soon", "He always kept his poise/ To the top branches", His knowledge is valid in that context, as truth in *Mowing* ***is valid in terms of the sun's heat and the silence:***[10]

Briefly, what Paton wants to emphasize is that the swinger of birches, boy or poet, must know his own powers and know the strength of the trees and the strength of metaphor.

In the following lines, Frost goes on to tell us how one should bend the birch branches and gives the methodology of how to swing:

..... He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.[11]

According to R.L. Frost the boy should not throw himself into the sky to soon, before becoming a real man. He should not rush or he will uproot the tree, thus culture. He will destroy it if he is not careful. So, he

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[10] E.H. Cady and L.J. Budd, On Frost, p.130

[11] S. Whicher and L. Ahnebrink, **Twelve American Poets**, p,93

must maintain balance, he must control his passions with reason. This is a painstaking process because the balance is delicate, just like filling a cup to the brim. He should throw himself up and then come back down. Then sky is the ideal and the ground is the real. So, he has to connect the real with the ideal by being not far fetched. To deconstruct and reconstruct he has to be rational. He has to know and be able to handle the real and the ideal.

So, as Elaine Barry says the swinging of birches has become for him more than a childhood game. It is a metaphor for the ideal human attitude, finely balanced between a pragmatic acceptance of life as it is on earth and a sense of dissatisfaction with it.

Like Elaine Barry, in his article, **"Frost's Figures of Upright Posture"**, John F. Sears also indicates strongly that:

> *Birches* ***is Frost's answer to Shelly's*** *Skylark,* ***and his rejection of Platonism. While Shelly's skylark is a symbol listened to and contemplated, of a changeless and painless world beyond this world of suffering, Frost's boy climbing a birch tree is a figure of love, commitment, striving and action in the "pathless wood" of this world. Frost's swinger of birches is not "an unbodied joy" who "springest from the earth, nor is his art "unpremediated". The beauty of his action in his mastery of his body and, like Baptiste, is his knowledge of his material, his adaptation to nature's form and movement. The trees in*** *Birches* ***are associated with the growing competence of a boy "too far from town to learn baseball.". His skill proves his worth and he makes, like Baptiste and the woodsplitter, a figure of alertness and action. In the boy's case, however, the fallen state of the world is not merely a condition that surrounds him, it is inevitably contained in his act. The tree will bend, and he will return to the ground. The poet himself would like to be the boy sometimes and "climb blank branches up a snow- white trunk/ Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more/ But dipped its top and set me down again.***

The birch tree is an inadequate vehicle of transcendence, but that is the way Frost wants it.[12]

As the poem proceeds, life is displayed as an enigma and pathless wood:

So was I once myself a swinger of birches
And so I dream of going back to be
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open (13)

As wee see, the persona was once a swinger of birches and he dreams of going back to be. It is when he finds himself amidst chaos, in the pathless wood and see that the values of life have become fossilized that he would like to leave for a while. According to Robert L. Frost an individual is responsible for his choice and he acknowledges the need for relief by a withdrawal toward heaven.

Frank Lentricchia in his article, **The Redemptive Imagination** discusses that:

One figure seems to imply another – the image of the farm youth swinging up, out, and down to earth again recalls the boyhood of the poet. For anyone but Frost the "pathless wood" is trite. But for him it carries a complex of meaning fashioned elsewhere. The upward swinging of the boy becomes on emblem for imagination's swing away from the tangled, dark wood; a swing away from the "straighter, darker trees"; a swing into the absolute freedom of isolation, the severing of all "considerations". This is the transcendental phase of redemptive consciousness, a game that one plays alone. The downward movement of redemptive imagination to earth, contrarily, is

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[12] Earl J. Wilcox, Robert Frost: **The Man and the Poet**, p.47

a movement into community, engagement, love –the games that two play together.[13]

According to Priscilla M. Paton unlike the boy among the birches the poet is subdued by a "pathless wood". The form of his dream of release corresponds to the boy's physical action; getting away from earth to begin "over an over again":

I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over
May no fate will fully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb blank branches up a snow- white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.[14]

In the closing lines of the poem, **Birches**, the persona wants to get out of the linguistic and cultural structure in order to go to differance, and tries to see the structure which he has to change from a broaden scope to reconstruct the cultural values. He prays to God, and wishes God not to take the half of what he has given and he prays to God to come back to the earth too. He never quits, he never stops being a swinger of birches. This is heroic and it requires endurance and patience. He does not want to be snatched away never to return, for he knows that the earth is the right place for love. There is love in the real but not the ideal. He then expresses an American quality by saying that he wants to climb to the top. With this he means that one should be satisfied with nothing but the best.

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[13] Harold Bloom, **Modern Critical Views on Robert Frost**, pp.32-33

[14] S.Whicher and L.Ahnebrink, **Twelve American Poets**, p.93

Frost ends his poem with a line that emphasizes the importance of modisty. One could do worse than be a swinger of birches he says. It is certain that being a swinger of birches is heroic, but one must be humble. Humility is the highest virtue, love comes after it. With these lines Robert Lee Frost gives us an inspiring philosophy of life. He gives us an explanation of how and when we can make the past flow into a creative future.

While Elaine Barry is commenting on the poem's closing lines, she stresses the significance of the coming back:

> ***The climbing is partly a restorative escape (he only longs for it when he is "weary of considerations" and when life is too much like a pathless wood) and partly spiritual aspiration (a climbing "toward heaven") The two are not necessarily contradictory. Melville's Ishmael took to the sea with the same ambiguity of motive. But the important thing is the coming back. Frost's pragmatism is reflected in the gentle spoofing of all those classical myths, such as that of Tithonus, in which the gods perversely play havoc with man's aspirations. The speaker here prudently wants to have a bet both ways: "Many no fate willfully misunderstand me/And haf grant what I wish and snatch me away/Not to return." And his reasoning is equally pragmatic: "Earth's the right place for love:/ I don't know where it's likely to go better.***[15]

For Barry, these lines of **Birches** is a delightfully colloquial echo of Andrew Marvell's warning about the limitations of nonearthly existence:

> *The grave's a fine and private place*
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> *But none, I think, do there embrace.*[16]

After referring to the lines of Marvell's poem, she goes on explaining the meaning of being a swinger of birches an gives the details of R. Frost's looking at things :

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[15] Elaine Barry, **Robert Frost**, p.114

[16] Ibid, p.114

> ***The swinger of birches- as embodying a philosophical or ethical attitude- has had his critics. In an array of mixed metaphors, his conscious balance between "earth" and "heaven" has been seen as fencesitting, drifting, or having his cake and eating it too. The implication in such criticism is that a choice of one or the other, whatever inadequacies it might open up in terms of practical living, is a prerequisite for any claim to intellectual fiber. Yet Frost saw both art and life as a "bursting unity of opposites", and his insistence on holding contradictions in a deliberate tension, was a consciously adopted intellectual attitude, not an emotional slipperiness... The swinger of birches thus embodies one of Frost's major themes. He represents a mode of consciously balancing the disparate forces of affirmation and negation that were captured as independent moods in many of the lyrics. Yet the balance, for him, is essentially an emotional one. The voice of the poem endorses this as the primary emphasis. Indeed, the casual throwaway quality of the last line ("One could do worse than be a swinger of birches") deliberately disclaims any intellectual pretension in his final attitude. It remains on the level of statement- whimsical, unexplored.***[17]

We see that, at the end of the **Birches**, a precious balance has been restored between the claims of a redeeming imagination in its extreme, transcendent form, and the claims of common sense reality.

Not only Barry but also George F. Bagby in his book, **Frost and the Book of Nature** puts extra emphasis on the closing lines of the poem, **Birches**:

> ***The famous closing lines of the poem clearly move toward a reconciliation of human aspiration and earthly reality. The poet hopes that "no fate" will "willfully misunderstand" him "And half grant what I wish and snatch me away/ Not to return. Earth's the right place for love." ..... The proper role of the mind or spirit is seen here, not as a conquest of the natural, not as a transcending of***

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[17] Ibid, p.116

> ***earth or a "steering straight off after something into space," but as an integral part of a larger process of give and take, "launching out" and return. The mature speaker of*** *Birches,* ***on the other hand, knows how to use natural fact to reach its uppermost limits, to climb "Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more" but then to accept the end of the trip and be returned by the tree in a kind of cooperative effort. The imagination here again asserts its freedom and autonomy by dominating natural fact; but them, refreshed by that flexing of imaginative muscle, it "comes back" to natural fact to "begin over" now willing to accept The different but also "almost incredible freedom." As Frost puts it elsewhere, of being "enslaved to the hard facts of experience.***[18]

In conclusion, what is important in **Birches** is not only what the poem sounds like, it is what the poem says and most emphatically it is saying something from the beginning- "When I see birches bend to left and right" to its last line- "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches." So, Frost's points of view gives us the impression of penetration and clarity.

According to Robert L. Frost, a man who knows how to control his passions can reach the ethical level and be successful as a questor of the absolute truth. But he can only do this by loving; without love he cannot get the power to survive. As he stresses that the earth is the suitable place for love and the persona with feeling of humility and the capacity of keeping the distance, can keep the balance and becomes a man of integration.

Frost's viewpoint is self restricted. He has not tried to look everywhere at once. He looks into the heart of a memory long enough to see and feel what is to be totally seen and wholly felt. At first sight, **Birches** seems as if it is a subjective poem but then the ripples move out and out until they touch everyman.

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[18] George F. Bagby; **Frost and the Book of Nature**, p.122

So, **Birches** is a fine parable as Frost has ever written. It is a poem of knowing and doing; of experience and education by life and also the co-ordination of the ideal and the actual.

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