

KINDNESS, MEMORY AND THE TRUE MEANING OF HUMAN DWELLING AND BUILDING IN TWO POEMS BY ROBERT FROST

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In one of his last lectures to students Robert Frost argued that poetry was nothing but «dwelling on things»: «Gloating and doting», said Frost, «is the whole business, you know. Dwelling on things! Dwelling on things! «Dwelling on the fact! If it's beautiful statistics— you know, there are some beautiful statistics to gloat on, too. That's what it all is— dwelling on something that vibrates and stays in your mind and keeps coming back, ...» (*Living Voice*, 191) It was not the first time that he defined poetry in such a way. He had referred to his poem «Mowing» using similar terms four years earlier. This early sonnet has often been associated by critics, as the poet himself also did when he acknowledged that it had «something to do with my own philosophy of art», (*LV* 133) with Frost's beliefs on the nature and aims of poetic writing. The emphasis on fact and its seemingly paradoxical reconciliation with dreaming, would fit into his distrust of the role of transcendental experiences. As his writings on the art of poetry clearly show Frost depended on his unconscious faculties, creative imagination, inspiration, reveries, for the composition of his poems. He once explained that poetry differs from philosophy in their shared concern for knowledge in that the first attains it unconsciously. Yet he always opposed, as the trees in his remarkable poem «The Sound of Trees» that may talk of going but never do, their feet safely rooted in the ground, a complete departure from earth to any promising sky. The repeated symbolic movements the speakers of his poems may either think of attempting or actually engage in, are always checked at the start or followed by an equally strong impulse that leads them back to reality, to earth.

His intention is to stay with the things, to dwell on the things as he puts it. But how and to what extent can a poet dwell on this earth? Frost uses in his statement just

quoted two words that should make his meaning clear: gloating and doting. The first one suggests satisfaction and pleasure and the second one love and care. To dwell then would be both to find satisfaction in the objects of reality, to enjoy them, and to feel affection, even passion as doting also implies. This significance of the act of dwelling suits well the epitaph in which Frost defined himself as someone who had had all his lifetime a lover's quarrel with the world. Though a constant and often frustrating conflict because nature objects to being known, it is also a relationship that never lacks loving affection.

Frost emphasizes this enduring and lasting quality of his doting on things in the same quotation. By dwelling the poet keeps in his mind the elements of nature that he loves. An essential feature of his affection is that he never forgets or dismisses them. It is a passion that maintains alive the memory of the things that one once loved. To dwell would therefore mean not only to feel passionate love but to be capable of remembering long that affection. It is to have the capacity for faithful and enduring love, for that vibration and deep emotion that never vanishes, for the things that the poet cares for.

Dwelling is also the subject of two of the essays of Martin Heidegger's book, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. In the first one, «Building Dwelling Thinking», after establishing that no human building is possible unless man learns to dwell on this earth, he reflects on the real and true significance of the second term. Dwelling, he argues, is first of all «a staying with things» that demands from human beings a different attitude in relation to the essential nature of the things around him. In order to be capable of dwelling, they should save and protect those fundamental features that make things what they are instead of wasting and mastering them: «Dwelling is sparing and preserving. To save the earth rather than to exploit it or even wear it out. Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it,...»(150)

Heidegger, in one of his readings of the poetry of Hölderlin, finds this accomplished in poetical works. «Poetically man dwells» the philosopher shares with the poet because as Heidegger explains poetry represents the embodiment of the harmony of man, earth and sky. The poet explores the dimension and space existing between earth and sky and in doing so holds the necessary balance of those three elements. Poetry allows poets to measure the span that separates the sky from the earth yet each of their imaginative flights, as Frost also defended, provokes an equally powerful reactor towards the earth. The object and aim of all poetry, Heidegger remarks, is not to transport man to a transcendental reality but to make him stay with things, to make him capable of dwelling: «Poetry does not fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it and thus bring him into dwelling.» («Poetically Man Dwells», 218)

This measuring activity of poetry that lets man dwell and therefore build or earth is against the frenetic and excessive one that the German philosopher sees in the modern methods of building. Unable to think of the true nature of dwelling that allow him to be at peace with things by preserving their identity and own self, his building:

are the result of a mechanical, blind and careless calculating that causes his restless and unpoetic existence: «Thus», Heidegger says, «it might be that our unpoetic dwelling, its incapacity to take the measure, derives from a curious excess of frantic measuring and calculating.» (228) Only if man abandons his inappropriate and hostile attitude toward the things on earth, will he recover the significance of dwelling. Only then will he be capable of humane dwelling and building. But how is man to know the real nature of dwelling and building? What's more, how is he going to use that knowledge to change his mistaken dwelling and building? Heidegger finds the answers to these questions once more in Hölderlin. Poets, he says, can be at peace with things because they are kind to them:»'As long as Kindness, The Pure, still stays with his heart....,' Hölderlin says in an idiom he liked to use: 'with his heart,' not 'in his heart.' That is, it has come to the dwelling being of man, come as the claim and appeal of the measure to the heart in such a way that the heart turns to give heed to the measure.» (229) As long as he retains things in his memory he will go on measuring the space between the earth and the sky. He will only fail to do it if his kindness abandons their hearts. Dwelling, either poetically or just humanly, is thus tied, as Frost had also put it, to the possibility of doting and remembering long the things that belong to this earth.

These ideas and considerations of both poet and philosopher on the meaning of dwelling and building, are reflected in two poems of Frost in which a natural element, the brook, is the subject that elicits the meditations of the speaker. They are not the only poems of his in which brooks appear. However, they present similarities in manner and content which make them the right choices to show the different ways man may stay with things. Either human beings are capable of never-ending care for things as they are and, as a consequence, there is a chance for peaceful dwelling, or, on the contrary, they neglect the objects of the external world and bring upon themselves pains and sufferings. The distinct existences of these brooks of the two poems show that both possibilities may occur. The poem «Hyla Brook» was included in Frost's third collection of poetry, *Mountain Interval*. It tells of a small brook that disappears every June dried up by the heat of late spring. By that time its bed is already filled with the dead leaves of the nearby trees so that no one passing by would notice that there flowed a stream with «song and speed.» No one but those who, like the speaker of the poem, saw it flashing earlier in the year. He still remembers how it used to run before it went underground to feed the vegetation that grows on what once were its banks. It may not be as powerful and swift as those other brooks usually celebrated in songs but its memory has remained with the speaker:

A brook to none but who remember long.
This as it will be seen is other far
Than with brooks taken elsewhere in song.
We love the things we love for what they are.
(*The Poetry of Robert Frost* 119)

The final line of the poem, one of those sayings that Frost sometimes liked to end his poems with, explains why the speaker recalls this frail and puny brook. Though it is at present nowhere to be seen, his love and affection has kept it in his heart. And he will retain the presence of the brook until it recovers its strength. The brook stays with him when there is no trace of its stream but in the minds of those who are able to «remember long.» In this way, the speaker has proved to have that one thing needful for dwelling. His kindness has preserved and saved from oblivion a thing of this earth and, he has done it without considering any kind of self-interest or personal benefit. His is the pure kindness that allows men to dwell on things.

Few people in the city depicted in the poem «A Brook in the City» in *New Hampshire*, would know what to say if they were asked about the brook that some time ago licked the walls of the old farmhouse. No one seems to recall when and how, as that of «Hyla Brook», it faded. Unless they looked at the old maps of this former rural environment they would tell the speaker of the poem who now seeks its present whereabouts, that no brook ever ran water over there. Fortunately for the brook, his questions are little more than a pretense to remind the population of this urban setting that it still lives and flows. Anyone searching for it should look in the sewers where the constant and unrelenting growth of the city has driven it:

What cinder loads dumped down? The brook was thrown
 deep in a sewer dungeon under stone
 In fetid darkness still to live and run- (231)

This time the brook has not been wiped out by the heat of the sun. Nor has it gone underground to nourish grass and flowers. The development of the city has turned the brook into an useless and paltry thing. Instead of preserving the essential nature of what it is, a brook, modern building has wasted an «immortal thing» as the poem describes it.

It might well be this eternal quality of the brook, as opposed to the mortal character of the human constructions, that gives the speaker the necessary confidence to suggest that it is people's forgetfulness what does not let them live at peace. His words share some of that menacing inflection of the voice that warned the trees of «Spring Pools» against «sweeping away» those pools of melted snow. The difference is that whereas in «Spring Pools» there is only the verbal threat, in «A Brook in the City» the people are already being paid back for what they have done to the brook. As the appropriate revenge for having being forced to grope underground into filthy and dark sewers, it has pushed its way into the unconscious channels of the mind. In a sort of freudean retaliation, the brook haunts them day and night making them feel uneasy and restless:

No one would know except for ancient maps
That such a brook ran water. But I wonder
If from its being kept forever under
The thought may not have risen that so keep
This new-built city from both work and sleep. (231)

«Their Ears are not serenaded with the perpetual murmur of Brooks», as Robert Beverly described in 1705 in his book *The History and Present State of Virginia* (qt. in Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, 83), the encounter of the first colonists with nature. Only the speaker would escape this curse that deters the rest of the population from leading a quiet and serene existence. He seems to be the only one who, as the speaker of «Hyla Brook» is capable of remembering long. He has kept all through this time his recollections of that brook he used to play with:

I ask as one who knew the brook, its strength
And impulse, having dipped a finger length
And made it leap my knuckle, having tossed
A flower to try its current where they crossed. (231)

Whereas the city has not only buried and sunk in oblivion but also deprived the brook of its essential features as such, his memory has dwelt faithfully upon it. His remembrance of that past time when he dipped his finger into its water and his warning against the city comes from someone who loved and keeps on feeling affection for the brook. Unlike the city whose «frantic calculating», as Heidegger puts it, has turned the brook into one of the numberless lines that configure its physiognomy, he has saved the image of the brook as it should look and be. If the kind of building of this modern city proves that its people do not know the real significance of dwelling and, as a consequence, they do not live at rest and peace with things, he possesses the indispensable elements: love and the capacity to retain it. His pure kindness will permit him to dwell with things and therefore to build.

Unkindness was precisely, according to John Ruskin, the origin of the vulgar and clumsy architecture of his time. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, he missed the careful and patient toil of thousands of unknown workers who had put up the old buildings. In those arches, balconies, sculptures and ornaments of churches and palaces that he drew for his book, he perceived the devoted and delightful effort of the anonymous man who had carved the stone. In opposition to this architecture of old in which men put their hearts in what they were doing, modern building is the product of what he calls machine work. It ought to be despised and banished not because the results are coarse or bad, but because they do not tell of the single human heart that made each of its details. They might be

perfect buildings but their cold regularity of lines and uniformity ignore the feeling and love that must always exist when hand and stone touch:»I cannot too often repeat», wrote Ruskin, «it is not coarse cutting, it is not blunt cutting, that is necessarily bad; but it is cold cutting the look of equal trouble everywhere the smooth, diffused tranquility of heartless pains ...» (162). Heidegger, alongside Frost, would have said that the cause of all these problems is that men do not know how to dwell any more. They seem to have forgotten how to stay with things, to be at peace with them, to love and respect the brook and the stone. In this sense, modern building is the highest expression of men's loss of memory and care for things. If architecture, as Ruskin himself observes in the chapter «The Lamp of Memory», is one of «the two strong conquerors of the forgetfulness of men»,(169) it seems that it has resigned from this duty in modern times. Poets, as both Heidegger sees in Hölderlin and Frost shows, through the speakers of his poems, in «Hyla Brook» and «A Brook in the City», continue to deserve that name. They save and preserve the earth and the things on it by means of the lasting love they feel for them. As a consequence, poetry lets men dwell by reminding them of the meaning of dwelling which is nothing but to dote on and stay with things. Building, on the other hand, no longer based on the true nature of dwelling, condemns rather than rescues them from oblivion.

Someone, poets perhaps, should tell the people of the cities, as Italo Calvino wrote in *Las ciudades invisibles*, that the road to their future is paved with remembrances and recollections. Marco Polo realizes when he walks in the cities he arrives in, or just dreams as Kublai Khan, guesses, that the multiple fragments and details that may configurate men's eventual existences are already given from the start. The countless boughs that will shape and sustain their lives grow in the past. It is then their responsibility to protect them so that they never wither. As Calvino puts it, «los futuros no realizados son sólo ramas del pasado: ramas secas.» (42) The speaker of «Hyla Brook», by singing to the brook that once sung for him till snow and rain renew its strength, seems to be aware of this close connection between past and future. His kindness retains the memory of his brook until it washes off the dead leaves that now conceal its dried up bed. The future belongs to those who have learned that dwelling on things is to «remember long.»

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