



Robert Frost

(1875-1963)

Birches (1916)

When I see birches bend 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.
Ice-storms do that. 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 crystal 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:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
But I was going to say when Truth broke in
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. 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.
 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.
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over.
 May no fate willfully 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 know where it's likely to go better.
 I'd like to go by climbing 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.

ANALYSIS

“In this monologue the reader is taken through three imaginative experiences, each one a little further from everyday matters than the one before. In the first twenty lines we see and hear the ice-laden white birches through *the poet's eyes and ears*. Frost chooses his words skillfully to help us experience the scene: the icy branches ‘click upon themselves,’ and turn ‘many-colored / As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel,’ and we hear the sound of ‘crystal shells / Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust.’ He piles image on image, but stops short of too much with a touch of gently humorous exaggeration, ‘You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.’ Then he caps all this richness of observation with one of the most vivid pictures in the poem: the trees are ‘Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair / Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.’

In the second twenty lines, the poet prefers a fanciful reason for the birches bending (a boy swinging them) and we experience a warm human feeling toward the boy. Here we feel through *the poet's heart*. Compared with the first twenty lines, the second twenty present few images, and the description is given directly, without the aid of figures of speech. But the lines toward the end of this passage compare the care required to climb a birch with the care needed to fill a cup to the brim and ‘even above the brim.’ They make clear that Frost has had firsthand experience in climbing birches and that it was fun. Then the poet turns to a different kind of discussion of the swinging of birches.

In the last third of the poem we get thoughtful reflections on swinging birches through *the poet's mind*. The poet dreams of going back to being a swinger of birches when he is ‘weary of considerations.’ Sometimes the world is too much for a person. Possibly one is unhappy or confused or weary of the

struggle and wants 'to get away from earth awhile.' But climbing is only *half* the game of swinging birches; the other half is coming down again. The speaker in the poem wants to get away a little while and then come back and begin over. And there's a further gain beyond temporary escape from earth in climbing birches: one gets a little above the earth and sees it from a greater perspective. But one wants to return, for 'Earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better.' The place to look for satisfactions is right here on earth, not in some ideal world, not in some future heaven.

Then quickly, matter-of-factly, Frost brings us back to earth and concludes the monologue with the homely last line, 'One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.' A poem, as Frost said elsewhere, 'begins in delight and ends in wisdom.' This poem surely does.

James M. Reid
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966)
with Laurence Perrine

"'Toward heaven' but never to, never all the way. Frost fears transcendence. [?] Despite all the apparent moralizing ('earth's the right place for love'), this passage is one of the most skeptical in Frost. He contemplates a moment when the soul may become completely absorbed into a union with the divine. But he is earthbound, limited, afraid. No sooner does he wish to get away from earth than he thinks of 'fate'-- rather than God. And what might be a mystical experience turns into a fear of death, a fear that he would be snatched away 'not to return.' He rejects the unknown, the love of God, because he cannot know it, and he clings to the finite: 'Earth's the right place for love'."

Floyd C. Watkins
"Going and Coming Back: Robert Frost's Religious Poetry"
South Atlantic Quarterly 6 (Autumn 1974)

"Frost begins to probe the power of his redemptive imagination as it moves from its playful phase toward the brink of dangerous transcendence. The movement into transcendence is a movement into a realm of radical imaginative freedom where (because redemption has succeeded too well) all possibilities of engagement with the common realities of experience are dissolved. In its moderation, a redemptive consciousness motivates union between selves as we have seen in 'The Generations of Men,' or in any number of Frost's love poems. But in its extreme forms, redemptive consciousness can become self-defeating as it presses the imaginative man into deepest isolation.

'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 meditation. Perhaps young boys don't bend birches down to stay, but swing them they do and thus bend them momentarily. Those 'straighter, darker trees,' like the trees of 'Into My Own' that 'scarcely show the breeze,' 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 seems not to have constricted himself but to have been released....

Fascinated as he is by the show of loveliness before him, and admiring as he is of Nature as it performs the potter's art, cracking and crazing the enamel of ice coating on the birch trees, it is not finally the thing itself (the ice-coated trees) that interests the poet but the strange association he is tempted to make: 'You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.' Certainly there is no question of belief involved here. The linkage of the scientifically discredited medieval sphere with the heaps of cracked ice suggests rather the poet's need to break beyond the rigid standard of empirical truth, that he himself has already allowed into the poem, and faintly suggests as well the kind of apocalyptic destruction that the imagination seeks when unleashed (the idea that the inner dome has been smashed clearly pleases the speaker)....

Manipulating the simile, the overt figure of comparison, is a dangerous ploy for the poet, implying often that he does not have the courage of his vision and does not believe that his mode of language can generate a distinctive perspective on experience. For Frost, however, and for any poet who is rooted in what I call

the aesthetics of the fiction, the simile is the perfect figure of comparison, subtler even than metaphor. Its overtness becomes its virtue: in its insistence on the disparateness of the things compared (as well as their likeness) it can sustain a divided vision; can at once transmute the birches--for a brief moment Nature stands humanized and the poet has transcended the scientific universe--and, at the same time, can allow the fictive world to be penetrated by the impurities of experience that resist the transmutative process of imagination. It is at such moments as this in Frost's work that the strategies and motives of a poetry of play are revealed.

There is never any intention of competing with science, and therefore, there is no problem at all (as we generally sense with many modern poets and critics) of claiming a special cognitive value for poetry. In his playful and redemptive mode, Frost's motive for poetry is not cognitive but psychological in the sense that he is willfully seeking to bathe his consciousness and, if the reader consents, his reader's as well, in a free-floating, epistemologically unsanctioned vision of the world which, even as it is undermined by the very language in which it is anchored, brings a satisfaction of relief when contemplated. It may be argued that the satisfaction is greatest when it is autonomous: the more firmly the poet insists upon the severance of his vision from the order of things as they are and the more clearly that he makes no claim for knowledge, the emotive power of the poem may emerge uncontaminated by the morass of philosophical problems that are bound to dog him should he make claims for knowledge. Both poet and reader may submerge themselves without regret (because without epistemological pretension) in aesthetic illusion.

The shrewdness in Frost's strategy now surfaces. While claiming to have paid homage to the rigid standards of empirical truth in his digression on the ice-loaded branches, what he has actually done is to digress into the language of fictions. When he turns to the desired vision of the young boy swinging birches, he is not, as he says, turning from truth to fiction, but from one kind of fiction to another kind of fiction: from the fiction of cosmic change and humanized nature to the fiction of the human will riding roughshod over a pliable external world. And the motives for all of this fooling? I think there are two: one is that Frost intends to fox his naturalistically persuaded readers; a second is that this is what his poem is all about--the thrusting of little fictions within alien, anti-fictive contexts. As he evokes the image of the boy, playing in isolation, too far from the community to engage in a team kind of sport, he evokes, as well, his cherished theme of the imaginative man who, essentially alone in the world, either makes it or doesn't on the strength of his creative resources. And now he indulges to the full the desired vision that he could not allow himself in the poem's opening lines... 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 an 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 a movement into community, engagement, love--the games that two play together....

One really has no choice but to be a swinger of birches. In the moment when, catapulting upward, the poet is half-granted his wish, when transcendence is about to be complete and the self, in its disdain for earth, has lofted itself into absolute autonomy, nothing having any claim upon it, and no return possible, then, at that moment,, the blessed pull of the earth is felt again, and the apocalypse desired by a transcending imagination, which seemed so imminent, is repressed. At the end of '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. To put it in another way, the psychic needs of change--supplied best by redemptive imagination--are balanced by the equally deep psychic need--supplied by skeptical ironic awareness--for the therapy of dull realities and everyday considerations."

Frank Lentricchia
Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self
(Duke 1975)

"The philosophy articulated in 'Birches' poses no threat to popular values or beliefs, and it is so appealingly affirmative that many readers have treasured the poem as a masterpiece. Among Frost's most

celebrated works, perhaps only 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' ranks ahead of it. Yet to critics like Brooks and Squires, the persona's philosophical stance in 'Birches' is a serious weakness.... The didactic and philosophical element that some critics have attacked strikes others as the very core of Frost's virtue.... Perhaps impartial observers can accept the notion that 'Birches' is neither as bad as its harshest opponents suggest nor as good as its most adoring advocates claim.

'Birches'...contains three fairly lengthy descriptions that do not involve unusual perspectives. In fact, the most original and distinctive vision in the poem--the passage treating the ice on the trees (ll. 5-14)--is undercut both by the self-consciousness of its final line ('You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen') and by the two much more conventionally perceived environments that follow it: the rural boyhood of the swinger of birches (ll. 23-40) and the 'pathless wood,' which represents life's 'considerations' (ll. 44-47). As a result, the poem's ardent concluding lines--its closing pronouncements on life, death, and human aspiration--do not arise from a particular experience. Instead, they are presented as doctrines that we must accept or reject on the basis of our credence in the speaker as a wise countryman whose familiarity with birch trees, ice storms, and pathless woods gives him authority as a philosopher.

Since in 'Birches' the natural object--tree, ice crystal, pathless wood, etc.--functions as proof of the speaker's rusticity, Frost has no need for extraordinary perspectives, and therefore the poem does little to convince us that an 'experience,' to use [Robert] Langbaum's wording, 'is really taking place, that the object is seen and not merely remembered from a public or abstract view of it.' This is not to deny that the poem contains some brilliant descriptive passages (especially memorable are the clicking, cracking, shattering ice crystals in lines 7-11 and the boy's painstaking climb and sudden, exhilarating descent in lines 35-40), and without doubt, the closing lines offer an engaging exegesis of swinging birches as a way of life. But though we learn a great deal about this speaker's beliefs and preferences, we find at last that he has not revealed himself as profoundly as does the speaker in 'After Apple-Picking.'

It is remarkable that the verb 'to like,' which does not appear in Frost's non-dramatic poetry prior to 'Birches,' is used three times in this poem: 'I like to think' (l. 3); 'I'd like to get away' (l. 48); and 'I'd like to go' (l. 54). The speaker also tells us what he would 'prefer' (l. 23), 'dream of' (l. 42), and 'wish' (l. 51). But while his preferences are generally appealing, and while they seem intellectually justified, they are not poetically justified in the sense that Langbaum suggests when he discusses the 'extraordinary perspective' as a 'sign that the experience is really taking place': 'The experience has validity just because it is dramatized as an event which we must accept as having taken place, rather than formulated as an idea with which we must agree or disagree' (p. 43)....

Unlike the meditative lyrics Frost selected for North of Boston... 'Birches' does not present a central dramatized event as a stimulus for the speaker's utterance. Although the conclusion seems sincere, and although Frost created a persuasive metaphorical context for it, the final sentiments do not grow dramatically out of the experiences alluded to. Yes, the speaker has observed ice storms that bend the birches 'down to stay' (l. 4); he has 'learned all there is / To learn' about swinging birches (ll. 32-33); and he has struggled through the 'considerations' of life's 'pathless wood' (ll. 43-44). But the relationship of these experiences to his present utterance--the poem--is left unclear.

We would be more willing to accept what Squires calls a 'contradictory jumble' of images and ideas if we were convinced (as Eliot and Pound often convince us) that the diverse materials had coalesced in the speaker's mind. Frost's confession that the poem was 'two fragments soldered together' is revealing; the overt, affected capriciousness of the transitions between major sections of the poem (ll. 4-5, 21-22, and 41-42) indicates that instead of striving to establish the dynamics of dramatized experience, he felt he could rely on the force of his speaker's personality and rural background....

When Frost presents himself as a farm worker, for instance a mower wielding his scythe or apple picker resting his weary body--the fantasy seems sincere and convincing. When we consider Frost's career and personal history, however, we may wonder about his motives in falsifying the character of his childhood. The resulting images lack originality and inspiration. Surely 'Birches' contains some vivid and forceful passages, but when a line or phrase gives us too strong a sense of the poet's calculated effort to validate his speaker's rusticity, the spell of the poem, its incantatory charm and imaginative vision, is threatened.

Fortunately, in 'Birches' this threat is *hardly noticeable*, certainly not overwhelming or repellent, unless we want it to be." [italics added]

John C. Kemp
Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist
(Princeton 1979)

"In *Robert Frost: A Living Voice*, his account of the poet's talks at the Bread Loaf School of English, Reginald L. Cook quotes Frost's remarks on 'Birches'... 'I never go down the shoreline [from Boston] to New York without watching the birches to see if they live up to what I say about them in the poem.' Invariably the listener laughed, but on the double take he realized that Frost, the careful craftsman, was confirming his assertion that birches bend to left and right by verification. Getting details right was a telling responsibility. His birches, he insisted, were not the white mountain or paper birch of northern New England (*Betula papyrifera*); they were the gray birch (*Betula populifolia*).'

The way in which Robert Frost came to write 'Birches' is described by Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant: 'As for the poet, "who never saw New England as clearly as when he was in Old England," he could not tie down his creative moments. It was about this time, early in 1914, while tramping the muddy yard at the Bungalow [West Midlands], that he suddenly; he says, wrote a new poem, not to be included in North of Boston. This was the now so famous and beloved 'Birches,' with its cold and crystal memories of another kind of wintry world.' As this account suggests, Frost's poem might have reflected pure, almost spontaneous invention, but if so, it was stimulated by memories of boyhood experiences of winter and summer in northern New England and sharpened by the perspective of the poet's self-imposed exile. What I would suggest, however, is that in 'Birches,' even though Frost saw New England most clearly when he was in Old England, he re-viewed his wintry New England scene through Thoreauvian eyes....

The conjunction of Thoreau's celebration of winter birches and his buoyant homily on man's inferiority to Nature may be compared with Frost's similar conjunction of themes in 'Birches.' If man makes Thoreau 'wish for another world' but Nature makes him 'content with this,' to Frost it is when life most resembles Nature—when 'life is too much like a pathless wood'—that the poet would 'like to get away from earth awhile.' Frost would 'climb black branches up a snow-white trunk / Toward heaven,' but he would come back, he quickly decides, for 'Earth's the right place for love.' Thoreau would undoubtedly endorse Frost's aphorism. But their initial agreement would evaporate, I suspect, if each were to explain precisely what he took the statement to mean. While Thoreau would most characteristically focus on love of Nature, Frost would just as readily assert the claim of man's fundamental love for man....

In Frost's poem...[the] first twenty lines are largely devoted to a description of the effect ice-storms have on birches....The details in these lines are precise and deceptively neutral. The entire passage contains nothing to suggest that Nature is superior (or inferior) to man, nor are we to infer that the two are equal. As description these lines exemplify what Frost calls the 'matter-of-fact' of 'Truth.' But Frost does not stop with the conclusion that ice storms, and not swinging boys, are the cause of birches bent 'down to stay.' He approaches, finally the idea that man's acts upon Nature have their own meaning and beauty: approvingly Frost decides that, given a choice, he 'should prefer to have some boy bend' birches. In the midst of swinging, boys are not observers of Nature; they actually collaborate with Nature by taking the 'stiffness' out of birches. Frost would have a bent tree signify that some boy swinging from earth, has gone beyond that 'pathless wood / Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs / Broken across it.' 'Birches' suggests that Nature's beauty is somehow enhanced when man has worked an effect upon Nature.... Frost's poem may stand as a qualified reply to Thoreau's recurrent strain of illimitable Nature worship....

Frost's humanism became a harder, more durable thing in its midwinter setting of ice and snow. As late as August 1919, in a list of poems that his friend John T. Bartlett might like to read, Frost recommended 'Swinging Birches.' In some ways it is unfortunate that Frost stopped calling the poem by this title. I say unfortunate because the activity at the heart of the poem—the activity that generates whatever cohesion the poem has—is the boy's swinging of birches and the poet's ruminations on the possibility that the birches he sees have been bent by boys at play. He would like to think that such is the case. But since liking to think does not make it so, the poet turns to the more likely reason, the permanent bending of birches by ice storms."

George Montiero
Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance
(U Kentucky 1988)

“Although ‘Birches’ describes a boy’s game instead of a chore, it too has fact, dream, and in that intent game a commitment as deep as one of earnest love. Here Frost’s comments on being at home in figurative values are most apt for his actual poetic images: knowing how to ride metaphor is analogous to knowing how to ride birches. The facts about the ice storm in ‘Birches’ grow the more and more figurative as the poet’s imagined preference sounds real and prosaic. In the first lines, the poet associates a real scene with an image in his mind, and he deliberately distinguishes between the two. The casual assumption, ‘you must have seen them,’ makes his statements sound public and verifiable....

What follows is by no means lifeless fact but an enchanting account. Not just some ordinary woods, the enameled trees look as crafted and ornamental as fine glass sculpture, and the fallen ice evokes a mythical catastrophe... Again the poet knows metaphor’s limits and implies that anyone knows them. The offhand ‘You’d think’ shows how common it is to slip into expressions of fancy and fall back on shared myths about the heavens and earth....

‘Truth’ with a capital ‘T’ is abstraction personified, a figurative value. She, a trusted absolute, it seems, and not the poet interrupts with these ‘facts’—‘crystal shells’ and ‘the inner dome of heaven.’ By implication, the poet prefers an untruth which does not deal in facts. His fancy, though, is down to earth. No idle, elfish tale here... This parable is both history and dream... 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 and over again.’

In the last lines, the poet clearly uses the parable for its figurative value, and another of Frost’s comments comes to mind: the aim of metaphor is ‘to restore you to your ideas of free will’ (‘Education by Poetry’). The poet’s imagination, with metaphors which attend to longings and to real events, restores free will without distorting the truth. The trees are not bent by the boy; thinking that he changes the woods is the fiction. However, it seems someone really has climbed the trees and enjoyed a flight from sky to earth. By using metaphors which fuse fact and dream, the poet is no longer beaten back; and he recovers the freedom of the boy who knows all there is to know and who always kept his poise....

In the end, dividing Frost’s poetic images into fact, dream and both is impossible. Frost undermines such divisions in a manner both playful and serious, exploring slippery issues about the natures of perception, interpretation, reality and truth. His poems often illustrate the mind seeking out metaphor and meaning in some rural or domestic scene, testing different possibilities. They also show with varying degrees of irony the mind, language, and familiar, perhaps inherent, myths imposing themselves on a landscape. Or maybe the landscape imposes something on the mind.”

Guy Rotella
“Comparing Conceptions: Frost and Eddington, Heisenberg and Bohr”
On Frost: The Best from American Literature
eds. Edwin H. Cady and Louis J. Budd (Duke 1991)

“The discursive blank-verse meditation ‘Birches’ does not, like ‘The Wood-Pile’ and ‘An Encounter,’ center on a continuously encountered and revealing Nature scene; rather, it builds a mosaic of thoughts from fragments of memory and fantasy. Its vividness and genial, bittersweet speculation help make it one of Frost’s most popular poems, and because its shifts of metaphor and tone invite varying interpretation it has also received much critical discussion, not always admiring. The poem moves back and forth between two visual perspectives: birch trees as bent by boys’ playful swinging and by ice storms, the thematic interweaving being somewhat puzzling. The birches bent ‘across the lines of straighter darker trees’ subtly introduce the theme of imagination and will opposing darker realities. Then, almost a third of the poem describes how ice storms bend these trees permanently, unlike the action of boys; this scene combines images of beauty and of distortion. Ice shells suggest radiating light and color, and the trees bowed to the level of the bracken, suggest suffering, which is immediately lightened by the strange image of girls leaning their hair toward the sun as if in happy submission.

The fallen 'inner dome of heaven' alludes to Shelley's 'dome of many colored glass' (also alluded to in 'The Trial By Existence') to suggest the shattering of the ideal into everyday reality. Frost's speaker then self-consciously breaks from his realistic but metaphorically fantasized digression to say he would prefer to have some boy bend the birches, which action becomes a symbol for controlled experience, as contrasted with the...fatality of ice storms. The boy's fancied playfulness substitutes for unavailable companionship, making for a thoughtful communion with Nature, which rather than teach him wisdom allows him to learn it. Despite the insistence on the difference between ice storms' permanent damage to birches and a boy's temporary effects, the boy subdues and conquers the trees. His swinging is practice for maintaining life's difficult and precarious balances.

The third part of the poem begins with a more personal and philosophical tone. The speaker claims to have been such a youthful swinger of birches, an activity he can go back to only by dreaming. The birch trees, probably both ice-bent and boy-swung, stand for the order and control missing from ordinary experience. The 'considerations' he is weary of are conflicting claims that leave him disoriented and stung. The desire to 'get away from earth,' importantly qualified by 'awhile,' shows a yearning for the ideal or perhaps for the imaginative isolation of the birch swinger. His 'I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree... / Toward heaven' suggests leaving earth, but he reveals by his quick apologetic claim that he doesn't mean that. He wants to be dipped down again toward earth, but the pursuit of the ideal by going sounds like death, as his quick apology acknowledges. Frost does less in this poem than in 'After Apple-Picking' to suggest a renewed pursuit of the ideal in life rather than a yielding to death. His main pursuit is continual balance between reality and ideality."

Mordecai Marcus
The Poems of Robert Frost: an explication
(G.K. Hall 1991)

"The first twenty lines of 'Birches' clearly hint at Promethean tendencies. The poem is set at that time of the natural year which most suggests imaginative stirrings: the springtime moment in the imagination's life when it begins to rouse itself from winter lethargy. Though immobilized by their wintry covering of ice, as the Eolian 'breeze rises' the birches move 'and turn many-colored / As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.' 'Soon,' warmed by the sun, they 'shed crystal shells,' like the human beings of 'Sand Dunes' casting off dead external coverings to take on new shapes and new vitality. The evidences of that spiritual molting, as many have noted, echo the Promethean outreach of Adonis: 'Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away / You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.' And, though the birches are permanently 'bowed' by the ice storm, they remain suggestive of aspiration: 'You may see their trunks arching in the woods / Years afterwards,' still straining toward that inner dome of heaven.

In the poem's central fiction, Frost adroitly converts the birches from emblems of Promethean aspiration to emblems of natural fact conquered by that aspiration. Rather than an ice storm, the poet 'should prefer to have some boy bend' the birches; this fictive explanation represents more clearly the central presence of human activity, and human domination of the natural ('One by one he subdued his father's trees'). The comparison used to describe the care which the boy takes in climbing to the very 'top branches' of the birches—'climbing carefully / With the same pains you use to fill a cup / Up to the brim, and even above the brim'—reminds us that this is not only a poem about trees but a celebration of spiritual thirst.

But, in the last third of the poem, where he explicitly reads in the act of swinging birches a lesson for the governance of one's imaginative life, Frost draws back from the Prometheanism implied earlier in the poem: 'I'd like to get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over.' As that latter line suggests, the visionary assertion of 'Birches' is ultimately less extreme than that of 'Wild Grapes.' As Richard Wilbur notes, the echoes of Shelley in this poem are ultimately used to argue against Shelley's Prometheanism: "'Birches,' taken as a whole, is in fact an answer to Shelley's kind of boundless neo-Platonic aspiration' (113). 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 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 young girl in 'Wild Grapes,' because of her 'not knowing anything' about 'letting go,' about accommodating natural fact, is carried off by the birch in that poem like a fish caught by a fish pole. 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 then, 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' (Letters 179).

Such a return or reconciliation would, for Blake or Shelley, amount to surrender. But Frost, like most other American nature writers, does not posit Blake's or Shelley's kind of inevitable struggle to the death between imaginative perception and natural fact. Like Thoreau (with certain exceptions), like Emerson in his more restrained moods, Frost believes that, in the final analysis, the two forces are capable of cooperating to achieve meaning."

George F. Bagby
Frost and the Book of Nature
(U Tennessee 1993)

"'Birches' connects poetic aspiration and physical love. It begins with a fanciful image ('I like to think') of a boy swinging on and bending birches. It then shifts to a brilliant description of ice-laden branches blown by the wind that 'cracks and crazes [suggesting cracked glazes] their enamel.' Inspired by medieval cosmology and by a famous passage from Shelley's 'Adonis' (an elegy for Keats, about poetic power cut off in mid-career by death), Frost writes of all the broken ice-glass: 'You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.' He then returns to the swinger-of-birches theme as the boy, like the future poet, launches out at the proper time, keeps his poise and climbs carefully. Swinging himself on the branches 'Toward heaven,' he'd 'like to get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over.... / Earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better.' Opposing the Platonic view of idealized love, Frost believes Earth, not Heaven, is the right place because love should be physical and tested against the realities of life."

Jeffrey Meyers
Robert Frost: A Biography
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Michael Hollister (2015)