

Robert Frost

(1875-1963)

Mowing (1913)

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound--
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

ANALYSIS

“A one-sentence interpretation of this poem by its author is, ‘The youth takes up life simply with the small tasks.’ Wrote T. K. Whipple, in *Spokesmen*: ‘Robert Frost’s is preeminently a farmer’s poetry. His familiarity with nature and with objects is not, for all his deservedly famous observation, that of the observer or spectator, but that of the man who has worked with them and used them. His acquaintance with them is more intimate and more intuitive than that of the onlooker. A grindstone to him is not a quaint object with rustic associations, but something which has made him groan and sweat; a scythe does not remind him of Theocritus but of the feel of the instrument as he swung it.’ In ‘Mowing,’ the poet is concerned with suggesting to the reader his ‘intimate and intuitive acquaintance’ with a swinging scythe--his sensing of significance in an ordinary task. The verse form, since it is a sonnet with its own individual rhyme-scheme, and since its iambic rhythms are adjusted to those of a conversational tone, represents the modified Modernism of the author’s versification.”

Walter Blair

The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 917

This poem is a perfect example of agrarian pastoralism, an American tradition that began with *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) by Crèvecoeur and *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1794) by Jefferson, then includes Emerson, Thoreau, Cather, Faulkner and others: (1) the setting is the farm, the “good place”; (2) the farmer is the “good shepherd” who cares for animals (making hay presumably to feed livestock) and the land; (3) he has an “earnest love” of hard farm work, a puritanism integrated with his pastoralism; (4) his work of necessity makes him an objective Realist who must seek the truth and face facts in order to survive, as opposed to a Romantic dreamer; (5) he is not a materialist who values “easy gold”; (6) he has a spiritual relationship to Nature as a source of divine truth; (7) through this relationship he has attained natural harmony, independence, fulfillment, peace and a sweet life.

Typical of Frost, the diction is plain. It is the voice of the common man and the tone is conversational, questioning, searching, humble--moving from honest uncertainty through experience and insight to a lesson or moral. The first lines establish the pastoral setting beside the wood--the quiet and the whispering. The scythe is a traditional emblem of time and death. The farmer participates in a seasonal cycle of planting, cultivating and harvesting. He is part of the natural order, even while he also imposes a human order on the environment: he cuts down flowers out of place in his field and he scares away a snake in the Garden.

The series of four strongly accented syllables in “scared a bright green snake” convey the quick movement of the snake and emphasize it, evoking the myth of the Fall. The bright green of the snake indicates that it is part of Nature and behaving naturally. This farmer is using a tool that makes him seem a timeless representative of the human race living in harmony with Nature while also mastering it. Pointedly, he is using a scythe, a primitive tool that makes little impact on the environment, rather than a machine in the Garden. He is more evolved than Adam, figuratively speaking, in that he is too disciplined, focused on his work and untempted by an Eve to notice the snake, which is no danger and offers him no apple. He scares it away without trying.

His scythe whispers to the ground: “What was it whispered? I knew not well myself.” The poem is about his relationship to the ground of being, or Nature. He asks himself what his mowing, the whispering, means--and ends with an answer. First he speculates that the sound is inducing mere sensations, feelings due to the heat or the quiet. He knows it was no dream of leisure nor “easy gold at the hand of fey or elf.” He dismisses Romance as wishful exaggeration: “Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak.” He begins to feel the truth as he swings in a natural rhythm: “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.” From experience he learns that the best reward for a thing done is having done it, just as Emerson said. The last line of the poem repeats “My long scythe whispered” as if the whispering is a prayer affirming his faith in creative Nature: “and left the hay to make.”

Michael Hollister (2015)