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Wordsworth, Mrs. Morrison, MacLeish and the Meanings of Robert Frost's "A Silken Tent"

The perfect construction of Robert Frost's "A Silken Tent" is, to a great extent, an end in itself, absolute, a purely aesthetic triumph:

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taut
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

And yet this most elegant poem reveals reserves of subtle beauty and layered meaning as one probes beneath its lovely surface. "A Silken Tent" is a love song about a real woman, one who also loved Frost, though not in the way he at first wished. It is also intertextual (if one defines that word less rigorously than the extreme post-structuralists do), full of echoes and emulations of other poems that enrich its significance and hint at the complexity of Frost's feelings and intentions as he wrote it.

Frost always took pride in his metrical skill, and in particular his ability to achieve originality within traditional forms and versification. As he put it in describing Edwin Arlington Robinson (his closest kinsman in this regard among "modern" American poets), Frost always valued and cultivated the "old fashioned way to be new."¹ "A Silken Tent" certainly displays this side of Frost's gift. It is a classic Shakespearian or English sonnet, fourteen lines of flowing, precise

iambic pentameter, with the prescribed (ababdcdefefgg) rhyme pattern. Indeed, its metrical regularity is extreme even by the standards of the sixteenth-century English masters of the form—only the first foot of line 8 is reversed, a *trochee*.

"A Silken Tent" is also a single sentence, built without apparent strain around one simile. The simile, an extended, exquisite comparison of a lovely, poised lady and the dynamically stable, wind-rippled tent of silk, *is* the poem after the introductory "She is as." Sustaining a simile over fourteen lines, 105 words, and in the process gaining, rather than losing grace, naturalness and depth of meaning is a feat worthy of Sidney, Spenser or Shakespeare. We are meant to see and admire it as such. At the same time, the subtle development of the poem's single, concrete, yet fanciful image suggests the ingenuity of Herbert or Donne. Comparing a woman and a tent (even a silken one, a radically unutilitarian tent) is *catagorical*, a violent yoking of opposites, near absurd on first consideration. But it proves remarkably effective as a means of conveying the special balance, the poised doubleness of the lady. The poem is a *tour de force* that one reads with the great sonnets and love lyrics of the sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries very much in mind. It is, thus, in a general sense, intertextual or influenced, aligned with traditional schools of lyric poetry, though not with specific renaissance or metaphysical poems.

"A Silken Tent" is also intertextual in more precise senses. For one thing it was written to flaunt Frost's virtuosity in rivalry with Archibald MacLeish's "You, Andrew Marvell," which is itself a *tour de force* and a fascinating example of intertextuality. "You, Andrew Marvell" is a poem of thirty-six lines in one sentence. In the course of it MacLeish develops at length a conceit of precisely the kind cultivated by John Donne and, of course, Andrew Marvell. The spherically geometrical fact (so central in poems like "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward") that the sun is always setting somewhere is combined with the chilling dread of our continual, high-speed pursuit by time and doom that dominates Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress": "But at my back I always hear/ Time's winged chariot hurrying near." Even sunbathing at high noon we literally and figuratively face darkness, MacLeish stresses in the first of the poem's nine stanzas, the introductory clauses of his ever-elongating sentence:

And here face down beneath the sun
 And here upon earth's noonward height
 To feel the always coming on
 The always rising of the night...

Then in stanza after stanza, clause after clause, he evokes the eternal dusk, the edge of night sweeping over the earth from farthest "curving east," across Asia, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and inevitably our place in the sun:

And here face downward in the sun
To feel how swift how secretly
The shadow of the night comes on...

In 1938 Frost heard MacLeish read "You, Andrew Marvell" and indulged in an embarrassing public display of professional jealousy. In 1939 he published "A Silken Tent" (reprinted in the volume called *A Witness Tree*, which won Frost an unprecedented fourth Pulitzer Prize in 1942); one point of the sonnet was to show that he could out-do MacLeish as a syntactical and metrical magician and as a cultivator of the metaphysical conceit.

Frost succeeded. His extended sentence really works as a sentence, while MacLeish's sometimes seems unified more by lack of punctuational full-stops than an unbroken logical-syntactical chain. There are also a number of false rhymes of the "sun"- "on" variety. The extra disciplines of sonnet form and metrical consistency also make Frost's success far more impressive. It is a case of a great poet stimulated to do his best by the work of a very good one, determined to define the distance between their levels of achievement, between skill and genius. Years later Frost was infuriated by the treatment of his poem as such a virtuoso demonstration, as genius showing off, in Robert Francis' very clever little poem, "Apple Peeler":²

Why the unbroken spiral, Virtuoso,
Like a trick sonnet in one long, versatile sentence?

Is it a pastime merely, this perfection,
For an old man, sharp knife, long night, long winter?

Or do your careful fingers move at the stir
Of unadmitted immemorial magic?

Solitaire. The ticking clock. The apple
Turning as the round earth turns.

Francis neatly captures the competitiveness that impelled Frost, his first two lines focussing on Frost's "A Silken Tent" and his last two recalling "You, Andrew Marvell." "Apple Peeler" is a marvellous example of doubled intertextuality. Frost's resentment was surely in part a response to the accuracy of Francis' implicit rebuke and richly elliptical praise of MacLeish. However, he was probably also bothered by the treatment of his poem as possibly an exercise in sheer technique,

a "trick sonnet." If so, I think Frost misread the subtler suggestions advanced in "Apple Peeler," which ponders "unadmitted immemorial magic" (and not merely MacLeish's) beneath "virtuoso" surface. But Frost's touchiness was perhaps more extreme than usual, for "A Silken Tent" is an expression of strong, very personal feelings, a song from the heart, despite its genesis in public competitiveness and technical display. This brilliant sonnet proved upon initial publication in 1939 that his talent as well as his sanity had survived the considerable trauma of his wife's death on 20 March 1938. It also compliments the woman who helped Frost to survive and achieve poetic rebirth.

Kathleen Morrison, the wife of Theodore Morrison, a professor at Harvard, intervened when the poet became a recluse after Elinor Frost's death. She brought him back into public life, and unwittingly inspired the much older poet to propose during the summer of 1938 that she leave her husband and marry him. Her marriage was strong, and her refusal was absolute, but an agreement was soon reached that she would become his salaried secretary and day-time *factotum*, taking over chores Elinor had performed. Thereafter, she was one of the fixed stars in his life, an essential, platonic help-mate and emotional resource. "A Silken Tent" was originally entitled "In Praise of Her Poise." It is Frost's explicit poetic acknowledgment of his feelings about Kathleen Morrison, to whom he also dedicated *A Witness Tree* ("To K. M. For her part in it"), as he had dedicated earlier volumes to his wife.³

The poem is an elaborate compliment to a lovely woman who managed, as few people had, to limit Frost's demands without alienating him, and who eased the great poet's "lover's quarrel with the world." This poignant phrase is familiar to readers of Frost because it was re-used in 1941 in the last line of the poem, "The Lesson for Today." It was first used, however, in a letter of thanks to Mrs. Morrison at the end of the summer of 1938. The central conceit of "A Silken Tent"—the diaphanous tent, improbable in its silken delicacy and elegance, achieving dynamic stability between earth and heaven, breeze and ropes, around a moving but firm centre, epiphanic yet refusing *apotheosis*—is reminiscent of metaphysical imagery at its best. It also has both Frost's usual realism and a strong touch of fantasy, the doubleness familiar from *After Apple Picking* and so many other poems. A silken tent is a thing of romance. However, the poem shows that Frost had looked steadily, even analytically, at tents of more pragmatic weave on summer days. It also perfectly captures the beauty and "poise" Frost saw in Mrs. Morrison's situation and character. He admired, albeit a bit ruefully, the firmness and tact with which she balanced affections and duties between him and her hus-

band (who was himself a friend and admirer of Frost's), between old and new affections, old and new commitments. Asked to commit herself to Frost, she was checked (assuming, as Frost probably liked to do, that she would have accepted under other circumstances) with equal grace and finality by her uprightness, "the sureness of the soul," and other "ties." With a touch of the wish-fulfillment of the aging and vain, Frost could imply that his attraction had put at least enough strain on her relationship with Theodore Morrison to make her for the first time aware, in the "summer" of her life, that it was a form of "bondage," no matter how "silken" and loving:

... only by one's going slightly taut
 In the capriciousness of summer air
 Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

At this level of meaning, the final subtleties are that Theodore Morrison, a most understanding and secure husband, more or less shared in the compliment to his wife, while any embarrassment Frost felt about his proposal was dissipated in its characterization as a caprice of the "summer air."

The real emphasis, however, is upon the woman. The rare combination of hard-working practicality and idealistic sensibility Kathleen Morrison had in her middle years (when, her children reared, she "adopted" Frost) is nicely suggested by the almost weightless buoyancy of the "midday" tent and its necessary attachment to the earth. As anyone who has camped one night knows a tent not tied down will collapse, cannot stand, no matter how light its fabric. Silk is not air. His image conveys Frost's half-accurate, half-romanticized notion of the accommodation Mrs. Morrison managed between commitments to husband and family, social conventions and duties and his genius and needs. Like the tent, she hangs guiltlessly, pleasurably "at ease" between and because of—not despite—opposing forces. Her uprightness and usefulness are dependent on inherent virtue (the "central cedar pole"), together with not "one cord," but "countless silken ties of love and thought." Frost may have reflected that he was a breeze that had stirred and lifted (literally inspired) her, and that he was one of the cords or "guys" (the author of the first line of "Mending Wall" — obviously, Frost is what "does not like a wall" — was never above a sly pun) that would continue to give her life complex integrity.

Frost's praise of Mrs. Morrison's poise is complicated and enriched by two further forms of intertextuality. One is obvious. He pictures her half-yielding to a strong tendency toward heaven, transcendence, and away from the earth below, perfected as she is checked by "countless silken ties of love and thought," tender bonds to the mundane. This ob-

viously resembles Frost's self-concept in such poems as "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Birches." The writer of "A Silken Tent" had already balanced the draw of "woods. . . lovely, dark and deep" against "promises to keep,/ And miles to go before I sleep." More than twenty years before he wrote "A Silken Tent" for Mrs. Morrison he had characterized himself as a "swinger of birches," a man who would like to

. . . climb black branches up a snowwhite trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
 But dipped its top and set me down again.

Poets praise themselves in praising others, their special egotism valuing self-resemblances, real or imagined. Mrs. Morrison's poise, an intertextual glance reveals, embodies a balance Frost had fought to maintain or dreamed of achieving in his own more thorny and difficult life and character.

I believe there is another, subtler level of specific intertextuality in "A Silken Tent." Perhaps it is what many traditional critics would call "influence." The balancing of heavenly yearning and earthly affection for which Mrs. Morrison is praised recalls an ideal elaborated in many poems by William Wordsworth, especially *The Excursion*. There is no specific evidence that Frost re-read *The Excursion* in 1938-39, but he knew Wordsworth's poetry intimately, had read and taught it many times over many years. He was re-reading a good deal of romantic poetry at the time. He told a friend in September, 1938: "Every little while I have another read at Queen Mab, The Revolt of Islam, Alastor, Prometheus Unbound or Epipsychidion."⁵ The moral and intellectual hero of *The Excursion*, the man called the "Wanderer," perfectly embodies a balanced ideal, heavenward yearning fused or interacting with earthly attachment. This is made explicit in a passage similar enough to "A Silken Tent" to suggest Frost wished—I think consciously—subtly to associate Mrs. Morrison with Wordsworth's sage, and thus to associate himself with another highly-charged figure in Wordsworth's poem, the "Solitary."

Mrs. Morrison healed Frost when he could not accept having lost his wife and had become a rural recluse with little faith in the world or his own creative future. In *The Excursion* the Wanderer strives argumentatively and sympathetically to redeem the Solitary, a recluse among hill shepherds, embittered by his own loss of faith and the death of his wife and children, a man situated very much as Frost may have seen himself to be in 1938. The Wanderer always exemplifies a fusion of spiritual insight and loving, practical commitment to earth and men, bodying forth a self-concept cherished by Wordsworth and

Frost. In a crucial speech near the end of Book IV, at roughly the mid-point of the long, nine-Book poem, he specifically declares that completeness and spiritual and moral health require not only epiphanic intuitions of the divine, but a humbler love for the beauties of the physical world and deep sympathy with other men (IV, 1107-1274). When his speech ends, the third man in the scene, Wordsworth's *persona* (his most obvious self-concept) praises the effects on his own spirit of the Wanderer's eloquence. Then he declares that, having been educated by time and nature, the Wanderer has been perfected by:

... faith become
 A passionate intuition; whence the Soul,
 Though bound to earth by ties of pity and love,
 From all injurious servitude was free. (IV, 1295-99)

This whole section of *The Excursion* is conceptually like Frost's sonnet. The resemblances, verbal as well as intellectual, between the last two lines cited above and lines 9, 10, and 14 of "A Silken Tent" are such as to add another level to Frost's conceit and to his praise of Mrs. Morrison. Allusion or intertextuality interweaves with simile. She was to the grieving, reclusive Frost the kind of saviour and healer that Wordsworth's grandly-conceived Wanderer tried to be in the life of the grieving, reclusive Solitary. The subtlest and most extreme praise of Mrs. Morrison is that she, "strictly held by none," yet "loosely bound/ By countless silken ties of love and thought," is a living realization of Wordsworth's imagined "Soul" who "Though bound to earth by ties of pity and love,/ From all injurious servitude was free."

Thus, Frost's aesthetic triumph or virtuoso display initially asks to be perceived as beautiful in the cool, distanced sense which we associate with formal perfection. It turns out, however, to be rich with personal emotion and identification, edged with contemporary rivalry, suggestive of the techniques of the renaissance sonnetteers and the metaphysical lyricists. It is finally deepened by the suggestion that the "she" in the poem, Mrs. Kathleen Morrison, lived the ideal suggested by Wordsworth's philosophical lover of Heaven, earth and man.

NOTES

1. Robert Frost, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrence Thompson (New York, 1972), p. 347.
2. Lawrence Thompson and R.H. Winnick, *Robert Frost: The Later Years. 1938-1963* (New York, 1976), pp. 8-9, 204-6.
3. *Robert Frost: The Later Years*, pp. 1-24.
4. *Robert Frost: The Later Years*, pp. 13, 372.
5. Letter to David McCord, circa September, 1938 (*Robert Frost: The Later Years*, p. 373).