AFTER APPLE PICKING: CRITICAL APPRECIATION

Louis Untermeyer describes “After Apple Picking” as “so vivid a memory of experience that the reader absorbs it physically” (244). One of Frost’s most anthologized poems, it first appeared in his second book, North of Boston. Whereas “Birches” was not printed until Mountain Interval, which followed North of Boston, the notion of climbing trees toward heaven is established here. “After Apple-Picking” appeared first, but it might be considered the later voice of “Birches.” The narrator is not the swinger of birches here but rather a mature speaker who is much like the weary poet who wanted to “get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over.”

The poem opens with the image of a ladder sticking through a tree, but it quickly moves to a barrel that was not filled and apples that were not picked. The essence of difficult rural life is illustrated through the descriptions of hard work and work that is never done. But there is also a mystical element. The narrator is strangely altered by the “scent of apples”—they seem to have the effect of poppies on his psyche. He cannot “rub the strangeness” from his sight. He has looked “through a pane of glass,” which seems to be a thin coating of ice formed overnight in the “drinking trough,” and, as if gazing into Alice’s looking glass, he has seen something that was “held against the world of hoary grass.” The world described here is as worn, tired, and old as the speaker feels, and a world brighter and more magical can be seen only as a mirage, momentarily held before it melts. But again the speaker is at fault: He has “let” the image “fall and break.”

The speaker seems to be having a dream within a dream: While the image falls away, he finds himself growing more and more full of sleep. As his body aches with the work left undone and his arches ache from time spent perched upon a ladder, he visualizes apples magnified; seemingly beautiful apples “appear and disappear” in his mind’s eye. The poem begins to lull the reader with the dreamy imagery and the distant, repetitive, “rumbling sound / Of load on load of apples coming in.” The apple farmer desired a “great harvest,” surely for his livelihood, but is exhausted by the magnitude of the work, which is as magnified as the apples in his view. Once again he embraces full responsibility, as his “desire” has brought something more than he can manage.

The poem seems straightforward: a description of a tired apple farmer growing heavy with sleep and dozing off to the sound in his memory of a hard day’s work. But as is typical in Frost, the reader never gets off quite so easily. Just when it seems as though the poem will draw to a dreamy close, the reader is thrust back to what has been left undone. Just as the barrel remained unfilled, the farmer is reminded of the “ten thousand fruit to touch” and of the apples that “struck the earth” and “[w]ent surely to the cider-apple heap / As of no worth.”

The trance is interrupted by the present-tense breaking in of “[o]ne can see what will trouble / This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is,” and the reader is forced to question what it is that will trouble the speaker’s sleep. The work left undone seems a likely cause, but so does the matter of the apples left to the cider heap. They were treated as if of no worth, simply for having “struck the earth.” But the apple farmer, too, has struck the earth. He is no longer climbing toward heaven, perched on a ladder, up above the earth at an untouchable height. He has, in his fatigue, struck the earth, and it is there that he is reminded of the work left undone and the possibility that he, while idle, is of no worth. Marie Borroff speculates that apples “constitute any series of things—or persons—with which one is responsibly concerned, each of which must be not merely handled but handled with love. This is the source of the kind of tiredness that is peculiarly human, the kind . . . that leads to a troubled, not a dreamless, sleep” (26–28).

The return to earth late in the poem is highlighted by a consideration of nature. The speaker questions what sort of sleep he might have, some “human sleep,” or a “long sleep”—which one the woodchuck, if he were around, might be able to determine. This places nature in a more knowledgeable role than the narrator. Or as one critic put it, the narrator seems to have been “duped by a woodchuck.” The woodchuck, otherwise known as a groundhog, hibernates for all of winter, beginning in late fall. The reference to the absent woodchuck suggests further that the farmer’s work, which should have been completed by late fall, has grown all the more heavy on his mind.

Frost moves in and out of traditional forms with his rhymes here, weaving in and out of weariness and in and out of sleep. As in “Acquainted with the Night” and other poems, the structure of the poem mimics its message, and here the end rhymes lull the reader to succumb to the dreamy quality of the poem.

Frost’s use of a long sleep seems metaphorically suggestive of the long sleep of death or of the shift into the afterlife, as it differs from a human sleep. But Laurence Perrine argues that “whatever sleep it is,” it presents “a continuation of earthly activity” (89). Either way, this farmer is “done with apple-picking now” as the “Essence of winter sleep is on the night.”