I

rony, taken to mean discrepancy between levels of meaning or between expectation and event, permeates Robert Frost’s poem “Birches.” Like so much of Frost’s work, this poem presents a simple, ingenuous first impression. But its underlying depth and complexity result from a pattern of subtle shifts in the train of thought, the technique, and the tone. Ultimately, the poem expresses a deep love of earthly life in spite of all its difficulties, while celebrating communion with nature as a part of this life. It reaches this culmination by surveying beautiful and lonely, joyous and painful experiences, and coming to a calm acceptance of their balance.

The poem opens with a picture of slanted birch tree trunks and the speaker’s vision of a boy swinging them into their bent posture. The speaker interrupts himself to explain that actually, birches are bent by ice storms and proceeds to give a beautifully illustrated description of such a storm. He breaks from his storm description to return to the birch-swinging boy, and tells in detail why and how the boy pursues this activity. Finally, the speaker connects this vision to his own life. He was once such a boy, and in the difficulties of later life, he longs for a return to that carefree state. But his longing is for more than that; for finally, he imagines climbing the tree as a temporary escape from this life, followed by a fresh start as he swings back to earth holding on the birch’s top branches.

The poem’s structure combines movement among these three basic content sections with contrasting elements of idea, diction, and voice to create a piece which is simultaneously naive and profound, literal and figurative, engaged and reserved. The progress back and forth through these contrasting levels of meaning gives the reader the repeated experience of ironic reversal as the poem proceeds. The final irony is the calm understatement with which the speaker resolves his contemplation of the ultimate problem — finding peace amid the troubles of this life.

In the monologue of the poem, the speaker’s ironic, understated voice moves through several phrases of image, episode, and reflection. The speaker describes country scenes, recalls pleasures of country life, and subtly weaves into his descriptions and recollections a contemplation of “Truth” and poetry, love and life, and almost-death. Much of the poem’s language is very plain, seemingly literal and straightforward, and the speaker gently mocks his own impulse to be “poetical” [l.23], trying perhaps to keep his audience believing that this is just a chat about boyhood memories. Indeed, Frost moves so smoothly from literal to figurative language and from straightforward to profoundly understated and/or ironic observations that a reader may experience and enjoy the poem without fully realizing how much philosophical ground the speaker has covered.

The opening three-line sentence presents a striking visual image of white birches criss-crossing a background of “straighter darker trees” (perhaps foreshadowing the
left-and-right-bending pattern of the poem's progress), and a simple response to it, stated: "I like to think some boy's been swinging them" [l.3]. The contraction establishes a casual tone, even as it maintains the smooth iambic pentameter of the statement. In line four, the speaker already turns aside from his first thought with a "But . . .," and goes into his first digression: "But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay./Ice storms do that" [l.4-5]. In keeping with the simple opening, the meter remains regular through line four, but then the ice storm vision takes over, the speaker's thoughts begin to intersect, and there is hardly a metrically regular line for the remainder of the poem.

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The casual conversational tone persists in the transition to the ice storm section ("Often you must have seen them/Loaded with ice . . .") [l.l.5-6], but soon the images and metaphors begin to cluster. We hear the click of icy branches, feel the breeze, see the many-colored enameling of the branches, and soon find ourselves amid the shattered glass of the inner dome of heaven — an elevated allusion to medieval cosmography that fits smoothly into the elegant imagery of this section.

Remembering the trees, the speaker brings us back to them with the repeated picture of their being dragged down by the weight of the ice, and again maintains a literal explanation for three lines [l.[14]-16]. Then another figure strikes him, and he takes four lines to present the picturesque comparison of the summer birches, "Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair/Before them over their heads to dry in the sun" [l.[19]-20].

At this point, having developed two artistic digressions from his original, rather literally stated topic, the speaker interrupts himself again: "But I was going to say when Truth broke in / . . . / (Now am I free to be poetical?)" [l.[21]-23]. The personification of Truth as a lady interrupting "With all her matter-of-fact about the ice storm" [l.[22]] and seeming opposed to the "poetical" is surely ironic, coming immediately after the two poetical flights in which the speaker has just indulged. And the irony carries through the poem, as the "poetical" account of the boy swinging birches is presented in a very "matter-of-fact" tone, almost as a prose recollection, after which the speaker's conclusions expand into comments on earth and heaven so vast
that they must be radically understated to maintain the poem's casual tone.

As he moves into his description of the boy's life, the speaker slips subtly from the subjunctive (“I should prefer to have some boy bend them”), flirting with a death-wish, the speaker turns so smoothly that his audience may at first miss the import of the shift as he quietly observes, “So was I once a swinger of birches./ And so I dream of going back to be” [ll.42-43].

In the serious closing section of the poem, where Frost moves from the “delight” with which he once said a poem should begin, into the “wisdom” with which he said it should end, the speaker returns to the figurative language and imagery which characterized the ice storm section. The comparison of life to “a pathless wood” sets the scene; the burn

between “poetry”

and tickle of cobwebs in the face and the twig lashing an open eye provide tactile images to draw the reader into. Life is painful at times, and the speaker wishes “to get away from earth awhile…” [ll.49].

But the direction of the impulse shifts yet again as the speaker continues by saying that once away, he'd want to “come back and begin over” [ll.50]. And he hastens to repeat that he doesn't wish to leave earth permanently. He mildly asserts that “Earth’s the right place for love;” [ll.53], but with the most understated of confirmations: “I don’t know where it's likely to go better” [ll.54]. Because it expresses an appreciation for life rather than a fear of death, this sequence presents not a Hamlet-like vacillation between death and life, but rather a very balanced and low-key assessment — in keeping with the thoughtful, ironic, understated voice the speaker has maintained throughout.

Having

the mood contrary to fact, into the simple past for his account of the lone
boy fetching cows and swinging on birch trees because he lives “too far from town to learn baseball” [ll.26]. The reader is invited to understand the repetitiveness (“over and over again”), the satisfaction (“One by one he subdued”), the care (“With the same pains you use to fill a cup...”) and the exhilaration (“flung outward with a swish”) of the experience before the speaker reveals that this is his own
...d memory: “So was I once myself a swinger of birches” [ll.42]. The inverted word order in line 42 gives focus and closure to the childhood scene. And then the speaker makes his most profound change in direction of thought — from childhood and the trees to the nature of life — with, ironically, the smallest change of topic and the simple adding-on conjunction “and” rather than the contrasting “but” used for the earlier shifts. The ice storm digression at line 4 breaks in with, “But swinging doesn’t bend them down to stay.” The return from the ice storm to the swinging section at line 21 is equally abrupt: “But I was going to say...”. Yet here, on his way from remembering childhood pleasures to
between wish and reality, the speaker has found a comforting moment in a difficult life.