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The Rhetorical Design of Darkness: Reading Implicatures in Frost.

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Frost's "Design" has frequently been analyzed in relation to the so-called Argument from Design, "a teleological or physico-theological argument for the existence of God or, more generally, for an intelligent world creator" based on perceived evidence of deliberate design in the natural or physical world.

Thematic discussions of the poem seem to predominate in the critical literature, but since it's Frost, there is always interesting work to be done in the area of stylistics. Frost's own comments encourage this sort of thinking. He talked of “skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the meter.” This was an early occurrence of a key phrase: the sounds of sense, or the sound of sense, went on cropping up in his writings, lectures, letters and conversations to the very end of his life (Clive James). Meanwhile, thematic approaches have produced some of the best readings of this particular poem that we have. I'm thinking particularly of Randell Jarell's 1953 Poetry and the Age.

> *"And this little albino catastrophe is too whitely catastrophic to be accidental, too impossibly unlikely ever to be a coincidence: accident, chance, statistics, natural selection are helpless to account for such designed terror and heartbreak, such an awful symbolic perversion of the innocent being of the world*" (Jarell page#).

This remains pretty much a standard reading of the poem up to the present. And agreement on the force of the last couple of lines is also pretty well established: "*And then this whole appalling categorical machinery of reasoning-out, of conviction, of condemnation... is suddenly made merely hypothetical, a*

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> *possible contradicted shadow, by one off-hand last-minute qualification: one that dismisses it, but that dismisses it only for a possibility still more terrifying, a whole new random, statistical, astronomical abyss underlying the diabolical machinery of the poem*" (Jarell page#).

Also well-established is the pleasure we take in the possibly ironic relation between the careful design of the poem as a sonnet and the "last minute qualification" of the last couplet. The thought that sonnets are relatively small, and rigorously designed, balances rather nicely with (or against) meditations on the malevolence of a designer crouched intentionally behind casual arrangements in nature. The specific point of reference for this kind of discussion is the Petrarchan sonnet, generally typified by setting forth a problem in the octave, then resolving that problem or relieving the tension in the sestet. Frost's masterful use of rhyme is always worth exploration, as well.[1]

Rather than join the ongoing discussion of the poem's themes and their relations to its form, I'd like to take a few pages to look at the sestet (the last six lines of the poem), with an eye to the use we make of certain implicatures in reaching our moral (even religious), and ethical judgments of the poem as a whole.

First, a brief summary of what we have come to understand by the term "implicature" since it was introduced by Paul Grice in 1957. It is, I believe, still not in very common use among literary critics. I have some opinions about why that's the case, but I reserve those for another time.

Here is a definition of implicature from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2005):
H. P. Grice (1913–1988) was the first to systematically study cases in which what a *speaker* means differs from what the *sentence* used by the speaker means. Consider the following dialogue.

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1. Alan: Are you going to Paul's party?

   Barb: I have to work.

If this was a typical exchange, Barb meant that she is not going to Paul's party. But the sentence she uttered does not mean that she is not going to Paul's party. Hence Barb did not *say* that she is not going, she *implied* it. Grice introduced the technical terms *implicate* and *implicature* for the case in which what the speaker said is distinct from what the speaker thereby meant or implied.[2] Thus Barb implicated that she is not going; that she is not going was her implicature. Implicating is what Searle (1975: 265–6) called an *indirect speech act*. Barb performed one speech act (meaning that she is not going) *by* performing another (saying that she has to work).

I want to look particularly at which implicatures are generated by the questions that Frost uses (asks?) in the second section of his poem. I will begin with the possibility that the questions are rhetorical in nature. By a rhetorical question I mean one that offers a clear proposition as a necessary answer. Real questions open the door to possible answers, and imply that the speaker is honestly requesting information, or is inviting an honest response from his interlocutor. Rhetorical questions are notoriously manipulative in some instances, but in many others (this poem is an example, I think) they are simply the means by which certain attitudes or perspectives or judgments are communicated. Frost is famous for sly tricks or jokes, but rarely are they at the expense of his readers. Rather he usually invites us (often with a kind of verbal wink) to share the joke. In this particular poem, I think he sets us up for the joke, but to pull it off successfully, he has to violate certain sentence rules. I'm not sure how typical this kind of rule-breaking is in the rest of his poetry. I imagine other readers have been more alert, and can think of other examples.

For ease of reference, here is the complete poem:

Design

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I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth --
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth --
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?--
If design govern in a thing so small.

Robert Frost, 1922

To return to the question about questions. Rhetorical questions, as I have defined them, use a question form to communicate some proposition. This would seem to qualify all of them for a study of the implicatures they generate, and depend on for their effect. This is a good moment to recall the valuable contribution to the Gricean theory of implicatures made by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1995) in Relevance: Communication and Cognition. They propose a theory of **poetic effect** as a result of what they call "weak implicatures," principally implicatures generated by the necessary (to speaker's meaning) implicatures of the utterance.

To avoid falling into an exclusively theoretical discussion, let's take the first question of the sestet as a concrete example:

"What had that flower to do with being white," / The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?"

If this is not a rhetorical question, it opens for a reader the consideration of variations in color of flowers, the oddities in nature that may surprise us, even to consider the wonders of nature's abundance. But it is a rhetorical question. Somehow it conveys dismay, shock, even horror at the whiteness of the flower. The question conveys, as an implicature, and as answer to a rhetorical question, the conviction that the whiteness of the flower is out of the ordinary. We could even paraphrase the question as a statement, "That flower has no business being white." This is, perhaps, a result of the skill with which the original image was presented in the first part of the poem. The presence of the proposition, something like "It is somehow wrong that this flower is white," or "The whiteness of this flower is abnormal somehow," is communicated and established as path for reading. Notice that the implicature here is *not as forceful* (to be distinguished from the technical idea of *weak* in Sperber and Wilson) as the implicatures generated by the next two questions:

What brought the kindred spider to that height, / Then steered the white moth thither in the night?

The first implicatures have the character of possibility. The whiteness of the flower is somehow abnormal, but no specific reason for that abnormality is offered. In the next set of implicatures, however, agency is introduced directly and forcefully into the poem. The verbs "brought" and "steered" implicate agency. Something brought the spider and steered the moth. In one way it is tempting to claim that the second questions of the poem are more rhetorical in nature than the first question. This idea is borne out by the rhetorical nature of the last question: "What but design of darkness to appall?" This is clearly more definitively and more forcefully a rhetorical question, than the earlier ones. One might see this kind of progression as an exercise in intensification. It certainly seems so to me.

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In fact, it might seem that the implicature generated by the final question is a clarification of the comparatively vague implicatures generated by the previous questions. If only "something" or "someone" brought and steered, we still want to know what or whom. And it turns out that the power we have been invited to contemplate as we arrange our reading of the poem may be "darkness" itself. Not only that, but it might even be the case that that darkness is capable of rhetorical intent. It intends to appall (us, presumably, or at least the poet.)

This last comment about the rhetorical intent of darkness may be the result of a weak implicature. They are characterized quite interestingly in Sperber and Wilson in terms of responsibility. Their idea in 1995 (the second edition of their book) was that weak implicatures might be considered as something like "poetic effects." This of course catchesthe eye of students of poetry. What I have found most intriguing is not so much their methodological definitions or descriptions of how weak implicatures are generated, but the possibility that their distinguishing characteristic is that the responsibility for employing them lies with the receiver, or in the case of poetry with the reader. To clarify: We can see that the (strong) implicatures of the first questions are quite legitimately ascribed to the intentions of the poet or to the character of his utterance. Frost clearly intends to create in his reader's mind the possibility of dark agency in the universe. But "the design of darkness to appall" (putting aside the etymological observations about the relations of "appall" to "become pale")[2] may be read as a complete answer to the previous questions. I mean that we may have to resolve an ambiguity in this line (probably without thinking too much about it) in order to continue. We have to choose between "the design of darkness" (a complete thing in itself) and "darkness' design." I am going to argue that most of us read "the design of darkness to appall" as precisely the complete and unified thing that brings the spider and steers the moth. I could be wrong. The other reading is equally available. It's quite possible to read "darkness" as the agent that brings the spider, and steers the moth, and has the design (intention) to appall. However, if I'm right, assigning rhetorical agency to darkness is the result of a weak implicature. And, if we follow Sperber and Wilson, weak implicatures are a reader's responsibility. Here we

enter the realm of ethics and questions of ethical reading. And the ethical decisions we make if we take up the weak implicatures I've outlined (at least while reading) are also religious in nature if we engage with what we imagine to be Frost's religious values.

Now, what about that rather strange bending of the rules of good sentence writing that we can observe in the final couplet? Here it is again:

> What but design of darkness to appall?--
> If design govern in a thing so small.

Frost, it seems, needs the question mark after "appall." Why? In one way, the question mark belongs exactly where it is; it marks the question, and communicates in the most forceful way its implied answer. But as we continue to the second line, we discover (not uncomfortably) that we are reading a dependent clause, part of the sentence that has been artificially ended before it's over. This gives the dependent clause a sound of sense that cuts across the regular rules of *grammar* (to ring a change on Frost's original "meter.")

The last line responds directly to the strong implicature communicated in the penultimate line, and conveys its own implicature, a weaker one, that readers take responsibility for almost gratefully. The weak implicature we are invited to incorporate into our reading of the poem is precisely the possibility that design (and by implication rather than implicature, the rhetorical intentions of darkness) do not govern. But this is an implicature conveyed by a rhetorical question. If the final question, (whether design governs), is a real question, then the reader is responsible not only for his own reading of the poem, but his own understanding of the nature of design, in poetry and in nature. This invitation to take responsibility is, I think; the reason for Frost's rather intrusive punctuation of the final couplet. Notice how our reading would be altered if the punctuation were more strictly by the book:

What but design of darkness to appall,
If design govern in a thing so small?

I think certain ambiguities would disappear, the tension between the answer contained in the first line of the couplet and its subversion in the following line would disappear, and our own ethical engagement with the poem would dissipate.

We know how careful Frost is in managing the endings of his poems. They are not traps he lays for the unwary, but rather generous invitations to participate in an ongoing ethical, and at times religious debate he has with himself and pursues in his poetry. We owe him a debt.

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[1] A more recent contribution to this well-established reading of the poem can be found in the very engaging monograph, Robert Frost: The Ethics of Ambiguity (John H. Timmerman, Bucknell University Press, 2002)
[2] Frost himself, a rather capable student of Latin after all, may have enjoyed it.