

TERRIFYING POET

by

Robert Strong

Read at a meeting of The Chicago Literary Club on April 25, 2016

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[Author's Note: I have revised this paper to comply with copyright law so it may be posted on the Chicago Literary Club website. The full texts of poems presented have been replaced by links to the poems on the website of the Poetry Foundation. I have made no other changes to the paper as read at the April 25, 2016 meeting.]

On March 26, 1959, the poet Robert Frost was honored at a dinner in New York City celebrating his eighty-fifth birthday. Held at the Waldorf-Astoria, the dinner was attended by a hundred fellow-poets, critics, and friends. It was a fitting celebration of Frost, who was not only America's most famous poet, but also the best loved. Phrases from his poems had become part of American speech and honors had been showered upon him—four Pulitzer prizes; honorary degrees from colleges and universities; a Congressional Gold Medal; and many other awards. Frost was a nation-wide celebrity. Two years later would he be invited to compose a poem to read at the inaugural ceremony of President John F. Kennedy in January 1961.

Success as a poet came surprisingly late to Frost. He wrote poems in obscurity for two decades before he could find a publisher interested in his work. During this time he struggled to support his wife and children as a farmer and school teacher in New Hampshire. In 1912, when he was 38 years old, he felt his dream of poetry as a full-time career was slipping away. He decided to risk all and move to England and attempt, he said, to live “poetically.” He and his family found a small thatched cottage in a little village just outside London. He knew no one when he arrived, but before long his naïve gamble paid off. Within months he met many English poets and through them found a receptive London publisher. His first book of poetry, *A Boy's Will*, was published in 1913 and was well received. Frost's second book of poetry, *North of*

Boston, was published in London in 1914 and was also praised. His success in England crossed the Atlantic when another American poet in London, Ezra Pound, wrote to Harriet Monroe in Chicago to tell her he had discovered a promising new American poet. Pound reviewed *A Boy's Will* in Monroe's *Poetry* magazine, and Frost's two books found their way to New York. The American publisher Henry Holt contacted Frost with an offer to publish them. With this good news, Frost decided to come home. When he landed in New York in 1915, he was surprised to see a prominent review of his book *North of Boston* in the *New Republic* magazine. Henry Holt published Frost's third book of poetry, *Mountain Interval*, in 1916, and his career as a poet was launched. He described himself whimsically in a letter to Louis Untermeyer, a leading American literary figure he had recently met: "Chief occupation...pursuit of glory; most noticeable trait, patience in the pursuit of glory."¹

Frost received his first Pulitzer Prize for Poetry at age 50 in 1924 for *New Hampshire*, his fourth book of poetry, bringing him to the attention of the popular press and general public. He began giving public talks and poetry readings in the mid-1920s, and as his popularity grew, so did the frequency and range of his travels. He called his public performances "barding around." He never prepared for these events. He simply began to talk about what was in his mind at the moment—a personal anecdote, a bit of New England history, a work of literature—and something would remind him of one of his poems, which he would recite. He avoided poems he considered painful. He dressed in rumpled clothes, his hair was an uncombed thatch, and he wore heavy farmer's work boots. His wry, slow-talking performances were punctuated by witty comments and New England sayings. Audiences and the press loved them. It is no exaggeration to say that Frost created his genial 'Yankee sage' persona at his many performances across the country over four decades, a persona that the public read into his poems. In 1950, the U.S. Senate

¹ Quoted in Adam Kirsch, "Extracting the Woodchuck," *Harvard Magazine*, January-February, 2014

unanimously passed a resolution honoring Frost on his seventy-fifth birthday, the first such congressional citation of a poet. Its words express well the feelings of the entire country at that time. It began by commending his poetry for giving the American people “a long series of stories and lyrics which are enjoyed, repeated, and thought about by people of all ages and callings.” It went on to praise Frost’s humor, his wisdom, and his enhancement of Americans’ love of country.² These sentiments remained unchanged until shortly after Frost’s death in 1963.

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Frost introduced his second book of poetry, *North of Boston*, and every published volume of his collected poems, with a short poem titled “The Pasture.”³

THE PASTURE

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/44270>

Brief as it is, “The Pasture” displays many of the reasons Frost’s poetry was so popular during his lifetime. The poem is a conversation with the reader that might occur in everyday life. The poem’s genial speaker offers an invitation to accompany him on simple rural chores. The pasture spring will be cleaned, but the speaker hastens to add that he really won’t work too hard. He implies there might be something interesting to see in the clear spring water. In the poem’s second stanza, the invitation is to see a newborn calf a short time after its birth, one of the most pleasing sights of farm life. In this poem and many others, Frost is the good-natured pastoral poet of rural New England. He does not write about country people, he speaks as one of them and draws the reader into the activities of country life—mowing a field, picking apples, walking in the woods, tending livestock, swinging on birch trees. With his detailed knowledge of local

² *The Road Not Taken*, Lewis Untermeyer, ed. (New York: Holt, 1951), vii

³ All poetry quoted is from *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1964)

plants and animals and the region's independent people, the stories and images in his poems are rooted in closely observed daily reality.

Frost's style of writing also contributed to his great popularity. His poetry is written in plain, clear language with simple words, rarely more than two syllables. At a time when other new poets were eliminating rhyme, formal metric patterns, and punctuation, Frost retained these conventional features in his poems. He believed he could best achieve the vitality of human speech by combining the regular beats of traditional poetic diction with the pattern-less rhythms of prose. He used rhyme in many poems, but he wrote others with no formal rhyming scheme. In some poems, even when rhyme is present it is obscured by placement in no regular sequence. Frost believed that rhythm and rhyme helped his poetry create an emotional response in the listener to the sounds of words as well as to their meanings. Although he didn't strictly follow literary convention, he departed from it in subtle ways that didn't shock contemporary readers. Only in rare exceptions is there anything in Frost's poetry to alter the narrator's calm voice and air of casual informality.

The poem "Mowing" illustrates Frost's style in a longer, more complex poem.

MOWING

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/53001>

The poem is a sonnet, one of the oldest traditional forms in Western literature, but it is loosely structured. The rhythms of poetic speech and prose pull back and forth throughout the poem, mixed together in almost every line. Each line ends in a word that rhymes with one other line in the poem, but there is no regular pattern to these rhyming pairs, so the effect is scarcely noticed. Frost adds the sound of mowing to the first half of the poem with the many words repeating the "esss" sound in "whispering."

The poem's narrator sets the scene in the first two lines: he is mowing a hay field and his scythe makes a sound like whispering as he cuts the grass. The narrator's story then shifts to his own flights of imagination about what the whispering sound might mean. The poem presents questions for the reader. What is the scythe whispering? What does "anything more than the truth" mean? Whose truth? Is there a sly sexual metaphor in the sequence from "earnest love" to "orchises" (the Greek word for testicle) to the "long scythe" that lays down the hay "to make"? What "fact" is labor's "sweetest dream"? The poem appears to be about the "truth" of reality—physical labor in this case—and the weakness of imagination that runs so far beyond it trying to impose meaning. But the poem could also be taken as an extended metaphor on the process of writing poetry, or any creative endeavor, in which imagination builds on physical reality to create a work of art. Other interpretations of the poem's meaning are possible. Frost, like the scythe, does not explain. He was too mischievous to make his meanings clear. "My poems," Frost wrote to a friend, "are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless." Some poems, such as "The Pasture," are as straightforward and direct in meaning as they appear. In most poems by Frost, however, meaning is more elusive. While many readers are content to accept the pleasant surfaces of Frost's poems, they often contain ambiguities that intrigue thoughtful readers.

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At the peak of Frost's popularity, all his audiences—ordinary people, academics, and literary commentators—were united in their admiration of Frost the poet and Frost the man. At the dinner in New York honoring Frost on his eighty-fifth birthday, the first speakers praised Frost as a pastoral poet, an advocate of rural life whose work embodied the best of American values. The main speaker that evening was Lionel Trilling, Columbia University professor,

novelist, and one of the most eminent and influential voices in American letters. Trilling flattered Frost with a comparison to Sophocles: “Like you,” he said, “Sophocles lived to a great age, writing well; and like you, Sophocles was the poet his people loved most . . . We have come to think of [Robert Frost] as virtually a symbol of America . . . not unlike an articulate . . . bald eagle.” But Trilling also said that Frost’s many admirers misunderstood him. Frost was not a poet whose work “reassures by his affirmation of old virtues . . . and ways of feeling: anything but.” Instead, Trilling stated his belief that in some of Frost’s poems he presented “the terrible actualities of life. I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him, if it makes things any easier, a tragic poet.”⁴ Trilling went on to explain that Frost was terrifying because “the universe he conceives is a terrifying universe.”

Frost appeared surprised and unsettled by Trilling’s remarks. After he rose to recite some of his poems, he asked plaintively, “. . . am I terrifying?”⁵ The reaction to Trilling’s remarks among critics and the public was swift. Donald Adams, a columnist for the *New York Times*, attacked Trilling’s speech in print, and letters flooded into the Times in Frost’s defense. One letter sneered, “I hope Robert Frost was having a nice plate of buckwheat cakes and Vermont maple syrup as he read Mr. Adams’ remarks.” Other publications took up the cry against Trilling. Frost wrote Trilling to reassure him that he didn’t mind being made controversial. “You weren’t there to sing ‘Happy Birthday, dear Robert’.” He went on to say, “no sweeter music can come to my ears than the clash of arms over my dead body when I am down.”⁶

Trilling’s observations were not new, and, in the words of the redoubtable writer and critic Edmund Wilson, Frost was “a dreadful old fraud” for acting surprised when he heard

⁴ Trilling’s speech is quoted in Burnshaw, *Robert Frost Himself*, 103-105

⁵ Interview with Victor Reichert quoted in Meyers, *Robert Frost*, 319

⁶ *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, Lawrance Thompson, ed., 583

them.⁷ Frost later remarked in an interview that his poetry was indeed full of darkness, and he was pleased that Trilling saw the “badness” as well as the “goodness.” Frost wanted it both ways. He courted a popular audience but was not unhappy to be taken seriously as a poet who expressed the full range of human experience.

The many painful events in Frost’s life were known—the poverty of his early years; the death in infancy of two of his six children and the suicide of another; the severe emotional illness of his sister and daughter, both of whom Frost had to commit to mental institutions; and Frost’s own periods of deep depression. But early biographers either downplayed these events or presented his life as a study in endurance and personal fortitude. Most critics and academics agreed with *New York Times* columnist Donald Adams’ comment that “Frost simply sees the universe as it is” and accepts it. All supporters of the conventional view of Frost’s poetry were strongly influenced by the poet’s charismatic personality and the mask of affability that he created through his public appearances and unceasing self-promotion.

A small number of literary commentators had written for decades about the themes of human isolation and loneliness in Frost’s poetry. The most prominent of these was poet and essayist Randall Jarrell, Frost’s predecessor as Library of Congress Poet Laureate. Jarrell considered the conventional view that Frost’s poetry was merely traditional and uplifting a “grotesque simplification.”⁸ Jarrell’s published essays describe the underlying shadows and complexities he saw in Frost’s work. In the poem “Home Burial,” the grieving parents of a dead child are locked in a misunderstanding. Each is desperately unhappy, but they can’t communicate or comfort each other. In “Acquainted with the Night,” the narrator has walked “out in rain—and back in rain” into the darkness beyond the “furthest city light.” He is burdened

⁷ Letter to *New York Times* and Wilson’s comments quoted in Meyers, *Robert Frost*, 320

⁸ Randall Jarrell, *No Other Book: Selected Essays* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 20

some hidden guilt and hears a human voice cry out in the distance. Loneliness and a sense of despair suffuse the poem. In “Design,” a white spider sits upon a white flower holding up a dead white moth, “three characters of death and blight mixed . . . like the ingredients of a witches broth.” The poem concludes with the observation that if there is design in the universe, it may be malevolent.

The poem “‘Out, Out—” is one of Frost’s most dramatic statements of the harsh realities of life. The title alludes to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

‘OUT, OUT—‘

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/53087>

Frost never recited this poem in public. It was “too cruel,” he said. Did the men who worked with the dead boy turn away to hide their own emotional responses to the horrible event? Even so, the poem offers no comfort after the boy’s death. This poem was first published in 1916 and again in each published volume of Frost’s collected poems. It was there for all to see.

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Robert Frost died on January 29, 1963 at the age of eighty-eight, and without his vivid personality in the public eye Lionel Trilling’s “terrifying poet,” who had been there been there all along, gradually emerged in literary discourse. More academics and commentators wrote about the ambiguity, dark undertones, and desire to withdraw from the world beneath the calm surfaces of Frost’s poetry. The perception of old virtues associated with Frost changed during the social protest movements in America of the late 1960s and 1970s. In 1974 the poet and pacifist William Stafford wrote in the *New York Times Review of Books*, “Our simple, rugged poet is gone. And perhaps the simple, rugged things for which he stood have also vanished forever . . .”

Some of Frost's values, Stafford said, such as self-reliance, endurance, and patriotism, "seem like anachronisms in the America of 1974."⁹

The most significant change in Frost's image occurred with publication of a three-volume biography by Lawrance Thompson, Frost's chosen biographer, between 1966 and 1976.

Thompson's biography could not be published before Frost's death, but well before the first volume was written, Frost knew that his chosen biographer and former friend "Larry" had turned against him. He went to Stanley Burnshaw, his editor at Henry Holt publishers and a close friend for thirty years, to ask Burnshaw to save him from "Larry" and his "lies." Burnshaw recalled their conversation in his memoir of Frost published in 1986.

"[After a long silence, Frost] raised his head and gazed into my eyes. 'I'm counting on you to protect me from Larry.'

'But he's your official biographer! You picked him.'

'I'm counting on you,' he repeated gravely. 'You will be here. I won't.'

'If you need protection, simply undo what you did.'

'Too late now.'

'*Anyone* has the right to retract for a valid reason.'

'I gave him my word.'"¹⁰

Frost felt obligated to let Thompson proceed, but he knew the result would severely damage his reputation as a man and as a poet. By the time Thompson's biography of Frost was complete, the picture of him that was so admired before his death had vanished. Thompson portrayed Frost as a monster—a selfish, manipulative, angry, cruel man who was responsible for his family's unhappiness and contributed to his wife's bouts of depression, the mental illness of

⁹ William Stafford, "The Terror in Robert Frost," *New York Times Review of Books*, August 18, 1974

¹⁰ Burnshaw, 116

his daughter Irma, and the suicide of his son Carol. Thompson's massive 1,800-page assault dwells on Frost's failures and negative characteristics and interprets the details of his life to support this view. Thompson's dislike of Frost is evident in the sub-headings of the biography's topical index: "Brute," "Charlatan," "Cowardice," "Enemies," "Hate," "Jealousy," "Rage," "Revenge," "Spoiled Child," "Vindictive," and "Murderer."

When Thompson's second volume of the biography was published in 1970, reviewers and commentators accepted Thompson's jaundiced portrayal of Frost. *The New York Times* called Frost "a monster of egotism" who left "behind him a wake of destroyed human lives." *The New Yorker* called him a "mean-spirited megalomaniac." Another influential reviewer called him a "hateful human being."¹¹ Conventional literary opinion now considered Frost terrifying indeed, but as a person rather than as a poet.

A reaction to Thompson's biography gathered strength in the 1980s. Memoires by friends such as Stanley Burnshaw and other people who knew Frost well spoke from personal experience and Frost's correspondence to contradict many of Thompson's damning assertions. Thompson's objectivity as a biographer was discredited after his published notes confirmed his growing personal hatred of Frost and it was discovered that Thompson had a clandestine affair with the woman who became Frost's closest female friend after the death of his wife Elinor. In 1988 the author Joyce Carol Oates wrote a long article in the *New York Times Review of Books* about the rise of what she called "pathography," biographies that dwell on "dysfunction and disasters, . . . failed marriages and failed careers, alcoholism and breakdowns and outrageous conduct." Oates cited Thompson's biography of Frost as a leading example, calling it a work of "true malevolence." Thompson's biography "has become a notorious example of what can

¹¹ Parini, 452

happen when a biographer turns completely against his or her subject.”¹² A more balanced view of Frost is presented in a biography by Jay Parini published in 1999 and now considered the best and most accurate of the many accounts of his life. Frost’s poetry is still read, admired, and studied, but the view of Frost as a monster is so deeply rooted that it continues to appear in articles by academics and commentators.

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Robert Frost was a man of contradictions. He “was a loner who liked company; a poet of isolation who sought a mass audience; a rebel who sought to fit in.”¹³ Despite his great success, he always felt like an outsider. He was a pastoral poet who was not sentimental and a poet of working people who disliked Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. In an interview or on stage, Frost was unfailingly good-humored and charming, but in private he could be ill-tempered and was never free from his tendency to depression. Even though Frost was devoted to his wife Elinor and his children, his turbulent emotional life often created great stress among them. His poetry contains more wry humor and playfulness than he felt in much of his personal life. Poetry, Frost said, “is a momentary stay against confusion.” Confusion for Frost meant more than simple misunderstanding. It was a condition of profound uncertainty bordering on despair. He found a refuge in the act of creating a poem, but only a momentary one.

Frost the man is gone. We are left with his poetry. As the poet Joseph Brodsky said, “Would you like to meet Mr. Frost? Then read his poems, nothing else.”¹⁴ In the spirit of Joseph Brodsky’s advice, Mr. Frost’s poetry shall have the last word.

¹² Quotes from “Extracting the Woodchuck,” by Adam Kirsch, *Harvard Magazine*, Jan-Feb. 2014

¹³ Parini, 446

¹⁴ Quoted in “All the Difference,” by Jonathan Miles, *New York Times*, May 11, 2008

AFTER APPLE-PICKING

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