

Lecture 3 Robert Frost

1. Frost's Career: Work, Truth, Tools

---First, back to "Birches," 121: The dynamic play of sound in the poem is like---and is itself an instance of---the relations of force and counter-force, desire and gravity, it describes. Not that the play of sound imitates the boy's play: rather, the meter has, in relation to Frost's voice the same mix of flexibility and resistance that the trees have in relation to the boy who uses them to go up and come down safely---primal forms of play that also suggest forms of poetic or even spiritual activity. The birches as a tool for playing---playing alone. The boy's solitude is like the mower's. Absence of other children---and the boy's father: we might see him, not simply as the farmer who holds the deed to those birches, but as God the father, who created them and is likewise absent or invisible.

---Main points in the first two lectures on Frost: Frost's special combination of "obviousness" and subtlety grows out of and reflects on the basic split in the audience for modern poetry between genteel and avant-garde readers, popular and so-called little magazines, indicative of a split between specialized and general readerships that defines modern literature as a whole and of poetry in particular.

---Frost was the first American poet to live a considerable living exclusively through poetry, a man paid simply for being a poet (for readings, in universities; the public bard we saw images of last week). Poetry was always a mode of work for Frost, and work was a model of poetic activity. Meaning is always something made, what the poet works on and for. Frost's modernity consists in the idea that truth is concrete and contingent, not a metaphysical matter, not an ideal principle; it is only available in the act (the moment) of deriving it, or constructing it, an act that is ordinary, incompletable, and thus necessarily repeated, an ongoing task. Frost is a materialist who calls attention to the circumstances of imagination: poetry is an encounter between fact and desire, focusing the terms, or conditions, on which something can be known. Tools are in Frost an image of those enabling conditions, and they include, in poetry, meter, rhyme, and all the technical resources of verse, the materials of language.

2. Frost's People: North of Boston

---*North of Boston*, Frost's second book, 1914, locates his subjects in an actual place. Boston was the capital of 19C American literature and culture, synonymous with gentility, Puritanism, old American money and style---exactly, in other words, what modernism attacked. Where did you go to write modern poetry? Anywhere but Boston: Pound, Eliot, H.D. to Europe; Crane, Moore, Stevens, Williams to N.Y. Frost alone moves north of Boston: to do so was to reverse the direction of modernization, the evacuation of rural New England by workers heading for the cities in the new, industrial

economy. Contrast Crane's image of Brooklyn Bridge and Frost's abandoned wood-pile: directly related by the large social and economic processes that changed the world in which American poets wrote. Frost goes against the grain; an anti-modern move in relation to other poets' ideas of progress that roots Frost's poetry of work in the lives of rural workers: who have to sustain--and entertain--themselves in isolation. Frost's people suffer and rage. Their New England is not an ideal pastoral place.

---The heart of *North of Boston* is the series of dramatic monologues and dialogues, speeches and conversations, for people who had never spoken before in American poetry, and who spoke in Frost's combination of colloquial sentence-sounds and unrhymed iambic pentameter (the heroic language of Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth). "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home Burial," "Servant to Servants," and "The Fear" are examples. Frost frames his people's words minimally. A fearful directness of presentation---e.g., "Home Burial" on p. 51. Compare Mary and Warren, from "Death of the Hired Man," on p. 38, talking about Silas (ll. 110-21). As in "Home Burial," the scene is the home, where a man and a woman are separated by gendered perspectives on loss and love. Love motivates work in Frost, but love doesn't work out. People are locked into themselves and their points of view. In "Home Burial," the issue is grief: the mother wishes to hold onto the dead child and to escape her husband---his force and his will. Which are the resources that he uses to respond to his son's death. The woman's objection is summed-up by his choice to bury the child himself. He responds to this loss privately--and as a worker. The grim tool of his mourning is a spade: p. 53 (67-96). The man is a desperate mechanism, struggling to take control of his world, to convert his circumstances into something he can work on---but he fails: he cannot build a fence to last. "Home Burial" is about the limits of work and the madness of it, its failure to bring forth a knowable world the worker can safely inhabit.

3. Frost's God: Put Out the Light

There is in Frost no God, no transcendental source of guidance or consolation, nothing out there in the world but the material conditions of our circumstances. Frost's poems press toward revelation: an apocalyptic uncovering of intention in the way things are: see "Design," "For Once, Then, Something," and "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep": p. 301. How are we supposed to feel about the people on the shore? Is their essential ignorance in any way hopeful? "Once By the Pacific," p. 250, as companion piece: God is imagined negatively as a presence perceived through, implied by or inferred from, the cruel arbitrariness of nature's destructive force. He is a maker who makes Himself known by unmaking things, a demiurge, a wicked poet. "Put out the light": this is a retraction of God's creative act, His fiat lux. There is also in that phrase an echo of Shakespeare's Othello, when he goes to murder Desdemona ("Put out the light, and then put out the light"). What would it mean to say that Frost's God is like Othello?

4. How Will You Save Your Soul?

---Without God, what sort of redemption is possible in Frost? Two answers in two late poems. "Provide, Provide": p. 307. A funny poem---the triplet rhymes and four beat line mark it as something like light verse. But what is one laughing at here? Public achievement and moral stature are of no use. The end is hard and solitary, no matter how

you come by it. So you had better look out for Number 1, and even that won't work. The only thing to do in life is to provide---and provide is just what you cannot ever do, as "Home Burial" knows. ---Compare "Directive," p 377: Vermont as the postwar world (1947); Frost takes us on an antimodern, "reverse" journey, recapitulating Frost's choices (ll. 1-17); the house as the home of "Home Burial" 40 years on (ll. 36-47); imagination as primary source; a final tool: a toy, which does duty as a sacred relic (48-62). A disillusioned and self-consciously ironic promise of salvation, of wholeness, but it is still a promise.