ROBERT FAGGEN

Introduction

If there is any truth to Emerson's aphorism "to be great is to be misunderstood," then Robert Frost is surely one of the greatest poets. In a century in which some of the most celebrated literature seemed to follow Emerson in reverse – "to be misunderstood (or incomprehensible) is to be great" – Robert Frost's seductively limpid lines were taken as evidence of the author's simplicity or, worse, simplemindedness. Frost's popularity, as well as his willingness in his later years to perform as a hoary public sage, left many among the academically sophisticated suspicious. His adherence to ancient literary traditions and his disdain of political radicalism angered those with more revolutionary temperaments. A reviewer, commenting in *The New Yorker* on his *Collected Poems* of 1930, proclaimed that his "popularity can be put down to the fact that he always expressed with imaginative sincerity, American nostalgia for a lately abandoned rural background," and that he was a bard "always occupied with the complicated task of simply being sincere."

Frost mischievously invited such criticism. The character of Keeper in his late poem, *A Masque of Mercy*, said "Some people do not want you to understand them/ I want you to understand me wrong," a statement that resonates well with Frost's own poetic practice. Years earlier in 1932 Frost wrote to Sidney Cox: "I have written to keep the curious out of the secret places of my mind in my verse and in my letters to such as you." (*SL*, 338) These comments express a doubleness, perhaps even a contradiction in his engagement with his audience; Frost reaches out but also holds back from and subverts his readers' expectations of sincerity and simplicity. Taking on many of the qualities of a trickster – innocent and sinister at once – Frost wrote "Ever since infancy I have had the habit of leaving my blocks carts chairs and such like ordinaries where people would be pretty sure to fall forward over them in the dark. Forward, you understand, *and* in the dark." (*SL*, 344) While no collection of essays could reach to the secret places of Frost's heart, this present volume is dedicated to the task of providing a

context for and an introduction to the contradictions and tension that lie at the center of his poetry. The greatest innovator in blank verse after Milton and Browning, Frost cultivated an ingeniously sophisticated use of colloquial speech, giving new life to the ancient tradition of pastoral poetry. And few poets have encompassed the realms of religion, science, politics, and philosophy with as much such unassuming subtlety.

Poets have been attuned to the range of Frost's achievement perhaps longer than critics and academics. Ezra Pound lauded the publication of Frost's first two books. In the 1950s, Randall Jarrell wrote several essays about "the other Frost," a world pervaded by hate, fear, yet one inspiring mystery and awe. W. H. Auden found a kindred spirit in Frost's own desert and lunar landscapes and admired his brilliance in "argufying" in verse. In his parables and poetry, Jorge Luis Borges followed Frost's ironic twists. American poets including Richard Wilbur, Mary Oliver, and Galway Kinnell have found in Frost a crucial foundation. Attentive readers of John Ashbery can note his meditation on the ironies of Frost's "The Road Not Taken" and "Directive" in "The System" as well as other works. Frost's pastoral wit has been of great importance to Irish poets Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon. And the pleasure of his terrors was source of wonder for Joseph Brodsky, the Russian-born Nobel Laureate who first read Frost while a teenager in St. Petersburg. The attentive formalist criticism of Reuben Brower in the 1960s preceded the groundbreaking achievement of Richard Poirier's *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (1976). In the last decade, there has been a flowering of critical attention that has placed Frost in a variety of illuminating intellectual and social contexts, and many of those critics have contributed to this volume.

Debate over Frost's biography has tended to dominate discussion of his work. Lawrance Thompson's three-volume biography presented an image of Frost as a great poet but a megalomaniac who was particularly cruel to his wife, Elinor, and to his children. Critical reviews of Thompson seized on the opportunity to sully Frost's reputation as America's national poet and alleged expositor of Yankee virtue. The personal animus and unverifiable anecdote that informs Thompson's biography received a strong corrective in William Pritchard's *Robert Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (1984), a work that, among its other achievements, helped refocus attention on the dissonances and complexities of the poetry. Pritchard's contribution to this volume examines Frost's *A Witness Tree* not only in terms of Thompson but also the more recent attempt by Jeffrey Meyers to read the great poetry of this book in lurid terms of Frost's personal life; he asks what we may gain and lose by biographical readings. Frost did have a strong hand in shaping the story of his life. Donald Sheehy, who has written some of the most exact-

ing essays on Frost biography, explores how Frost's accounts of his own life affect both biographers and critics. Was Frost a working-class youth who struggled against poverty in his early years? What attitude did he take toward laborers in the Lawrence, Massachusetts mill, and how can his experience be read in terms of a poem such as "A Lone Striker"? How attached was he to the farm life of New England? Frost eventually abandoned farming, in which he was neither terribly interested nor successful, and moved the family to England where he engaged Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats and published his first two books, *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston* – at the age of forty.

"Hugger-mugger farming" may not have been Frost's greatest love, but he knew it, and, more important, he knew many who lived that vanishing existence. But Frost also knew botany, astronomy, natural science, and thousands of lines of poetry, modern and ancient. Frost himself lived the existence of a farmer-poet, a tradition that extends back to the Roman poets Virgil and Horace, and his landscapes and depictions of country things are as much informed by the mythology of pastoral literature – from Virgil through Milton, Wordsworth, and Thoreau. "For Once, Then, Something," and "Spring Pools" owe their richness in part to Frost's engagement with the shifting representations of Narcissus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Thoreau's *Walden*. Pastoral literature has always been a mode of examining questions of political and social hierarchy, a form associated with simplicity but masking complexity. Frost's profound dialogue with the tradition of classical and Biblical pastoral literature is the subject of my own essay; his devotion to ancient Greek and Roman conceptions of poetry and poetic inspiration – Horace, Virgil, Ovid, Euripides – is the subject of Helen Bacon's "Frost and the ancient muses." Only a classicist of Bacon's immense learning could perceive the subtlety of Frost's use of the ancients. Though Frost's poetry invites longing for a lost Eden or Arcadia, his vision constantly resists the temptations of nostalgia while refusing to make grandiose claims about the difficulties of modernity. In fact, Frost's lover's quarrel with the spirit and substance of modern science distinguishes his vision of nature and man's place in it from almost all other modern poets.

Frost was hardly dismissive of his New England predecessors; he praised Edwin Arlington Robinson for his practice of "the old-fashioned way to be new." Frost's own newness is subtle, rarely seeking after shocking effect. The possibilities of ordinary language and public discourse fascinated him as he developed a suspicion and even contempt for the pretensions of religious and philosophical obscurity. The inexhaustible complexity of surfaces, the psychological interplay of individuals in dialogue, fascinated him as much as

the brooding intimations of inaccessible depths. Lawrence Buell has shown the extent to which Frost conceived of himself in relation to a local tradition of New England poetry and its rhetoric that includes Dickinson and Emerson as well as Longfellow.

Any discussion of Frost has to be attentive to his ideas about prosody and his emphasis on "the sound of sense." In a letter to a friend, Frost said "I give you a new definition of a sentence as a sound upon which words are strung." (*SL*, 110) Frost believed not in making new speech tones but in capturing the essential and eternal tones of voice and playing them against the strictness of the pentameter line. Frost realized what Wordsworth had proposed, "to adopt the very language of men." But he created some of the most stunning effects in "strict" and "loose" iambic lines. Timothy Steele has been studying Frost's prosodic practice for years, and his essay reveals how to hear Frost's lines as an essential aspect of reading them. Frost himself insisted not on "reading" a poem but on "saying" it, keeping open the potential vectors of meaning. Depending on how you take the tone of a phrase or sentence, the meaning of the poem shifts and beguiles keeping its freshness while still maintaining the tension and pleasure created by the expectations of meter. Though, as Steele shows, Frost's idea of capturing the "sound of sense" is both elusive and difficult. Though we have been blessed with many recordings of Frost reading his work, his public presence always presented the risk of reducing Frost's stunning multivocality to a single tone. The voice that begins a Frost poem is not necessarily the one that ends it, and a reader has to be alert to ever-shifting tones of his verse.

As extensively as Frost thought about voice, he also thought about the nature of metaphor. Frost argued that thought was dependent upon figurative language, not as mere decoration but as the basis of conceptualization. He was also aware of how much metaphors – evolution – for example, had come to dominate aspects of our culture and do much of our thinking for us. Judith Oster maps Frost's thinking about metaphor including poems that address the question of metaphor directly – "Maple," "Birches," "Revelation," and "The Silken Tent."

Frost saw poetry as a way of psychological survival in a chaotic universe. His poetry represents a continual dialogue between control and chaos, and he saw poetry as creating "a momentary stay against confusion," a something facing the nothing. The poetic act for Frost provides order and form set somewhat heroically against chaos, "a figure of the will braving alien entanglements." As he wrote in a letter to *The Amherst Student*: "The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration. What pleasanter than that this should be

so?"(*CPPP*, 740). Schopenhauer, Darwin, and James helped form and inform some of Frost's cosmology and psychology. Man attempts control in a universe that ignores him but the challenge provides some small recompense. But if there is in his poetic craft a rage for order, there is also a devilish love of chaos and subversion of the kind of control that borders on madness and tyranny. The essays of Mark Richardson and Blanford Parker explore the ways Frost's poems satisfy and confound our desire for order, purpose, and design. Frost took pleasure in chaos and waste, threats that inspired and limited the creation of order and meaning. No other twentieth-century poet gave so much force to the dialogue and tension of men and women. He and his fiancée Elinor were co-valedictorians at their high school commencement; his poetry often appears a continuation of her talk: "Dialogue as the Life Force." Such great blank verse narratives as "Home Burial," "The Death of the Hired Man," "In the Home Stretch," and the monologues "A Servant to Servants" and "Wild Grapes" present us with a new range of possibility for lyric poetry. Our propensity for taking sides becomes confounded by Frost's subtle and shifting representation of gender. Frost's women can no more readily be characterized than men. Frost found beauty in the unresolved conflict of equally worthy principles.

Equally misunderstood are Frost's politics, and his allegiances were complex and often seemingly contradictory. When Frost wrote that in life and poetry "strongly spent is synonymous with kept," he played on economic metaphors that seemed associated with "the trial by marketplace" but with irreverence toward its importance. Justice and mercy, freedom and equality, design and chaos remain unresolved tensions in his political, religious, and poetic thought. Frost loved the possibilities of individuality and freedom but recognized equally the limitations of environment; he regarded enforced egalitarianism with contempt but looked suspiciously and often with fear at excesses of the self-obsessed. The essays of Mark Richardson, Guy Rotella, and George Monteiro reveal the tension in Frost's responses to democracy, capitalism, the New Deal, and the Cold War – a passion for conflict and risk combined with a terrifying sense of limitation and ultimate annihilation. This tension can be seen in well-known lyrics such as "The Road Not Taken" but also in the stunning dramatic narratives, "The Ax-Helve," "The Self-Seeker," "The Housekeeper," and "The Black Cottage."

Frost looms as a giant figure in American literature. Most know or remember him for a few remarkable short lyrics, probably "Fire and Ice," "The Road Not Taken," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The essays in this volume discuss broad formal and thematic questions in Frost's work but also attempt to call attention to its great range – from dramatic monologues and narrative dramas to meditative lyrics. Though Frost seems an

inescapable presence, his poetry represents a great achievement in negative capability. John Cunningham's concluding essay shows the extent of that negativity as human absence becomes, paradoxically, a presence in Frost's poems. Frost disappears in the multivocal dramas of his poetry and reemerges transformed in threatening and strange persistence of otherness. We have Frost's letters, his terse and brilliant prose essays, and notebooks on which to draw for insight. But it is Frost's poetry that constantly challenges readers with contradictions, ambiguity, and uncertainty. The contributors hope these essays will take readers forward and farther into the dark of some of the most compelling poetry ever written.

1

DONALD G. SHEEHY

"Stay unassuming": the Lives of Robert Frost

> You seem to reason that because my mother was religious, I must have been religious too at any rate to start with. You might just as well reason that because my father was irreligious I must have been irreligious too . . . It would be terribly dangerous to make too much of all this.
>
> To Lawrance Thompson (1948) (*SL*, 529)

> When you get around to do my biography, don't try to make it too long, too detailed, too exhaustive and exhausting. Make it somehow sprightly and entertaining so that it will have some zip to it.
>
> To Lawrance Thompson (1954)[1]

"Robert Frost was so fascinated by the story of his life that he never tired of retelling it."[2] Thus Lawrance Thompson opened the first paragraph of the introduction to the first volume of the official biography. In the thirty-three years since the publication of *Robert Frost: The Early Years*, neither have readers of Frost tired of retelling, untelling, or simply telling off Thompson. The "Frost biographical wars," as Christopher Benfey remarks in a review of Jay Parini's 1999 *Robert Frost: A Life*, continue unabated, and at the center of the conflict stand opposed the public figure of the poet as venerable Yankee sage and the figure of the private man as "monster" inscribed in Thompson's biography. The distortion in both aspects of this Janus-Frost has in recent years drawn an impressive array of critics and biographers into the fray, among them William H. Pritchard, Stanley Burnshaw, John Evangelist Walsh, Lesley Lee Francis, Jeffrey Meyers, and, as mentioned, Jay Parini.

As a composite portrait, biographical revision has given contemporary readers a richer, more intriguingly complicated, if often contradictory, image of the poet. Working from new perspectives and often with new materials, it has shed light on aspects of the poet's character and experience obscured by layers of sentimental hagiography and pseudo-psychoanalytic formulae. In taking refutation of Thompson not only as a procedural principle but also as a moral obligation, however, biographical revision has tended to look

through the official biographer rather than look at him, and thus to overlook what may be of most value in the work to which he devoted his professional life. Thompson contributes most to our understanding of Frost, I believe, by the very terms of his failure to arrive at his own. Many reasons there certainly are to dispute Thompson's biographical resolutions, but no good reason to dismiss his realizations about a Frost biographer's particular difficulties.

To an unusual extent in Frost, any consideration of the poet's life entails a reconsideration of the many and various "lives of the poet." Having achieved literary prominence in early middle-age, Frost spent virtually his entire career as the conscious – and often self-conscious – subject of one or another biographical study. Certainly, as the examples of Gorham Munson, Sidney Cox, Robert Newdick, and a host of interviewers amply testify, the entanglements of Frost's life-telling long antedate the appointment of Thompson as official biographer in 1939. What an unanticipated quarter-century of witness provided Thompson, however, was an opportunity to compile a rich variety of Frost's self-accounting and the obligation – or so he came to believe – to resolve them fully into accord not only with each other but with a body of verifiable "fact." Thompson had agreed to the stipulation that the official biography not be published until after Frost's death. As a result, he spent the next twenty-five years as the most interested – and the least disinterested – "reader" of the poet's autobiography-in-progress, an ongoing romance in and out of verse in which telling the life and living the tale had grown inextricably entwined.

"The traditional version of the problematic of autobiography," Paul John Eakin observes in *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, "has focused on the apparently antithetical claims of truth and fiction that are necessarily involved in any attempt to render the materials of a life history in a narrative form." Eakin notes, however, that a paradigm shift has occurred. "Autobiography in our time," he concludes, "is increasingly understood as both an art of memory and an art of the imagination; indeed memory and imagination become so intimately complementary in the autobiographical act that it is usually impossible for autobiographers and their readers to distinguish between them in practice."[3]

Taking liberties at the border between memory and imagination was Frost's delight – and Thompson's torment. What Eakin describes as the "play of the autobiographical act" corresponds, of course, to what Frost called the "freedom of the material." It enables, in a sense, "the figure a life makes":

> I tell how there may be a better wildness of logic than of inconsequence. But the logic is backward, in retrospect, after the act. It must be more felt than seen

> ahead like prophecy. It must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader. For it to be that there must have been the greatest freedom of the material to move about in it and to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relation, and everything but affinity . . . All I would keep for myself is the freedom of my material – the condition of body and mind now and then to summons aptly from the vast chaos of all I have lived through. (*CPPP*, 777–78)

Troubled by Newdick's biographical "sleuthing," even as he authorized it, Frost had expressed concern to John Holmes, who wrote to Newdick in March of 1939: "[Frost] said he had spent his life heaping up piles of building material – friends, experiences, memories – and leaving them behind him unused to be used sometime when, as and how he wished. He said that this material he feels is his possibly for poems, and that once shaped by another hand isn't quite his any more."[4] A concern about "rights" to raw material is still evident in 1959, when the eighty-five-year-old poet wrote to reassure Thompson that Elizabeth Sergeant's *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence*, with which he had actively cooperated, would not steal the official biography's thunder.

> I've meant to give you all the advantages, supply you with all the facts, and keep nothing back, *save nothing out for my own use even in case I ever should write my own story*. And I have left entirely to your judgment the summing up and the significance. You've had a long time to turn me over in your mind looking for some special phrase or poem to get me by. By now you may think you have plucked the heart out of my secret and I don't care if you have. All is easy between us. (*SL*, 584; italics mine)

All was *not* easy with Thompson. He had cooperated with Sergeant under the assumption that her project was not biographical but critical, and he felt himself betrayed. Frost, however, could take satisfaction in Sergeant's book. *The Trial by Existence* met Frost's primary criterion by decorously rendering the particulars of personal life not for their own sake but to convey an idealized account of the tribulations and triumphs of the poet's spirit.

Tracing the course of modern autobiographical theory, Eakin locates a source in what Stephen Marcus finds everywhere implicit in Freud – that "'a coherent story is in some manner connected with mental health,'" and that "from this perspective, 'illness amounts at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself.'"[5] Eakin dwells at length – and in strikingly Frostian terms – upon James Olney's *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (1972): "For Olney, the dominant trope of autobiography is metaphor, a term which in his extended usage includes all the 'order-produced and order-producing, emotion-satisfying

theories and equations . . . by which the lonely subjective consciousness gives order not only to itself but to as much of objective reality as it is capable of formalizing and of controlling.'"[6] Acknowledging a debt to William James, Olney defines the self in experiential and operational terms:

> The self expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors; but it did not exist as it now does and as it is now before creating its metaphors. We do not see or touch the self, but we do see and touch its metaphors: and thus we "know" the self, activity or agent, represented in the metaphor and the metaphorizing.[7]

From a "developmental perspective," as Eakin observes, "the autobiographical act is revealed as a mode of self-invention that is always practiced first in living and only eventually – sometimes – formalized in writing" (8–9). For Frost, the practice of autobiographical self-invention and its formalization in art or rhetoric were integral and continuous, woven warp-and-woof through the fabric of his poetry, prose, correspondence, and conversation. In a remarkable letter to Lawrence Conrad in 1929, Frost touched upon the unsettling effect of being shaped by another's hand in terms that anticipate not only the Jamesian belief-into-fulfillment he would expound in his essay "Education by Poetry" (1930, *CPPP*, 717), but also the meditation on being-in-time at the heart of "Carpe Diem" (1939).

> Every little while you give me a strange picture of myself in something you say. You must be mistaken in thinking of me as ever having known what I was about. The present is least of the three times I live in. The future comes next. I live in that by a number of beliefs I want left vague – God-man-and-self-beliefs. I never know what is going to happen next because I don't dare to let myself formulate a foolish hope. Much less do I know what is happening now: I am too flooded with feeling to know. I suppose I live chiefly in the past, in realizing what happened and taking credit for it just as if I had predetermined it and consciously carried it out. But Lord Lord – I am never the creature of high resolve you want to have me. I have simply go[ne] the way of the dim beliefs I speak of dimly because I don't want them brought out into the light and examined too exactly. They wont bear it I may as well admit to forestall ridicule.[8]

Contrary to critical truism, Thompson was oblivious neither to the complexities of his subject nor to the methodological indeterminacies of his genre. While his project was finally undermined, in Leon Edel's terms, by the psychological confusion of his personal involvement with his subject and by the sheer abundance of his materials, Thompson remained acutely aware of the problematic nature of his biographical enterprise. Outlining in retrospect the praxis of the "new biography," Edel described in *Writing Lives*