This new critical volume offers a fresh, multifaceted assessment of Robert Frost’s life and works. Nearly every aspect of the poet’s career is treated: his interest in poetics and style; his role as a public figure; his deep fascination with science, psychology, and education; his peculiar and difficult relation to religion; his investments, as thinker and writer, in politics and war; the way he dealt with problems of mental illness that beset his sister and two of his children; and, finally, the complex geopolitical contexts that inform some of his best poetry. Contributors include a number of influential scholars of Frost, but also such distinguished poets as Paul Muldoon, Dana Gioia, Mark Scott, and Jay Parini. Essays eschew jargon and employ highly readable prose, offering scholars, students, and general readers of Frost a broadly accessible reference and guide.

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Editor’s Preface

Robert Frost was nothing if not a man of parts, as generally able as he was variously engaged. “It takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling / To get adapted to my kind of fooling,” Frost wrote in his last volume, *In the Clearing*, published in 1962 in his eighty-eighth year (CPPP 478). The best readers of Frost have always known this. The present volume, I hope, will widen their circle, allowing for a better understanding of the poet in his many arenas of inquiry and endeavor.

We might speak of several distinct periods during which readers and literary critics have sized Frost up. The first, dating from 1913 to about 1922, was a period of uncommon (and uncommonly deliberate) innovation in English and American poetry. Frost’s reviewers regarded him as party to these innovations, particularly when his second volume, *North of Boston*, appeared in 1914. Ezra Pound championed the book. Edward Thomas saw its novelty at once. Frost seemed thoroughly “modern.” In fact, his affiliations with the so-called Georgian poets situated him such that – had the Great War not intervened – a “modernism” alternative to the one *The Waste Land* consolidated in 1922 might have emerged. Speculative literary history is worth no more than any other sort of speculative history. But let’s imagine what might have happened had the war not come. We might have seen emerge, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, an Anglo-American modernism to rival the conspicuously cosmopolitan “high-modernism” of Eliot and Pound. This alternative would have been colloquial in language. It would have been at ease with tradition and form but confined by neither. It might have brought about a new kind of drama: short plays of one to three acts, plays of the sort Lascelles Abercrombie wrote, or of the sort Frost himself wrote (and contemplated writing) at about this time – for example, the startling one-act drama *A Way Out* (1917). That play held out the promise of more to come, as did the blank-verse dialogues of *North of Boston* that drew Abercrombie and Frost together in the first place. (Only while with Abercrombie in Gloucestershire did Frost ever seriously speak
Editor's Preface

of producing a book of “out and out plays” [CPPP 678]). It would have been a modernism pragmatic in philosophy, ironical, and wry in tone, with little to none of the portent and sense of cultural crisis Eliot and Pound dealt in, even before the war. It would have been a modernism relaxed enough in its moods and modes to avoid skipping from one -ism to another (Imagism, Vorticism, and so on) – a modernism that carried itself lightly but was nonetheless dark and deep. We might well have had another way out of the impasse to which the mid- and late-Victorian poets had brought English poetry. We might have had a live alternative to what Hugh Kenner later dubbed “The Pound Era” – all the more so had Frost succeeded in his quixotic aim, in 1915, to reconstitute in New England, with Edward Thomas and Abercrombie somehow a part of it, what they had had in Gloucestershire.

But the war came. Frost left England for America in February 1915, before German U-boats made the crossing too perilous. Rupert Brooke died on a hospital ship, and Edward Thomas in battle. Abercrombie worked in a munitions factory and labored, in the years after the war, largely in the groves of academe. Frost was left to bear the standard of a modern poetry that retained its connection to “the language really spoken by men,” as Wordsworth put it, but which was also more philosophically complex, and stranger in implication, than many of its readers supposed.

By the time Frost published New Hampshire in 1923, winning the first of his four Pulitzer Prizes – unmistakable signs of “popular” success – the borders had been drawn, and the contours of the second period I have in mind were now clear. Though thoroughly modern in his embrace of American pragmatism and Darwinism, Frost was no “modern-ist.” He would remain the poet who wrote, as he put it in a 1913 letter, “for all sorts and kinds” (CPPP 668), while Pound and Eliot wrote for an audience that, though elite and small relative to Frost’s, assumed extraordinary influence, especially in the more rarified precincts of the academy, in assigning value to “modern poetry.”

A draft of the preface Frost wrote for an English edition of his poetry in 1948 contains the following passage, much of it struck from the text eventually published under the title “A Romantic Chasm”:

Suppose American to have got as far away from present-day English as present-day English has from Elizabethan or even Chaucerian. There would be the compensation that my verse by being in American would be automatically raised to the high rank of having to be annotated. It might be advertised as with glossary. It might have to be translated from American into English. Anyway it would have to be studied. And to be studied is the
great thing in life – to be studied at once and not wait for time to make us puzzling. It may be gathered that I would hardly refuse the crown of having to be studied myself if it was pressed on me. But ay me, I fondly dream.

(CP 322)

Frost omitted the last six sentences. Perhaps they register too keenly his awareness of the condescension with which critics who favored the “high” modernists treated him. Those poets certainly had achieved “the high rank of having to be annotated.” No time had to pass for readers to find them “puzzling,” and therefore obscure, and therefore darkly obscure, and therefore immensely consequential. Relevant here also are remarks Frost made in the unedited transcript of the talk he would publish as “On Emerson” (1959), likewise omitted from the published text: “It is smart today, you know, to be reading St. John Perse, or T. S. Eliot, or me. No, leave me out. Not smart. ’Cause I’m just the country boy” (CP 322). Similar resentments, if they merit that term, turn up in a 1948 talk Frost edited for publication as “Speaking of Loyalty”: “I had a questionnaire the other day from an editor. He asked, ‘What in your opinion is the present state of middle-brow literature in America?’ That was new slang to me. I’d got behind a little bit, being off in the country. I hadn’t heard of ‘middle-brow’ before. What he meant to say was, ‘You old skeezix, what’s the present state of your own middle-brow stuff?’ There was something invidious, I am sure, in that” (CP 153).

But by the 1950s, Frost’s rustication was nearing its end (even if a great many readers would not realize it until the late 1970s). Frost always had more than merely a wide readership, and more than merely a middlebrow one (A Further Range was a selection of the Book of the Month Club in 1936). He had Randall Jarrell, whose essays on Frost in Poetry and the Age (1953) offered a major (and prescient) reassessment, alert to all we now know of the poet’s immense complexity. Soon enough Frost also had Lionel Trilling who – in an address prepared for a celebration of the poet’s eighty-fifth birthday in 1959 – said this:

I had best confess as simply as possible that for a long time I was alienated from Mr. Frost’s great canon of work by what I saw in it, that either itself seemed to denigrate the work of the critical intellect or that gave to its admirers the ground for making the denigration. It was but recently that my resistance, at the behest of better understanding, yielded to admiration.

(LY 267)

Trilling then added that Frost was a “terrifying poet.” “Call him, if it makes things any easier, a tragic poet,” Trilling said, “but it might be useful every
now and then to come out from under the shelter of the literary word. The universe that [Frost] conceives is a terrifying universe. Read the poem called ‘Design’ and see if you sleep any better for it. Read ‘Neither Out Far Nor in Deep,’ which often seems to me the most perfect poem of our time, and see if you are warmed by anything in it except the energy with which emptiness is perceived” (LY 267–78). Trilling then concluded with remarks that must have startled the man he celebrated:

I hope that you will not think it graceless of me that on your birthday I have undertaken to say that a great many of your admirers have not understood clearly what you have been doing in your life in poetry. I know that you will not say which of us is in the right of the matter. You will behave like the Secret whose conduct you have described:

We dance around in a ring and suppose
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

And I hope that you will not think it graceless of me that on your birthday I have made you out to be a poet who terrifies. When I began to speak I called your birthday Sophoclean and that word has, I think, controlled everything I have said about you. Like you, Sophocles lived to a great age, writing well; and like you, Sophocles was the poet his people loved most. Surely they loved him in some part because he praised their common country. But I think that they loved him chiefly because he made plain to them the terrifying things of human life: they felt, perhaps, that only a poet who could make plain the terrible things could possibly give them comfort. (YT 268)

The record shows that some of Frost’s middlebrow readers, to whom Trilling had forthrightly condescended (“a great many of your admirers have not understood clearly what you have been doing”), rankled at the epithet now applied to their cherished poet: “terrifying.” Nevertheless, Trilling made possible new ways of thinking about “modern” American poetry that placed Frost, if not at the center, then somewhere near it.

But the new dispensation did not take root at once, or in quite the form Trilling might have preferred. And this notwithstanding such anticipations of what would later come as Reuben Brower’s fine 1963 volume, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention. What distracted many readers from a fresh engagement with the poetry, and what tarnished Frost’s reputation most as the next decade or two unfolded, were the first two volumes of Lawrance Thompson’s biography of the poet, published in 1966 and 1970. Thompson, an embittered one-time admirer of the poet, single-handedly created what has been called “the monster myth”: Frost, he averred and implied, had been a terrible father; a poet
obsessed with fame and reputation, willing to manipulate anyone to achieve the one and to protect the other; and a cold, jealous man, who harbored (yes) homicidal impulses. One need only consult the topical indices whereby Thompson dismembered his subject: Anti-Intellectual, Baffler-Teaser-Deceiver, Brute, Charlatan, Cowardice, Enemies, Escapist, Hate, Insanity, Murderer, Myth-Maker, Pretender, Rage, Retalinations, Revenge, Self-Centeredness, Vindictive, and so on. Now the poet, not the poetry, was terrifying. William Pritchard deals ably with the ensuing biographical controversies in the present volume. Another indispensable treatment of them is Donald G. Sheehy’s “The Poet as Neurotic: The Official Biography of Robert Frost,” published in 1986. Suffice it to say that Thompson’s three-volume assault on his subject, its value as a primary record notwithstanding, shifted debates about Frost from the poetry to the life.

But fortunately Frost did not need Lionel Trilling to make him intellectually respectable, and, ultimately, he emerged relatively unscathed by Thompson’s effort to make him personally unrespectable. For decades, through his presence in classrooms at Amherst College, Frost had, wittingly or not, been doing work that would produce his best readers, Reuben Brower, William Pritchard, and Richard Poirier among them. Poirier opened up a new era in Frost studies with the publication, in 1977, of Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing. That book and the two that followed – The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections and Pragmatism and Poetry – place Frost in the main line of a thoroughly “modern” American poetry. This poetry, though not “difficult” to the point of forthrightly requiring annotation, is “dense” in a way, and to a degree, that rivals the work of any of Frost’s contemporaries (the terms quoted here are Poirier’s). To this list I would add Frank Lentricchia’s Modernist Quartet (1994); my own The Ordeal of Robert Frost (1997), at least insofar as it derived from a dissertation written under Poirier’s direction (I make no particular claim for it here); Robert Faggen’s Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin (1997), the first major study to take the measure of Frost’s commitments to Darwin; Katherine Kearns’s Robert Frost: A Poetics of Appetite (1994), an unusual and provocative book, indebted to literary theory as that had developed in the 1970s and 1980s; Robert Bernard Hass’s Going by Contraries: Robert Frost’s Conflict with Science (2002); Tyler Hoffmann’s Robert Frost and the Politics of Poetry (2001); and Tim Kendall’s The Art of Robert Frost (2012). We will certainly never speak of the first half of the twentieth century as The Frost Era. But few in the academy still think of it as The Pound Era, while Eliot’s peculiar influence, from 1922 down
through the 1960s, has come to seem a thing more institutional in force than definitive in character.

Now we enter upon yet another era, not merely in Frost studies but in the study of “modern” American poetry generally, occasioned by the publication of new and long-overdue editions of Frost’s writings by Harvard University Press. *The Notebooks of Robert Frost* appeared in 2006, bringing to light hundreds of pages of material never before published. *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost* followed in 2007. Underway now is the first comprehensive edition of the poet’s letters, scheduled for release in four volumes, the first of which appeared in 2014. This edition will more than treble the number of available letters. And it will allow (among many other things) for a better assessment – an assessment from the vantage point of a poet no longer consigned to middlebrow-dom or to a Lawrence Thompsonian Purgatory – of precisely the developments leading to the consolidation of a “high modernism” that, from 1922 until the 1970s, largely excluded Frost from its syllabus. Should *Robert Frost in Context* – appearing more or less coincident with Volume 1 of the letters, and in the wake of the *Notebooks* and the *Collected Prose* – spark off its own novelties in responses to the poet, my hopes for it will have been answered.

**NOTES**


2 *American Literature* 58.3 (October 1986): 393–410.

3 It took some thirty years to undo the damage Thompson wrought, but the job has been ably undertaken by (in addition to Poirier and Pritchard) Stanley Burnshaw, Donald G. Sheehy, Lesley Lee Francis, John Evangelist Walsh, and Jay Parini. However, I should note here that the “monster myth” still persists outside the circle of those well acquainted with the poet.

Abbreviations

References to works listed here are given throughout the volume as abbreviations followed by page number.

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