Stanley Burnshaw: On Robert Frost's Life and Career

Frost, Robert (26 Mar. 1874-29 Jan. 1963), poet, was born Robert Lee Frost in San Francisco to Isabelle Moodie, of Scottish birth, and William Prescott Frost, Jr., a descendant of a Devonshire Frost who had sailed to New Hampshire in 1634. The father was a former teacher turned newspaper man, a hard drinker, a gambler, and a harsh disciplinarian, who fought to succeed in politics for as long as his health allowed. In the wake of his death (as a consumptive) in his thirty-sixth year, his impoverished widow, with the help of funds from her father-in-law, moved east. She resumed her teaching career in the fall of 1885 in Salem, New Hampshire, where Robert and his younger sister were enrolled in the fifth-grade class. Soon he was playing baseball, trapping animals, climbing birches. And his mother, who had filled his early years with Shakespeare, Bible stories, and myths, was reading aloud from Tom Brown's School Days, Burns, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Wordsworth, and Percy's Reliques. Before long he was memorizing poetry and reading books on his own.

Frost's high school years in Lawrence, Massachusetts, marked a further change. Greek and Latin delighted him; at the end of the first year he was head of his class. An older student, Carl Burell, introduced him to botany and astronomy. More important, Frost became a promising writer: his poem "La Noche Triste," inspired by William H. Prescott's History of the Conquest of Mexico (1843), appeared in the April 1890 issue of the high school Bulletin, of which he was soon made editor. He joined the debating society, played on the football team, and again was head of his class. At the beginning of his senior year he fell in love with Elinor White, who had also published poetry in the Bulletin. On commencement day (1892) they shared valedictory honors and, before summer ended, pledged themselves to each other in a secret ritual.

In the fall they went their separate ways: Elinor to St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, Frost to Dartmouth on a scholarship and with his grandfather's aid. Though he relished his courses in Latin and Greek and his own wide reading of English verse, in particular Francis Turner Palgrave's Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language, the campus life dismayed him. Isolated and restless, he quit at the end of December, being needed, he said, to take over his mother's unruly eighth-grade class. He was nursing the hope that Elinor might give up school to marry him, but when she returned in April his attempts to persuade her failed.

After working for months as a trimmer of lamps in a woolen mill in Lawrence, Frost turned to teaching in grade school, while also writing poetry. At the end of the term, startling news greeted him: the New York Independent had accepted "My Butterfly: An Elegy," with a stipend of $15. His first professionally published poem would appear in November--he could earn his living as a writer! Once again he implored Elinor to marry him; once again she refused. Convinced there was now another suitor, he engaged a printer to make two leather-bound, gold-stamped copies of Twilight, each containing five of his poems. He took the train to Canton, knocked at her door, and handed her his gift. The inimically cool reception hurled him into despair. Pained and distraught, he destroyed his copy and went home. Still distraught, on 6 November he set out for the Dismal Swamp in Virginia--to throw his life away? punish Elinor? make her relent? On 30 November 1894, frightened and worn, he was back in
Lawrence. Before long he became a reporter, then returned to teaching. Elinor, having finished college, also taught in his mother's private school. Then at long last, on 19 December 1895, they were married by a Swedenborgian pastor. Nine months later, Elliot, a son, was born.

They both kept working as teachers, and Frost kept publishing poems. In the fall of 1897, thanks to his grandfather's loan, Frost, at age twenty-three, entered Harvard in the hope of becoming a high school teacher of Latin and Greek. Certain courses proved meaningful, most of all in the classics and geology, but also in philosophy with Hugo Münsterberg, who assigned Psychology: Briefer Course by William James, Frost's "greatest inspiration," then absent on leave. In March 1899, however, severe chest and stomach pains combined with worries about his ailing mother and pregnant wife forced him to leave Harvard.

Medical warnings--the threat of tuberculosis--drove Frost from the indoor life of teaching. In May 1900, with his grandfather's help, he rented a poultry farm in Methuen. Two months later, Elliot, the Frosts' three-year-old, became gravely ill with cholera infantum; on 8 July he died. Frost flailed himself for not having summoned a doctor in time, believing that God was punishing him by taking his child away. Elinor, silent for days, at last let fly at him for his "self-centered senselessness" in believing that any such thing as a god's benevolent concern for human affairs could exist; life was hateful and the world evil, but with a fourteen-month-old daughter, Lesley, to care for, they would have to go on. And when their landlord ordered them to leave by fall, Elinor took matters in hand. She persuaded Grandfather Frost to buy for their use the thirty-acre farm that her mother had found in Derry, New Hampshire, and to arrange, in addition, for Carl Burell, Frost's high school friend, to move in to help with the chores.

The "Derry Years" (1900-1911) were especially creative ones, bringing forth--complete or in draft--nearly all of A Boy's Will (1913), much, if not most, of North of Boston (1914), many poems of Mountain Interval (1916), as well as some that appeared in each of his later books. Yet at times in the first two years he was deeply depressed: in November 1900 his mother died; in July 1901, his other firm supporter, Grandfather Frost. But the latter's will bequeathed to his grandson an immediate annuity of $500 and after ten years an annuity of $800 and the deed to the Derry property.

Frost continued to write at night: poems and articles for poultry journals. He enjoyed working the farm by day and learning about the countryside and the lives of its people. By 1906, though fairly well off compared to his neighbors, yet with four children under seven, he was pressed for money. With the aid of a pastor-friend and a school trustee who admired his poems, he obtained a position at the nearby Pinkerton Academy, which he held with outstanding success. A pedagogic original, he introduced a conversational classroom style. He directed students in plays he adapted from Marlowe, Milton, Sheridan, and Yeats. He revised the English curriculum. And besides teaching seven classes a day, he helped with athletics, the student paper, and the debating team. At the end of five years, utterly exhausted, he resigned.

In the fall of 1911 he was teaching again, part time in the Plymouth, New Hampshire, Normal School. But in December he announced to his editor-friend at the Independent, Susan Ward, that "the long deferred forward movement you have been living in wait for is to begin next year." In July 1912 he started making plans for a radical change of scene. When he suggested England to Elinor as "the place to be poor and to write poems, 'Yes,' she cried, 'let's go over and live under thatch.' "
On 2 September 1912 the Frosts arrived in London. They stayed there briefly before moving into "The Bungalow" in Beaconsfield, where they would live for eighteen months. Elinor, charmed by the "dear little cottage" and its long grassy yard, strolled the countryside with the children; Frost traveled at will to London—forty minutes by train—roaming the streets, the bookshops, "everywhere." Before long he was finishing the manuscript of A Boy’s Will that he had brought to England and adding a few new poems. In October the book was accepted by David Nutt for publication the following March.

Through the next few months Frost was seized by a powerful surge of creativity, producing twelve or more lengthy poems, each strikingly different from the brooding narratives of A Boy’s Will: dialog-narratives in a style of “living” speech new to the language, exploring the inward lives of ordinary people in the New England countryside. By April 1913, most of (if not all) the poems that would constitute North of Boston had been written.

At the January 1913 opening of Monro’s Poetry Bookshop Frost was urged by the poet Frank Flint to call on Ezra Pound (whom he had never heard of), a reviewer for various journals. Frost waited until 13 March, about a week before A Boy’s Will was to appear. At Pound’s insistence, they walked to the publisher’s office for a copy. On their return, Pound started reading at once, then told his guest to "run along home" so he could write his review for Poetry, a new American monthly. In the next few weeks, thanks to Pound and Flint, Frost came to meet some of the best-known writers then living in England, including Yeats, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Richard Aldington, and Ford Madox Ford.

A Boy's Will, finally issued on 1 April 1913, elicited favorable but qualified reviews. Chronicling the growth of a youth from self-centered idealism to maturity and acceptance of loss, the thirty-two lyrics offered few hints of the masterful volumes to come, except for those in "Mowing," "Storm Fear," and scattered passages. Yeats pronounced the poetry "the best written in America for some time," leading Elinor to "hope"—in vain—that "he would say so publicly." Happily, in the fall, on his return from a family vacation in Scotland, Frost was greeted by two extraordinary tributes in the Nation and the Chicago Dial and a superb review in the Academy.

During the next few months, Frost came to know the writers Robert Bridges, Walter de la Mare, W. H. Davies, and Ralph Hodgson; the Georgian poets Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Gibson, Lascelles Abercrombie; and the essayist and poet Edward Thomas, who would become his bosom friend. With Flint and T. E. Hulme he discussed poetics, having spoken in letters to his Pinkerton friends John Bartlett and Sidney Cox of "the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre" and "the sentence sound [that] often says more than the words." He also wrote that he wanted not "a success with the critical few" but "to get outside to the general reader who buys books by the thousands."

In April, badly strained for funds, Frost moved his family 100 miles northwest of London to an ancient cottage, not far from Abercrombie's and Gibson's, in the rolling Gloucestershire farmland near Dymock. On 15 May North of Boston appeared, to be hailed in June by important reviews, particularly those by Abercrombie ("there will never be," said Frost, "any other just like it"), Ford Madox Ford ("an achievement much finer than Whitman's"), Richard Aldington ("it would be very difficult to overpraise it"), and Edward Thomas ("Only at the end of the best pieces, such as 'The Death of the Hired Man,' 'Home Burial,' 'The Black Cottage,' and 'The Wood-pile,' do we realize that they are masterpieces of a deep and mysterious tenderness"). By August, Frost’s reputation as a leading poet had been firmly established in England, and Henry Holt of New York had agreed to publish his books in America. By the end
of 1914, however, financial need forced him to leave Britain.

When Frost and his family returned to the United States in February, he was hailed as a leading voice of the "new poetry" movement. Holt's editor introduced him to the staff of the New Republic, which had just published a favorable review of North of Boston, and Tufts College invited him to be its Phi Beta Kappa poet. Before the year's end, he had met with Edwin Arlington Robinson, William Dean Howells, Louis Untermeyer (who would become his intimate friend), Ellery Sedgwick of the Atlantic Monthly, and other literary figures. In the following year he was made Phi Beta Kappa poet at Harvard and elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Mountain Interval, which appeared in November 1916, offered readers some of his finest poems, such as "Birches," "Out, Out--," "The Hill Wife," and "An Old Man's Winter Night."

Frost's move to Amherst in 1917 launched him on the twofold career he would lead for the rest of his life: teaching whatever "subjects" he pleased at a congenial college (Amherst, 1917-1963, with interruptions; the University of Michigan, 1921-1923, 1925-1926; Harvard, 1939-1943; Dartmouth, 1943-1949) and "barding around," his term for "saying" poems in a conversational performance. Audiences flocked to listen to the "gentle farmer-poet" whose platform manner concealed the ever-troubled, agitated private man who sought through each of his poems "a momentary stay against confusion." In the great short lyrics of New Hampshire (1923) and West-Running Brook (1928)--such as "Fire and Ice," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," and the title poem of the latter book--a bleak outlook on life persuasively emerges from the combination of dramatic tension and nature imagery freighted with ambiguity. Only the will to create form, the poet in effect says, can stave off the nothingness that confronts us as mortal beings.

In 1930 Frost won a second Pulitzer Prize for Collected Poems--the first had been won by New Hampshire--and in the next few years, other prizes and honors, including the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship of Poetry at Harvard. However, when A Further Range appeared in 1936, several influential leftist critics, unaware that Frost had "twice been approached" by the New Masses "to be their proletarian poet," attacked him for his conservative political views, ignoring the bitter meanings in "Provide, Provide" and such master poems as "Desert Places," "Design," and "Neither Out Far nor In Deep." A Further Range earned him a third Pulitzer Prize in May 1937. Ten months later, on 26 March 1938, Elinor died and his world collapsed. Four years before, in the wake of their daughter Marjorie's death, they had helped each other bear the grief. Alone now, wracked in misery and guilty over his sometimes insensitive behavior toward Elinor, he hoped to find calm through his children, but Lesley's rages only deepened his pain. For some time he continued to teach, then resigned his position, sold his Amherst house, and returned to his farm. In July Theodore Morrison invited him to speak at the Breadloaf Writers' Conference in August. Frost's lectures enthralled his listeners, but at times his erratic public behavior drew worried attention. To the great relief of his friends, Kathleen Morrison, the director's wife, stepped in to offer him help with his affairs. He accepted at once and made her his official secretary-manager.

Weeks before, however, Kathleen had called at his farm to invite him to visit her at a nearby summer house. Before long he proposed marriage, but she insisted on secrecy, on maintaining appearances. "We wanted to marry," he told Stanley Burnshaw, his editor in the 1960s. "It was all decided. But you know how matters seem at times--others to think of . . . It was thought best," he repeated, "It was thought best"--marriage without benefit of clergy, an altered way of life. He continued to bard around and to teach, residing from January through March at "Pencil Pines," his newly built Miami retreat; at his Cambridge house until late May;
then in Ripton, near Breadloaf, for the summer; and in Cambridge again through December.

During the 1940s Frost published four new books: A Witness Tree (1942), inscribed "To K.M./For Her Part in It," containing some of his finest poems, among them "The Most of It" and "The Silken Tent," and for which he received his fourth Pulitzer Prize; two deceptively playful blank verse dialogs, A Masque of Reason (1945) and A Masque of Mercy (1947), on the relationship between God and man, to be "taken" in light of his statements on "irony . . . a kind of guardedness" and "style . . . the way the man takes himself . . . If it is with outer humor, it must be with inner seriousness"; and fourth, Steeple Bush (1947), his weakest volume, although it included "Directive," one of Frost's major poems. None but his intimates knew of the decade’s griefs: his son Carol's suicide in 1940, his daughter Irma's placement in a mental hospital in 1947.

In the last fourteen years of his life Frost was the most highly esteemed American poet of the twentieth century, having received forty-four honorary degrees and a host of government tributes, including birthday greetings from the Senate, a congressional medal, an appointment as honorary consultant to the Library of Congress, and an invitation from John F. Kennedy to recite a poem at his presidential inauguration. Thrice, at the State Department's request, he traveled on good-will missions: to Brazil (1954), to Britain (1957), and to Greece (1961, on his return from Israel, where he had lectured at the Hebrew University).

More important for Frost as an artist and for his readers were the changed perceptions of his works, which began with Randall Jarrell's 1947 essay "The Other Frost." Jarrell saw him as "the subtlest and saddest of poets" whose "extraordinary strange poems express an attitude that, at its most extreme, makes pessimism a hopeful evasion." Twelve years later Lionel Trilling hailed Frost at his eighty-fifth birthday dinner for his "representation of the terrible actualities of life in a new way," for though "the manifest America of [his] poems may be pastoral, the actual America is tragic." And two years earlier, in London at the English-Speaking Union, T. S. Eliot (who in 1922 had dismissed Frost's verse as "unreadable") toasted him as "perhaps the most eminent, the most distinguished Anglo-American poet now living," whose "kind of local feeling in poetry . . . can go without universality: the relation of Dante to Florence, . . . of Robert Frost to New England."

In the Clearing, Frost's ninth and last collection of poems, appeared on 26 March 1962, the date of his eighty-eighth birthday dinner in Washington, attended by some 200 guests who heard Justices Earl Warren and Felix Frankfurter, Adlai Stevenson, Mark Van Doren, and Robert Penn Warren speak in his honor. Five months later, at the president's request, Frost made a twelve-day trip to the USSR, where he met with fellow writers and with Premier Nikita Khrushchev. On his return, "bone tired" and exhausted after eighteen sleepless hours, he made some ill-considered public remark, which was taken as a slur on both Khrushchev and President Kennedy. To Frost's deep dismay, the president did not receive him.

On 2 December at the Ford Forum Hall in Boston Frost made his last address and, though admitting he felt a bit tired, he stayed the evening through. In the morning he felt much too ill to keep his doctor's appointment. After considerable wrangling, he agreed to enter a hospital "for observation and tests." He remained in its care until his death in the early hours of 29 January 1963. Tributes poured in from all over the land and from abroad. A small private service on the 31st at Harvard's Memorial Church for family members and friends was followed by a public one on 17 February at the Amherst College Chapel, where 700 guests listened to Mark Van Doren's recital of eleven Frost poems he had chosen for the occasion. Eight months later, at the October dedication of the Robert Frost Library at Amherst, President
Kennedy paid tribute to the poetry, to "its tide that lifts all spirits," and to the poet "whose sense of the human tragedy fortified him against self-deception and easy consolation."

Within a decade, however, the poet's public image was shattered by the appearance of the second volume of Lawrance Thompson's authorized biography, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1937 (1970), which reviewers took at face value to be an accurate account of a man whom Helen Vendler deemed a "monster of egotism" (New York Times Book Review, 9 Aug. 1970). Although Frost later came to have grave misgivings about his choice, he had designated Thompson his official biographer in 1939. For whatever reason, the poet felt unable to renounce that decision despite his awareness of Thompson's frequently unsympathetic, even hostile constructions of his attitudes and conduct. Although reviewers perceived in Thompson, as Vendler put it, "an affectation of fairness," they tended to subscribe, nevertheless, to the "monster-myth" that poisoned Frost's reputation. Evidence that he was not a wrecker of others' lives was soon at hand in the form of The Family Letters of Robert and Elinor Frost, edited by Arnold Grade (1972). More than a decade would pass before the tide was turned: first by W. H. Pritchard's Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered (1984) and then by Stanley Burnshaw's Robert Frost Himself (1986), which enabled Publishers' Weekly to state that "the unfortunately influential 'monster-myth' stands here convincingly corrected."

Bibliography

