George Montiero: On "The Road Not Taken"

"THE ROAD NOT TAKEN" can be read against a literary and pictorial tradition that might be called "The Choice of the Two Paths," reaching not only back to the Gospels and beyond them to the Greeks but to ancient English verse as well. In Reson and Sensuallyte, for example, John Lydgate explains how he dreamt that Dame Nature had offered him the choice between the Road of Reason and the Road of Sensuality. In art the same choice was often represented by the letter "Y" with the trunk of the letter representing the careless years of childhood and the two paths branching off at the age when the child is expected to exercise discretion. In one design the "Two Paths" are shown in great detail. "On one side a thin line of pious folk ascend a hill past several churches and chapels, and so skyward to the Heavenly City where an angel stands proffering a crown. On the other side a crowd of men and women are engaged in feasting, music, love-making, and other carnal pleasures while close behind them yawns the flaming mouth of hell in which sinners are writhing. But hope is held out for the worldly for some avoid hell and having passed through a dark forest come to the rude huts of Humility and Repentance." Embedded in this quotation is a direct reference to the opening of Dante's Inferno:

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Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost. Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was the forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear. So bitter is it, death is little more.
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From the beginning, when it appeared as the first poem in Mountain Interval (1916), many readers have overstated the importance of "The Road Not Taken" to Frost's work. Alexander Meiklejohn, president of Amherst College, did so when, announcing the appointment of the poet to the school's faculty he recited it to a college assembly.

"The Choice of Two Paths" is suggested in Frost's decision to make his two roads not very much different from one another, for passing over one of them had the effect of wearing them "really about the same." This is a far cry from, say, the description of the "two waies " offered in the seventeenth century by Henry Crosse:

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Two waies are proposed and laide open to all, the one inviting to vertue, the other
alluring to vice; the first is comborsome, intricate, untraded, overgrowne, and many
obstacles to dismay the passenger; the other plaine, even beaten, overshadowed
with boughes, tapistried with flowers, and many objects to feed the eye; now a
man that lookes but only to the outward shewe, will easily tread the broadest
pathe, but if hee perceive that this smooth and even way leads to a neast of
Scorpions: or a litter of Beares, he will rather take the other though it be rugged
and unpleasant, than hazard himselfe in so great a daunger.
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Frost seems to have deliberately chosen the word "roads" rather than "waies" or "paths" or
even "pathways." In fact, on one occasion when he was asked to recite his famous poem, "Two paths diverged in a yellow wood," Frost reacted with such feeling?"Two roads!" that the transcription of his reply made it necessary both to italicize the word "roads" and to follow it with an exclamation point. Frost recited the poem all right, but, as his friend remembered, "he didn't let me get away with 'two paths!'"

Convinced that the poem was deeply personal and directly self-revelatory Frost's readers have insisted on tracing the poem to one or the other of two facts of Frost's life when he was in his late thirties. (At the beginning of the Inferno Dante is thirty-five, "midway on the road of life," notes Charles Eliot Norton.) The first of these, an event, took place in the winter of 1911-1912 in the woods of Plymouth, New Hampshire, while the second, a general observation and a concomitant attitude, grew out of his long walks in England with Edward Thomas, his newfound Welsh-English poet-friend, in 1914.

In Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant locates in one of Frost's letters the source for "The Road Not Taken." To Susan Hayes Ward the poet wrote on February 10, 1912:

Two lonely cross-roads that themselves cross each other I have walked several times this winter without meeting or overtaking so much as a single person on foot or on runners. The practically unbroken condition of both for several days after a snow or a blow proves that neither is much travelled. Judge then how surprised I was the other evening as I came down one to see a man, who to my own unfamiliar eyes and in the dusk looked for all the world like myself, coming down the other, his approach to the point where our paths must intersect being so timed that unless one of us pulled up we must inevitably collide. I felt as if I was going to meet my own image in a slanting mirror. Or say I felt as we slowly converged on the same point with the same noiseless yet laborious stride as if we were two images about to float together with the uncrossing of someone's eyes. I verily expected to take up or absorb this other self and feel the stronger by the addition for the three-mile journey home. But I didn't go forward to the touch. I stood still in wonderment and let him pass by; and that, too, with the fatal omission of not trying to find out by a comparison of lives and immediate and remote interests what could have brought us by crossing paths to the same point in a wilderness at the same moment of nightfall. Some purpose I doubt not, if we could but have made out. I like a coincidence almost as well as an incongruity.

This portentous account of meeting "another" self (but not encountering that self directly and therefore not coming to terms with it) would eventually result in a poem quite different from "The Road Not Taken" and one that Frost would not publish for decades. Elizabeth Sergeant ties the moment with Frost's decision to go off at this time to some place where he could devote more time to poetry. He had also, she implies, filed away his dream for future poetic use.

That poetic use would occur three years later. In 1914 Frost arrived in England for what he then thought would be an extended sabbatical leave from farming in New Hampshire. By all the signs he was ready to settle down for a long stay. Settling in Gloucestershire, he soon became a close friend of Edward Thomas. Later, when readers persisted in misreading "The Road Not Taken," Frost insisted that his poem had been intended as a sly jest at the expense
of his friend and fellow poet. For Thomas had invariably fussed over irrevocable choices of the most minor sort made on daily walks with Frost in 1914, shortly before the writing of the poem. Later Frost insisted that in his case the line "And that has made all the difference"?taken straight?was all wrong. "Of course, it hasn't," he persisted, "it's just a poem, you know." In 1915, moreover, his sole intention was to twit Thomas. Living in Gloucestershire, writes Lawrance Thompson, Frost had frequently taken long countryside walks with Thomas.

Repeatedly Thomas would choose a route which might enable him to show his American friend a rare plant or a special vista; but it often happened that before the end of such a walk Thomas would regret the choice he had made and would sigh over what he might have shown Frost if they had taken a "better" direction. More than once, on such occasions, the New Englander had teased his Welsh-English friend for those wasted regrets. . . . Frost found something quaintly romantic in sighing over what might have been. Such a course of action was a road never taken by Frost, a road he had been taught to avoid.

If we are to believe Frost and his biographer, "The Road Not Taken" was intended to serve as Frost's gentle jest at Thomas's expense. But the poem might have had other targets. One such target was a text by another poet who in a different sense might also be considered a "friend": Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose poem, "My Lost Youth," had provided Frost with A Boy's Will, the title he chose for his first book.

"The Road Not Taken " can be placed against a passage in Longfellow's notebooks: "Round about what is, lies a whole mysterious world of might be,?a psychological romance of possibilities and things that do not happen. By going out a few minutes sooner or later, by stopping to speak with a friend at a corner, by meeting this man or that, or by turning down this street instead of the other, we may let slip some great occasion of good, or avoid some impending evil, by which the whole current of our lives would have been changed. There is no possible solution to the dark enigma but the one word, 'Providence.'"

Longfellow's tone in this passage is sober, even somber, and anticipates the same qualities in Edward Thomas, as Frost so clearly perceived. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant had insisted that Frost's dream encounter with his other self at a crossroads in the woods had a "subterranean connection " with the whole of "The Road Not Taken," especially with the poem's last lines:

I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I? I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.

Undoubtedly. But whereas Longfellow had invoked Providence to account for acts performed and actions not taken, Frost calls attention only to the role of human choice. A second target was the notion that "whatever choice we make, we make at our peril." The words just quoted are Fitz-James Stephen's, but it is more important that Frost encountered them in William James's essay "The Will to Believe." In fact, James concludes his final paragraph on the topic: "We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? 'Be strong and of a good courage.' Act for the best, hope for the best, and take
what comes. . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better." The danger inherent in
decision, in this brave passage quoted with clear-cut approval by the teacher Frost "never
had," does not play a part in "The Road Not Taken." Frost the "leaf-treader" will have none of
it, though he will not refuse to make a choice. Nothing will happen to him through default. Nor,
argues the poet, is it likely that anyone will melodramatically be dashed to pieces.

It is useful to see Frost's projected sigh as a nudging criticism of Thomas's characteristic
regrets, to note that Frost's poem takes a sly poke at Longfellow's more generalized awe
before the notion of what might have happened had it not been for the inexorable workings of
Providence, and to see "The Road Not Taken" as a bravura tossing off of Fitz-James
Stephen's mountainous and meteorological scenario. We can also project the poem against a
poem by Emily Dickinson that Frost had encountered twenty years earlier in Poems, Second
Series (1891).

Our journey had advanced; Our feet were almost come To that odd fork in Being's
road, Eternity by term. Our pace took sudden awe, Our feet reluctant led. Before
were cities, but between, The forest of the dead.

Retreat was out of hope,? Behind, a sealed route, Eternity's white flag before, And
God at every gate.

Dickinson's poem is straightforwardly and orthodoxically religious. But it can be seen that
beyond the "journey" metaphor Dickinson's poem employs diction?"road" and "forest"?that
recalls "The Choice of the Two Paths" trope, the opening lines of the Inferno, and Frost's
secular poem "The Road Not Taken."

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