Frank Lentricchia: On "Provide, Provide"

The entire tone and manner is that of the public poet speaking to his democratic culture. The diction is appropriately drawn from the accessible middle level, with the exception of "boughten," a regionalist trace of the authentic life, meaning "store-bought" as opposed to "homemade," the real thing as opposed to the commodified version; no major problem if the subject is ice cream or bread, but with "boughten friendship" we step into an ugly world. The bardic voice speaks, but now in mock-directives ("Die early and avoid the fate," "Make the whole stock exchange your own"), counseling the value of money and power; how they command fear; how fear commands, at a minimum, a sham of decency from others (better that than the authenticity of their meanness). Genuine knowledge? Sincerity? Devices only in the Hollywood of everyday life. Try them, they might work."

But who, really, is Frost talking to? Who is this "you"? He appears to be addressing the audience he had been reaching (for twenty years at this point) through the press and from the platform: "For you to doubt the likelihood" is a bardic reminder to the masses. "What worked for them might work for you" is cynical and contemptuous counsel offered to the same. The penultimate stanza, however, whose triplet rhyme condenses the entire poem, makes no sense in that rhetorical scheme:

No memory of having starred Atones for later disregard
Or keeps the end from being hard.

Who among the ordinary, the unassuming, the obscure from fame, has any memory of having starred, of having lost it, of having to find a way to make up for later disregard? From a rhetorical point of view, the poem becomes incoherent here, but the incoherence is interesting and, I believe, calculated: an expressive sign. We know who has this problem: Hollywood's poet, talking contemptuously to and at himself, looking down the road at a possible fare that he would not be able to say he hadn't chosen, were it to turn out to be his -- because he had made the decision to commit himself to fame's course, within the cruel range of choices our culture offers to its serious writers, whose wares are so hard to unload. America's serious writers are all like the biblical Abishag, who, though young and beautiful, could not warm King David: she could not arouse him, and her trying only degraded her.
