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THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MODERN MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

AMERICAN poets at the turn of the century had little traceable influence of a positive kind on the development of modern poetry. When Pound, Eliot, Williams, H. D., Marianne Moore, Stevens, and the other Modernist poets of their generation cast off the late-Victorian styles that were usual in America around 1900 (and in which they had composed their own early work), they turned for psychological support and technical example to poets in foreign languages, to painters and sculptors, and, among American poets, to Whitman.

But as a negative influence, American poetry from roughly 1890 to 1912 played a large part in bringing on the Modernist revolution. The need to repudiate the conventional, usually insipid, see-no-evil verse of this time acted as a motive and spur of the strongest possible kind. In fact, if we ask why the development of the Modernist mode was chiefly by American poets, one reason is that American poets had no strong, innovative, and rebellious avant-garde movement among their immediate predecessors in their own country. After 1900 English poets reacted against the Aesthetic-Decadent-Symbolist-Impressionist poets of the 1890s and returned in some ways to the traditions of English Romantic poetry (for the poetry of the Romantic period is to the modern world what the Roman classics were to Augustan England). American poets, on the other hand, grew up during the predominance of a traditional poetry that was second-rate. Naturally they eloigned themselves from it, and with fewer misgivings and greater boldness because it was visibly weak.

Their rebellion was anticipated, though timidly, in the previous generation. Inevitably the Genteel Tradition engendered countertendencies. American poetry at the turn of the century must, accordingly, be viewed from a double standpoint. With the important exceptions of Crane and Robinson, it seems more or less of one piece to readers now, for most poets cultivated the decorous, elegiac, uplifting, and so forth, using a traditional, carefully worked diction and versification. But to readers seventy years ago, the poetic scene presented an altogether different aspect. The Genteel Tradition was obviously prevalent, but opposition movements were strong. If the former monopolized prestige, the latter aroused more interest and hope. Markham, Hovey, and the Canadian Carman were read far more eagerly than their genteel contemporaries, for they conveyed a greater reality and zest. They illustrate the degree of rebellion for which publishers and an audience could then be found.

At the end of this chapter we shall come to the one great American poet of the 1890s, Edwin Arlington Robinson. He is placed there because his work both includes and goes beyond the two large tendencies explored in it, the Genteel Tradition and its counterpointing oppositions. Robinson was not anti-Genteel. He emerged from within the fold, even from within its home territory of New England. He studied hard, he practiced craftsmanship, he echoed the major Romantic and Victorian poets of England, he had the conscientious moralism of his inheritance. But along with this he assimilated elements of American regional writing—the rendering of local speech, setting, and types of character—not in the theatrical and mannered way of Riley but with a tenacious fidelity to the concrete case. He also took over methods and subjects from prose fiction and created, at his best, a poetry that was subtle, bold, contemporary, and completely original. No one else in the nineties, either in England or the United States, was writing verse remotely akin to "Richard Cory" or "Reuben Bright." He was not quite the founder of modern verse in America, for the first wave

of modern poets did not learn their art from him. But modern poetry in America begins with Robinson.

THE GENTEEL TRADITION

The phrase "the Genteel Tradition" owes its currency to George Santayana, who used it in a famous lecture ("The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," 1911) and recurred to it on many occasions. To Santayana it suggested much of what made him uncomfortable in American academic and cultural life generally, and especially in the intellectual milieu of Boston and Harvard, where he taught philosophy: vestigial Puritanism in the form of excessive moral anxiousness and timidity; vestigial Transcendentalism in the form of vague idealism, not much related to actual life; earnest pursuit of "culture" and a faith in its spiritual or quasi-religious value, with the assumption also that America lacks "culture," and hence a special deference and attraction to Europe, where "culture" was thought to have its native home. As Santayana conceived it, the Genteel Tradition was without intellectual rigor or vital force; it could not accept natural, robust realities; it could hardly even perceive them. The extent to which he had a point may be illustrated in Madison Cawein. After he graduated from high school, Cawein took a job in Louisville, Kentucky, as a cashier in Waddill's Newmarket poolrooms. It was, in fact, a gambling house, and he saw much that another poet—Whitman, for example—might have exploited, since the place was thronged with gamblers, jockeys, sports, swashbucklers, and sharpers. In the midst of this Cawein wrote, in intervals of cashing bets, such verses as,

> What wood-god, on this water's mossy curb,
> Lost in reflection of earth's loveliness,
> Did I, just now, unconsciously disturb?

For, as a newspaper interviewer explains, the gambling house would "furnish excellent material for a novelist," but "where is the poet that ever sang, who could suck inspiration from such an olio of humanity?" (This Genteel explanation was probably Cawein's.) Above all, Santayana felt, the Genteel philosophy and values failed to express fully not only the life about them but

even the life of those who cherished them. They had stifled many of the promising writers he had known at Harvard. As he told William Lyon Phelps, "All these friends of mine, Stickney especially, of whom I was very fond, were visibly killed by the lack of air to breathe. People individually were kind and appreciative to them . . . but the system was deadly."

But the Genteel tendency had only to be characterized another way, and it became one of the great, valued roads always open to the human spirit. In this prestidigitation no one was more adroit than Santayana, who would argue that there is, after all, no compelling reason why a poetry or a philosophy must express the life either of the author or of whatever time and place it happened to be composed in. If Santayana was in some moods a materialist and naturalist, in other moods he was more a Platonist and pursuer of unchanging essences. And so he could say that one's allegiances are spiritual and ideal and that one should live in eternity. Although he was the most penetrating of the many critics of the Genteel Tradition, Santayana was also, in some respects, its greatest exponent, both as a philosopher and as a poet. In him the Genteel attitude purged itself of most of its timidity and soft-headedness, which he brilliantly satirized, and presented a permanent intellectual challenge to the self-consciously American and Modernist movements that were soon to dominate poetry in the United States.

In style the Genteel type of poetry was earnest and unequivocal, traditional, abstract, well-bred, inspirational, and meticulous. The chief historical service of this style to the development of American poetry may lie in its emphasis on formal craftsmanship. It is at its best in Santayana's sonnets, for example:

> O world, thou choosest not the better part!
> It is not wisdom to be only wise,
> And on the inward vision close the eyes,
> But it is wisdom to believe the heart.
> Columbus found a world, and had no chart
> Save one that faith deciphered in the skies.

The liveliest defense of this style comes, as one would expect, from Santayana in the Preface (1922) to his poems. He notes with ironic apologies that their "language is literary," that they are enveloped in an "aura of literary and religious associations,"

(1906), sold about fifty thousand copies. Field, who spent the latter part of his life in Chicago, had a large appreciative readership in the 1890s. He wrote in dialect occasionally, but many of his poems seem bookish, especially for a newspaper jester. He composed (with his brother) a series of free translations from Horace, *Echoes from a Sabine Farm* (1892), and it was typical of this complicated, sensitive, puckish man that, while some of them are humorously colloquial and seem to slap Horace on the back, the greater part are carried out with straightforward taste and affection. Field also wrote verses for children, of which favorites include the "Dutch Lullaby" ("Wynken, Blynken, and Nod"), "Little Boy Blue," and "The Sugar-Plum Tree." Some of these share with Riley's poems an unabashed sentimentalism of which no English poet would have been capable. "Little Boy Blue," for example, would have embarrassed even Robert Louis Stevenson.

Among these newspaper entertainers was Guy Wetmore Carryl (1873–1904), perhaps the leading writer of light verse at this time. Until he retired (to a cottage that Carryl, a bachelor, named "Shingle Blessedness") he was also a journalist and magazine editor. He showed sparkling wit, skill, and charm in parodies of Aesop (*Fables for the Frivolous,* 1898), Mother Goose (*Mother Goose for Grown-Ups,* 1900), and Grimm's fairy tales (*Grimm Tales Made Gay,* 1902), and wrote for a more knowing taste than did Riley or Field.

Poetry in the vein of Riley or Field overlaps in a significant way with the unsophisticated "handyman" verse. In the one case we have poetry for the people; in the other case it is by the people. The distinction is not always easy to make, for, generally speaking, the same sentiments appear in both kinds of poetry; the difference lies in the degree of technical expertise and imagination that are brought to bear. Among the many poets who stand on the borderline—for this kind of poetry was extremely common—John Wallace Crawford (1847–1917), "The Poet Scout," is the most interesting. He was born in Ireland. Wounded in the Civil War, he learned to read and write in a Northern military hospital. After the war he moved to the Western frontier, becoming one of the original seven settlers of the Black Hills. He served intermittently as an army scout (he was also a rancher, miner, and Indian agent), and succeeded "Buffalo Bill" Cody as

chief of scouts during the campaign against Sitting Bull in 1876. He subsequently took part in the Apache wars in the 1880s. Meanwhile, he was acting as correspondent for several newspapers and also publishing stories and poems. At the end of these adventures Crawford cashed in on his reputation, making frequent lecture and reading tours. He explains that his poems were "the crude, unpolished offspring of my idle hours . . . spontaneous bubblings from a heart whose springs of poetry and poetic thought were opened by the hand of Nature amid her roughest scenes." Be that as it may, his verses have a sleek journalistic effectiveness that is not quite artless or primitive. Many are in dialect. They are humorous or sentimental ballads and songs; the sentimental ones dwell on mother, home, and death, as in "Dreaming of Mother," "Farewell, Old Cabin Home" (adapted from a popular song), and "Death of Little Kit," written "on hearing from Mr. Cody (Buffalo Bill) of the death of his little boy, Kit Carson Cody." Obviously, Crawford's experiences were vivid and novel, but they served him only for incidental details of plot and setting. His forms, phrases, feelings, and stories had been the stock property of poets at least since Sir Walter Scott, as one sees in the opening of "The Dying Scout":

> Comrades, raise me, I am dying,
>   Hark the story I will tell;
> Break it gently to my mother,
>   You were near me when I fell.
> Tell her how I fought with Custer,
>   How I rode to tell the news:
> Now I'm dying, comrades, dying—
>   Tell me, did we whip the Sioux?

EARLY MODERN POETRY: CRANE AND ROBINSON

The poems contained in the two volumes Stephen Crane (1871–1900) published in the nineties, *The Black Riders* (1895) and *War is Kind* (1899), differed diametrically from the prevailing mode. They were in free verse; instead of discursive statement, they were suggestive metaphors and parables; instead of expressing the more ideal and uplifting emotions, they attacked religious faith and cosmic optimism with bitter ingenu-

ity. Nothing in history is unprecedented, and Crane was aware of Emily Dickinson and Whitman, of Ambrose Bierce, and of English Victorian pessimists such as Edward FitzGerald. Yet he does not really resemble them or any previous or contemporary writers. In their precision and spareness, their paradox, violence, visionary satire, and grotesquerie, his poems, more than any others of the time, anticipate the Modernist mode:

> I walked in a desert.
> And I cried,
> "Ah, God, take me from this place!"
> A voice said, "It is no desert."
> I cried, "Well, but—
> The sand, the heat, the vacant horizon."
> A voice said, "It is no desert."

Crane has suffered a frequent fate of anticipators and forerunners. What seemed shocking iconoclasm became common in the next generation, and when many poets were doing more or less what he had done, his weaknesses were more readily noticed. His protest is certainly more strident than profound. His inventions, though tersely and concretely phrased, are without density or manifold interaction in the phrasing; they arrest attention, but do not hold it. And there are many passages in which Crane did not work hard enough. The first sentence of "To the maiden" might almost have been written by Wallace Stevens, but not, one imagines, the conclusion of the second:

> To the maiden
> The sea was blue meadow,
> Alive with little froth-people
> Singing.
>
> To the sailor, wrecked,
> The sea was dead grey walls
> Superlative in vacancy,
> Upon which nevertheless at fateful time
> Was written
> The grim hatred of nature.

Edwin Arlington Robinson was born December 22, 1869, in the village of Head Tide, Maine. He was the youngest of three sons of Edward Robinson, a former shipwright who kept the

local general store. The background is relevant, for this wind-swept area of Maine combined the simplicity, even poverty, of village and rural America with the New England respect for books and the cosmopolitanism often found in seafaring places. When he was six months old, his family moved to the nearby town of Gardiner, the "Tilbury Town" of his poems. A quiet, conscientious boy, he excelled at school in Latin and English and began to write poetry in his early teens, composing or reading in a rocking chair (a habit that lasted throughout his life). He went to Harvard (1891), but during his second year his father died and Robinson returned to Gardiner.

Meanwhile the family fortune had been collapsing because of unwise investments made by a kindly older brother, Herman, who was now drinking too much. His even more gifted brother Dean was becoming a morphine addict and also turning to alcohol. Both appear, years later, as disguised characters in some of the longer poems. Robinson himself had been suffering from chronic mastoiditis, often with severe pain (it finally left him deaf in one ear), and lived in fear that the growing damage of the inner ear would reach the brain and cause insanity. At home he did the chores and continued to write. Finding the magazines closed to his work (a familiar experience until his middle forties), he brought out at his own expense (it cost fifty-two dollars) a small volume, *The Torrent and the Night Before* (1896). Already we see in these poems the plain honesty and patient craftsmanship he shared with his shipbuilding ancestors. Just as the book was about to appear, Robinson's mother died, and he decided to move to New York, hoping it would be easier to find publishers for his work. Here he lived in destitution for the next ten years, except for a six-month period when, at the age of thirty, he returned to Harvard as a sort of office boy to President Eliot—a job he detested. He never married. Thin, reticent, with dark searching eyes behind the glint of his spectacles, partially deaf, he could often talk freely with one person but became quieter with two and almost tongue-tied in a group.

Robinson's next two volumes, *Children of the Night* (1897) and *Captain Craig and Other Poems* (1902), attracted little attention. Refusing to turn to hack writing, he took what positions he could find, serving for a while as a timekeeper for the subway construction. When out of work, he was able to stay alive by eating

in the cheapest restaurants or at free-lunch counters in saloons; occasionally he had to content himself with a meal consisting of a roll from a bakery. He began to drink heavily and for seven years was a near-alcoholic. President Theodore Roosevelt became interested in his work, reviewed a second edition of *Children of the Night* in *Outlook* magazine (1905), and secured him a job in the New York Custom House, which Robinson kept until 1909. Despite Roosevelt's review, magazines remained uninterested in Robinson's verse, and the rejection slips continued to mount. Meanwhile he worked on his next volume, *The Town Down the River* (1910), dedicated to Roosevelt.

In 1911, when he was forty-one, he began spending his summers at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and continued to do so until his death. This gave him increased freedom and marked a turn in his life. Here in his cabin he would sit and rock for days on end, patiently composing. Winters were spent at the home of New York friends and, after 1922, at the home of the sculptor James Fraser. A growing range as well as increasing public recognition came with the writing of this decade and a half (1911–1927): the notable volume *The Man Against the Sky* (1916); *Merlin* (1917), the first of his three long Arthurian poems; *Lancelot* (1920); *Collected Poems* (1921); *The Man Who Died Twice* (1924); *Dionysius in Doubt* (1925); and *Tristram* (1927)—after the last of which his financial struggles were ended. In 1923 (by then fifty-three) he fulfilled a lifelong dream of visiting England, where he was warmly received by writers. Though he had planned an extended visit, in a few weeks he found himself missing the stone walls and forests of New England and returned to Peterborough. Meanwhile he had tried playwriting, but without success, though two of the plays—*Van Zorn* (1914) and *The Porcupine* (1915)—were published. He also wrote several long poems of a psychological character: *Avon's Harvest* (1921), *Roman Bartholow* (1923), *Cavender's House* (1929), *The Glory of the Nightingales* (1930), *Mathias at the Door* (1931), *Talifer* (1933), and *Amaranth* (1934). He was determined, as he grew older, to bring out a volume almost every year. In January 1935 he was found to have cancer; he continued to work in the hospital on his last poem, *King Jasper*, and died on April 6, 1935, at the age of sixty-five.

Although literary historians are tempted to classify Robinson

as a Realist, the label is misleading. His verse could be described as classical or Romantic with almost equal plausibility. As the name of a literary school "Realism" may suggest ideas of style and subject not fully appropriate to Robinson; his art (in contrast to his life) never descended into what Tennyson called the troughs of Zolaism. As with Frost, his reversion to reality was more in the Wordsworthian tradition and could be described in phrases from Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*: subject matter taken from common life and presented in a language really used by men. A closer statement of Robinson's intention and success might be that he moved poetry in the direction of the novelistic.

He formed his methods in relative isolation, and it is hard to say just what models or influences counted most. He studied the Latin classics; he read the major poets and novelists of England; he acquired some knowledge of French poetry through a friend; and he put all this to use in his own verse. George Crabbe, Emerson, W. M. Praed, Whitman, Meredith, and a few others are often mentioned, but these may be affinities rather than sources. The fact is that among earlier writers no particular figure or group seems to have swayed his course very much. As for contemporaries, he seems to have emulated none. But distaste can motivate as strongly as admiration, and Robinson, scorning the magazine verse of the day, worked to be as unlike it as possible.

His achievement can be estimated in different ways. There is the impressive size and variety of the effort—1,488 pages in small print, written throughout with intelligence and integrity. There is the much smaller number of poems—about forty pages by my estimate—that are likely to last. A few, such as "Richard Cory," "Reuben Bright," and "Miniver Cheevy," miniature the whole. They do not reflect his entire range but they exhibit in flawless performance what was innovative in his art.

If one compares these poems with the typical verses in American magazines in the nineties, they stand out in the respects major poetry always does—more individuality and more mind. But there are also differences in kind that sharply illuminate how independent and new Robinson was. Poetry in the prevailing mode was usually an expression of personal feeling, earnest in tone, general in subject, "beautiful" or "poetic" in diction, image, and setting. In contrast, "Richard Cory" concentrates on a

particular character. The poem is no lyric self-expression, but an impersonal, objective report. The setting is an American town of the time, the provincial imagination engrossed and dazzled by a figure of consummate gentlemanly elegance (of royalty, as the townsfolk take it, if one regards a counterpoint in the images—"crown," "imperially slim"). The idiom, though cultured, is colloquial, not in the least "poetic." Except at the end, the poem selects the most ordinary incidents as points of focus and plays down emotion.

Above all there are the irony and humor from which the poem chiefly derives its effectiveness. The surprise ending may be a little easy, and the implied moral—something like "how little we really know about the lives of others!"—may be trite. (The "idea" of the poem, Douglas Bush suggests to me, may have been taken from a bit in *Bleak House,* chapter 22.) But what matters is the attitude of the speaker toward himself and especially toward the other townspeople: his self-awareness, ironic distance, and detached amusement with the human comedy. The poem is subtle, however, and it is easier to sense this attitude than indicate its source. It depends very much on the characterization of the speaker through language, syntax, and metrical form. The idiom ("clean favored," "in fine") is itself "admirably schooled," the syntax controlled and orderly, and the neatness of the quatrains further contributes to the impression. One infers that the speaker is an educated man and hence that his self-identification with the too-admiring townsfolk is half ironic, a circumstance that becomes especially clear in the exaggeration of the lines,

> So on we worked, and waited for the light,
> And went without the meat, and cursed the bread.

The speaker has a self-conscious, fastidious awareness of his language. In the phrase, "yes, richer than a king," the "yes" means, "yes, we even used the stock cliché," and one thus understands that the phrasing throughout is adjusted in irony to convey the sayings and feelings of the townsfolk more than his own—for example, the subtly telling cliché, "from sole to crown," or the excessive enthusiasm (and bathetic fall) in the phrase, "imperially slim." A speaker so aware must also be aware of the discrepancy between the commonplace actions of Cory (going down

town, saying "good-morning," or simply walking) and the reactions of the townspeople (staring from the pavement, "fluttered pulses," their feeling that Cory "glittered when he walked"). Even the initial metrical inversion of the third line ("He was") counts by glancing invidiously at "we" others. The result is a reflective, shrewdly humorous portrait by implication of the town and townsfolk. Low-keyed, cerebral, ironic, impersonal, mingling humor and seriousness and implicating a whole social milieu, the poem was without precedent or even parallel in the 1890s.

> Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
> We people on the pavement looked at him:
> He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
> Clean favored, and imperially slim.
>
> And he was always quietly arrayed,
> And he was always human when he talked;
> But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
> "Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.
>
> And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
> And admirably schooled in every grace:
> In fine, we thought that he was everything
> To make us wish that we were in his place.
>
> So on we worked, and waited for the light,
> And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
> And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
> Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Robinson worked in many different modes. There are poems of direct meditative reflection, such as "Credo," "Hillcrest," or "The Man Against the Sky"; poems of characterization, such as "The Poor Relation" or "Miniver Cheevy"; poems in which narrative interest predominates, such as "The Mill"; symbolist lyrics, such as the villanelle "The House on the Hill" or "Luke Havergal"; and ballad-dialogues, such as "John Gorham." But what more typifies him is the convergence of these modes in his poems that are at the same time character study, narrative (usually indirect or implied), and meditative utterance. In "Eros Turannos," for example, a story is allusively and obscurely referred to and characters are sketched in some traits as well as in their local and social setting. The poem—and this is also typ-

ical—is spoken by an onlooker (one of the townspeople), whose character also plays a role and who only partly knows and partly conjectures the circumstances he tells. He reflects upon them, but his interpretations remain inconclusive, and we are left with a sense of the complexity of this human relationship and the difficulty of deciding anything about it. "Captain Craig," to take a very different example, is a ruminative poem; but the ruminations are quoted by the narrator as part of the characterization of the Captain, who is further characterized in other ways; also there are indications of personal tensions between the narrator and the Captain. In the dramatic monologue "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," the interest centers in the characterization of Shakespeare as the subject of the monologue, but it also includes the characterization of Jonson as the speaker of it, general reflections on genius and life of which Shakespeare becomes the occasion, and the mode of discourse itself, creating a dramatic interest by its colloquial idiom, syntax, and movement—its seemingly casual, eddying, and spontaneous flow. Robinson is often compared to Frost, and this interfusion of narrative, character, reflective, inconclusive wisdom, and low-keyed, colloquial talk gives point to the comparison. Robinson worked at times, though infrequently, in Frost's chosen region of the New England countryside, producing at least two masterpieces—"Isaac and Archibald" and "Mr. Flood's Party"—that are perhaps funnier, and more loving in their fun, than anything in Frost.

If a formula could be given for a typical poem of Robinson, it would include the following elements: characterization; indirect and allusive narration; contemporary setting and recognition of the impingement of setting on individual lives; psychological realism and interest in exploring the tangles of human feelings and relationships; an onlooker or observer as speaker, making the poems impersonal and objective with respect to Robinson himself; a penchant for the humorous point of view combined with an awareness that life is more essentially tragic; a language that is colloquial, sinewy, and subtle as it conveys twists of implication in continually active thinking; a mindfulness of the difficulty of moral judgment but also a concern for it. Feeling that all this can justly be said, one wonders why Robinson's reputation is not higher. For one thing, readers are doubtless intimidated by

the volume of his productivity. It is discouraging to face so fat a book, and, like most poets, he is more enjoyably read in selections than in toto. A less trivial cause is that, amid so much writing, a great deal seems bad, or more exactly put, it practices skills that seem less important at the cost of liabilities that now seem glaring.

I am referring to the nineteenth-century pursuit of strict metrical form. Robinson, however innovative with respect to syntax and diction (the first four lines of "The Clerks" contain 38 words, of which 36 are monosyllables and 2 are dissyllables), was a traditionalist in stanzaic form and meter. Of this traditional versification he was also a master, exploiting it in different ways and in countless skillful touches. But since poetry is or should be a too-demanding art, a certain slackness (or "license") in the medium must be allowed, and from time to time conventions change as to where the slackness will be tolerated. Anyone who pays attention to the verse of the middle and later nineteenth century will find that for the sake of filling their metrical boxes poets would permit themselves writing that was turgid, clotted, needlessly involved, padded, eked out, imprecise—bad by the standards of any age. This kind of thing gives point to Pound's remark that poetry should be at least as well written as prose, and it is this that spoils, at least for present-day taste, a great many of Robinson's poems.

During the last eighteen years of his life Robinson devoted himself mainly to long narrative poems. They illustrate at large the qualities already noticed in the shorter poems. *The Glory of the Nightingales,* for example, is a study of egoism. The circumstances are that Nightingale, a man of inherited wealth in the New England town of Sharon, undergoes his first serious rebuff in life when he fails to win Agatha, she preferring Malory, a poor, idealistic physician. Nightingale takes his revenge when, learning that the stock of a mine in which Malory had invested will be worthless, he does not tell Malory, who loses all his money. Agatha dies of the shock and Nightingale rejoices vindictively. As the poem opens Malory is on his way to kill Nightingale and then himself. He finds Nightingale in a wheelchair, however, and sees that he is mortally ill. A long conversation follows in which Nightingale confesses his self-centeredness and vanity and talks of all that Malory can still do for mankind. He

makes a will leaving his fortune to Malory for a hospital, and, when Malory goes, shoots himself with Malory's pistol. The story is more indirectly told than this summary indicates, but my sketch may suggest the contemporary, novelistic, psychological, reflective mode of this and the other tales. *Merlin, Lancelot,* and *Tristram,* which deal with Arthurian material, reveal Robinson's general intentions, the tales being divested of magic and romance. In *Merlin* the wizard becomes instead an intelligent, middle-aged man whose powers of prophecy stem from reflectiveness and experience. Much of the poem is given over to the love affair between Merlin and Vivian, which is treated not as medieval romance but as "modern love" more or less in the style of Meredith.

These long narratives go on mostly for between eighty and a hundred pages and make up about two-thirds of Robinson's total output. They appear to have been admired mainly on principle and to have been more praised than read. Neither can one challenge this consensus of inattention. It is impossible to read them with more than languid interest. To ask why this is so, however, is to raise fundamental questions about the limitations and the evolution of poetry in the modern world. Robinson, to be sure, was not a storyteller of Chaucerian genius. But since the Romantic period no poet has scored a major success in narrative poems of this length, though a good many have tried. One thinks of Browning's *The Ring and the Book,* Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum,* the tales of Morris, and Yeats's *Wanderings of Oisin.* The short short story of a few hundred lines, such as Frost's "The Witch of Coos," or a series of linked lyrics making up a story, such as Meredith's *Modern Love,* seem to exhaust the possibilities open to poetry on this line. Why? Answers can only be speculative, and while we are speculating, we should keep in mind that the question of the long narrative poem overlaps the question of the long poem generally. Here again there have been few successes that cannot be reduced to the general form of a long poem made up out of linked short ones: for example, *In Memoriam, The House of Life, The Waste Land, Four Quartets, The Bridge, Paterson.* The few exceptions that spring to mind—the longer epistles of Auden or Ginsberg's *Kaddish*—are especially revealing: they succeed precisely because they avoid the more

condensed uses of language that have been the norm of poetry for the last fifty years.

Two large, historical facts explain the present state of affairs. In the eighteenth century there was a rapid disappearance of the kind of thinking that judges a poem by expectations derived from the genre to which it belongs. For practical purposes—guiding the procedures of the writer and the expectations of the reader—the traditional genres of epic and mock-epic, epistle and satire vanished, leaving the poetic scene to the lyric or to the indefinite and amorphous genre of the descriptive-meditative poem, such as Thomson's *Seasons* or Cowper's *Task.* The disappearance of definite genres for the long poem meant that every long poem had to be a more or less original and ad hoc invention and, once developed, it could not be adopted by another poet without the stigma (in the modern world) of being an imitator. Thus, there can be no second *Don Juan* simply because there is the first, no second *Four Quartets* because there is the first. The poet must not only invent an original form, he must do it, as W. J. Bate has argued, in a milieu where the possibility of new invention may seem to the poet all but exhausted.

A much more important fact is that since the eighteenth century poetry has existed in competition with imaginative prose, and that prose has increasingly devoured the possibilities open to verse. Though this applies especially to prose fiction, one should not forget the essay and the descriptive vignette. Why prose has been able to do this so triumphantly is a question that can ultimately be answered only by referring to the intrinsic potentialities of the medium; for many purposes prose is a more flexible instrument. Whatever the explanation, the process has become a vicious circle or spiral. As prose has taken over steadily more, poetry has increasingly come to mean the lyric—the short, intense utterance. This shift of expectation was complete by the middle of the nineteenth century, and one result was that the reading of poetry was relegated to rare, particular moods. But at this time poetry still retained a "popular" or at least an easily accessible idiom. A further step was taken with the development of the Modernist idiom in the 1920s. This made poetry more difficult and therefore intellectually more challenging and thus created a different audience for it. But this audience was more specialized and limited than ever before, and it was an audience

for exceptionally condensed uses of language. Readers capable of reading the current, serious prose fiction often could not read the poetry that corresponded to it, so, to some extent, a different audience developed for the two arts. Moreover, the audience for poetry—which includes poets themselves—was looking for condensed and heightened uses of language that absolutely prohibited the long poem, for the simple, practical reason that attention cannot be kept at such a pitch for long. The audience for a long poem no longer exists; and, to return to Robinson, there is particularly no audience for an attempt to write novels in verse. The reader of fiction is put off because it is poetry; the reader of poetry, because it lacks the intensity he seeks. And because these pressures of expectation are felt most of all by poets themselves as they write, their intentions are divided and they fail to accomplish either. It is extremely doubtful that, had Robinson been writing prose, he would have allowed himself the fatal excess of reflection that clogs his plots or the too-easy melodrama of the plots themselves.

I have said little about the didactic and "philosophical" poems of Robinson, for I think they present his weakest side. They are, however, large in quantity and aim and have figured prominently in criticism devoted to him. Robinson felt it was part of the duty of a would-be major poet to have a "philosophy," and in "Octaves," "Captain Craig," "Credo," "The Man Against the Sky," and a great many other poems he set forth to expound one in a more or less direct way. Yet it is hard to know just what his "Credo" was. The tendency of his mind was more to questions than to convictions, which may be more "philosophical" in the true sense but impedes didactic ambitions. Also, he was no more practiced than most poets in the rigors of philosophical expression, and his meanings blur in vague abstraction and vague metaphor. Finally, his "philosophy" in didactic poems seems to be contradicted by the sense of life that emerges more concretely in character portrait and narrative. He is often described as a Transcendentalist, which he sometimes is. At other times he simply asserts an ungrounded hopefulness:

> No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,
> For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears,
> The black and awful chaos of the night;

> For through it all—above, beyond it all—
> I know the far-sent message of the years,
> I feel the coming glory of the Light.

In the more concrete and memorable poems, however, things usually turn out badly; many of them are starkly tragic. His characters learn wisdom, if at all, through failure and suffering, and there is little happiness that is not an overcoming of sorrow. But to these generalizations there are many exceptions, and perhaps the poems are more accurately described as the play of a shrewd, reflective, and uncommitted intelligence. There is the moral and metaphysical concern of the New England mind, but also the wariness of judgment. What Robinson sees more clearly than anything else is ambiguity, complexity, open possibility—how little we can know we know.

Between 1890 and 1912 Robinson was America's most important poet, though he was not so recognized at the time. He was an encouraging example to Amy Lowell, Pound, Frost, and a few others; but he was too isolated, too incapable of self-advertisement and pushiness, and too unlucky to have much influence on later writers. What they might have learned from him, they mostly learned elsewhere. Though Robinson was briefly a favorite of Auden's at Oxford, the objectivity, impersonality, reticence, wit, and ironic poise of poetry in the thirties, the offhand, colloquial, low-keyed and glancingly humorous manner, did not come particularly from Robinson. Yet they had one of their beginnings in his lonely, obstinate experiments in Gardiner, Maine, in the early 1890s.

7

TRANSITIONS AND PREMISES

IN THE first quarter of the twentieth century new types of poetry emerged in both England and America. They were many and diverse, yet similar in two fundamental respects: they were viewed by poets and readers as distinctively "modern"; and though "modern," they could be read with pleasure by a relatively large public. These facts are reflected in the titles of parts Two and Three of this book, and the titles are almost interchangeable. "Poetry in Rapport with a Public" deals chiefly with Britain. But America's early modern poetry was generally not the compressed, disjunctive, oblique, allusive, and sardonic writing for an elite that we now usually associate with Modernism. In Lindsay, Sandburg, Masters, Frost, and Amy Lowell it was accessible, sympathetic, and sometimes deliberately popular. Even Imagism had, as it turned out, a broad, intrinsic appeal; although it began as an avant-garde defiance and corrective to the "conservatives," it ended in the 1930s as a leading style of verse in high school yearbooks. Hence Part Three, which mainly takes up the new poetry of America, is entitled "Popular Modernism," the purpose being to distinguish this first phase of the modern movement from that which developed subsequently. But in Hardy, Lawrence, the Georgians, and the poets of the First

World War, British poetry also seemed modern, and although it was a different modernity from that of the United States, it was equally open and accessible.

These generalizations are made with exceptions; the most important are the works of Ezra Pound after 1919 and of T. S. Eliot. Whoever writes literary history finds that the greatest figures present problems to which there are no perfect solutions. The doings and influence of Pound and Eliot loom large in the period we are now taking up, the first quarter of the century, yet discussion of them is mostly deferred for the fourth part of the book, where we concentrate on the creation of the high Modernist mode. Eliot and Pound were the chief inaugurators of an essentially different, anti-popular poetry, the poetry that in the thirties and forties gradually, partially, and temporarily displaced the sorts that had prevailed in the 1910s and 1920s. As for Yeats, his work from roughly 1900 to 1922 was not untypical of the period, except in its excellence. He was probably the single most important contemporary influence on other poets as well, yet lengthy discussion of his career is also postponed. In the great poems of his last period Yeats participated in the high Modernist mode, at least in some respects, but he is the subject of the final chapter of this volume because his development was so representative that it allows us to hold in one final perspective much of the general history of poetry in his time.

THE DOMINANT MODE

Aside from Pound and Eliot, the major poets of the opening twenty-five years of the century were Hardy, Yeats, and Frost. In these poets and in many ancillary figures we recognize a prevailing mode of the period. It may be provisionally characterized as a quietly reflective, colloquial poetry of actual life. As modal poems one might think of Hardy's "Afterwards," Frost's "After Apple-Picking," or Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole." A few lines illustrate that, despite individual differences, the poems are essentially similar in kind and unlike anything in the British or American poetry noticed up to now. Here is Hardy:

When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous
 stay,
 And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,
Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk, will the neighbours say,
 "He was a man who used to notice such things"?

Frost:

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.

and Yeats:

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

These poems were published between 1914 and 1917. They represent at its most accomplished the dominant kind of poetry in the decade before *The Waste Land*, of which some representative lines are:

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
While I was fishing in the dull canal
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him.

The passage from Hardy exhibits his strengths of honest accuracy and control. The peculiar activity of the word "tremulous" in the first line may be noticed, and the uncouth, original exactness of "flaps" in the second. The passage from Yeats loses in quotation, partly because much of the effect of the poem lies in the shapeliness of the whole. But even in excerpt, the limpid beauty is felt. The teasing skill of Frost's meditative evasion may be focused in our uncertainty how to take the word "heaven," or what, if anything, may be meant—more than what is said—by the finality of "I am done with apple-picking now."

Attempting to describe the mode, we may begin by remarking that it gives the effect of talk—a leisurely, reflective, slightly heightened talk which is entirely individual with each writer. Such talk is a more difficult art than the poets of the nineties achieved, though it pretends to be no art at all. The idiom is colloquial and fresh, though also controlled and deliberated. The versification is traditional, but a little roughened and irregular. For theme or occasion the poems go to actual and familiar experience. Story elements are present: if there is no narrative, at least there is incident, character, and locality. In such respects the poems might be called "realistic," but their realism combines with the associatively pleasant or "agreeable." In what may have been an implicit protest against urbanization, mechanization, and deracination, this poetry tends especially to refer to the countryside and its traditional yet still contemporary objects and ways of life. Toward these the writer feels a quiet respect, a *pietas,* and whatever the more particular emotions of particular poems, this is a basic attitude conveyed by the poetry. (It contrasts sharply with the satire of *The Waste Land.*) It is a reflective poetry, but it wages no argument and reaches no conclusions.

The intention and balanced appeal of the mode also reveal themselves in what it avoids. It is as far as possible both from *l'art pour l'art* and from Impressionist notation of fugitive moments, and equally far, on the other hand, from a poetry of opinions and emotional generalities. It does not "soar into the Empyrean," neither does it strike rhetorical blows on behalf of some party or policy. It reminds us neither of Dowson, Symons, Tennyson, Browning, Kipling or of any of the Genteel poets of America. Symbolism, if there is any, comes without traditional emblems, portentous emotions, or airs of mystery, but is present only as an elusive suggestion, a glimpse of possible further vistas of meaning. *Symboliste* technique, with its deliberate concentration and obscurity, is utterly rejected. There are narrative elements, but rarely narrative poems. In poems typical of this mode, form is carefully studied and controlled, but the purpose is to repudiate formalism, if by that we mean the prizing of form for its own sake. Adhering to the traditionally familiar and ordinary, this poetry shuns whatever might seem either Decadent or Romantic—for example, the aberrant, the exotic, the remote, the wonderful—and it equally refuses ostentation of modernity.

There are no Impressionist vignettes of city life, neither is there the bleak, accusing realism occasionally found in Davidson. To sum up, this poetry makes a quiet, somewhat cautious approach to actual experience, feeling, and reflection, and in doing so preserves poetic pleasantness. Though an American, Robert Frost, was one of the masters in this style, the style itself was based on a traditional, typically English way of writing. It has its nearest precedents and affinities in the quiet lyric or short meditative poem of the Romantic period—Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," or Wordworth's "There Was a Boy" and "The Solitary Reaper."

POETS AND SCHOOLS

From the 1910s on Thomas Hardy was an important influence on younger poets, an influence that has never ceased to be felt. Yet to the present day the scope and power of his vision, at once tender, homely, grotesque, and terrifying, has not been generally appreciated. Already a well-established novelist, he published his first volume of verse in 1898. It might be chosen to inaugurate the modern period in poetry.

Aside from Hardy and Yeats, the first ten years of the century were dominated in England by two groups of poets: Edwardian entertainers, such as Kipling, Chesterton, Belloc, Noyes, Newbolt, and Masefield; and studious workmen in traditional veins, such as Bridges, de la Mare, Sturge Moore, Laurence Binyon, James Elroy Flecker, and Lascelles Abercrombie. The term "entertainers" might have been welcomed by the poets to whom it refers, but does not imply that they lacked a serious and intelligent purpose. The other main trend in Edwardian verse might be characterized as a use of poetry for solace through beauty. To poets of this school the entertaining versifiers appeared intolerably journalistic and slapdash. They themselves had a touch of the academic, if by "academic" one means an art that is learned, intelligent, controlled, and possibly quite admirable but that lacks strong individuality and freshness.

In order to judge these poets rightly, one must keep in mind their premises. To them the function and justification of poetry was its rich presentation of "beauty." The beauty they had in mind was not, however, the austere perfection of form that the

term had suggested to the Aesthetes. It was, instead, a vaguer derivative of the Romantic tradition, and might be briefly characterized as the idealistic in theme or sentiment combined with the associatively pleasant in imagery. A well-known sonnet of Masefield's illustrates this conventional, widespread type of poetry:

> Be with me, Beauty, for the fire is dying,
> My dog and I are old, too old for roving.

The Beauty here addressed is companionable and can be invoked along with cozy images of dog and fireside (the "fire" here is literal as well as metaphorical). The idea of poetry presupposed is one that descends, to repeat, from the later eighteenth century. As Keats put it in the line quoted earlier, the "great end" of poetry is "To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man." Unless one grasps how generally in the opening years of this century it was assumed that poetry is uplifting, solacing beauty, one cannot fully appreciate the countertendencies. Yeats, Brooke, Owen, Eliot, and many other poets trained themselves not to write in this way only by effort. It may be added that the partisans of poetic beauty were entrenched in the leading journals; if a poet offended their sense of values, their reviews could be gruesome. In the middle phase of his career Yeats was abused for the lowness and coarseness of many of his poems, and even to Yeats the work of Eliot hardly seemed poetry. No wonder Marianne Moore later reproached a rose for its blooms: "You do not seem to realize that beauty is a liability rather than an asset."

The poetry of Ireland forms a third distinct strain. These were the formative years of the Irish literary Renaissance, when the Abbey Theatre was entering upon its fame, and Joyce in exile was writing *Ulysses*. Throughout the teens and twenties Irish poets continued the national impulse that had quickened at the end of the last century. Poems were often patriotic celebrations, as in Yeats's "Easter, 1916" (which voiced, however, more doubts and qualifications than pleased Ireland at this glorious hour) and in a great many by Dora (Sigerson) Shorter, who is said to have died of heartbreak and overwork after the failure of the Easter Rebellion. Or, like Padraic Colum in his early volumes, poets took their subjects from Irish legend, folklore, and

popular story. Or, as in the poems of James Joyce, they repudiated the patriotic milieu by aspiring only to excellence.

With the year 1911 a number of circumstances tended to create a wider public for poetry. Masefield's *The Everlasting Mercy* was published in that year. The poem had enough narrative speed to hold interest and enough lower-class realism in setting and dialogue to arouse controversy; it was a bold challenge, going further even than Kipling to overthrow poetic proprieties. It caused much discussion and encouraged other poets to dare in other ways. In 1912 the first of Edward Marsh's anthologies, *Georgian Poetry, 1911–1912*, appeared. The name, chosen in reference to the new king, George V, was intended to suggest that a new age of major poetry had arrived. The dawn could be seen bursting in Marsh's anthology, which, however, exhibited not merely poets who were just becoming known but such veterans as de la Mare, Chesterton, and Gordon Bottomley. What Marsh printed in his anthologies was adventurous enough to provoke discussion, but his taste was representative of middle-class readers and the Georgian anthologies enjoyed booming sales. This commercial success called forth a number of other anthologies, all of which tended to win new readers for poetry. A third factor was the outbreak of war in 1914, which England entered with a high-minded, emotional idealism, for which poetry seemed the especially appropriate vehicle. Any number of ardent civilians wrote poems for the first time, and any number of others read almost the first contemporary poetry of their lives. The mood of that hour was caught memorably in Brooke's five patriotic sonnets. They are the poems, as has been remarked, of a civilian in uniform; the poems of experience were to come two years after Brooke's death and to express a harshly disillusioned view of the war.

"Georgian" poetry continued to be written and read throughout the 1920s; it has in fact never ceased, though it has gone through many mutations. But Robert Frost had been writing a poetry that was essentially of the Georgian type before the Georgians were recognized as a school. It is partly because his work so finely answered to the taste of the Georgian poets and their readers that he first made his reputation in England rather than in America. Generally speaking, the English poets of the First World War began as Georgians, and their poetry gradually

changed as they underwent the appalling conditions and experiences of combat in the trenches. The intention of some of these poets is symbolized by the fact that Owen carried with him, on leave in England, photographs of casualties; the home patriots must see what war is like. They wrote under the shock and moral outrage of immediate experience as soldiers, and their purpose was to show the blundering slaughter for what it was and to stop it. To this end they summoned violence in shockingly vivid description, bitter irony, satire, and invective—modes of utterance that had been explored only occasionally before the war in a few poems of Rupert Brooke, and, more cautiously, in Yeats, Hardy, Wilfrid Gibson, and a few others. The War Poets were perhaps too close to their subject, but they widened the possible tones and subjects of poetry, and it has never been the same since.

8

THOMAS HARDY

EVEN when they are dull, Hardy's poems are characteristic and, therefore, fetching. We like the personality they reflect—the compassion, reflectiveness, wistfulness, interest in character and story, elegiac and commemorative respect for human fates. Above all, there is the appeal of the firsthand, of experience and feeling that seem caught from life rather than literature. That we should have this impression is an achievement of Hardy's art. His style was an instrument for integrity, though in speaking of "integrity" one has in mind, in his case, not wholeness or unity but honesty, fidelity to his own self-divided, complex responses.

Born in Dorset, near Dorchester, in 1840, the son of a prosperous stonemason, Hardy was apprenticed at sixteen to a local church architect and went on to study in London (1862–1867) under the noted architect Arthur Blomfield. He continued to practice this profession for another six years. On a visit to Cornwall he met Emma Lavinia Gifford, who encouraged his growing interest in writing, and they were married in 1874. It was his lifelong conviction that "in verse was concentrated the essence of all imaginative and emotional literature." But his own poems were rejected by editors whose stock conceptions of poetry they offended. For thirty years Hardy wrote mainly

sive specters. Like the Edwardians, they reacted against the fin de siècle. The poets they loked to for paternal example were the English Romantics, and, among writers nearer in time, Housman, Hardy, Masefield, Yeats, and Synge. They repudiated the noisier side of Edwardian verse—that, for example, of Chesterton, Kipling, and Noyes—but they continued the Edwardian cultivation of the "agreeable," especially the appreciative treatment of countryside. Their technique avoided Victorian "rhetoric" and the lapidary perfectionism of the nineties, though they were intent on tightening and grooming the slipshod verse of the Edwardian narrative poets. The result was a traditional and popular style, easy, smooth, and perspicuous, usually impersonal and cautiously colloquial, with none of the dissonance, dislocation, and shock effects of the Modernists.

Nietzsche and Schopenhauer had long been modish in some quarters and Marx, Freud, and Kierkegaard were beginning to make an impression in the Anglo-Saxon literary world, but none of these Teutonic lights had dawned for the Georgians. They were "disinherited" of religious faith, but that was not for them a reason for anguish or despair. So far as beliefs can be inferred from poetry, they generally shared a cautiously optimistic naturalism—optimistic because in this merely natural cosmos it was possible for a human being to be reasonable and, with luck, happy. As individuals many of them lived through extreme suffering and horror, but such experience did not take hold of their minds and alter their sense of life and the universe. Their poetic feelings were wholesome, kindly, and compassionate. Their set of mind was, in a sense, compromising and deliberately minor, unable or unwilling to take major psychological, intellectual, or even technical risks. Compared with the great Modernist writers who followed they were of lesser stature, but they were capable of a civilized, complex balance and charm that has been rare since.

11

ROBERT FROST

THE poetry of Robert Frost begins with a radical self-restriction. As Goethe remarked, "In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister"—it is above all in the act of limitation that the master shows himself. The limits Frost worked within are a locality and an idiom. Rural New England, its farms, woods, weathers, and typical inhabitants, is the smaller world with which he chose to mirror the world. His idiom is educated but talked American, with a slight wash of country vocabulary and often a Yankee intonation. Traditional grand airs of poetry—volume of sound, for example, or density of metaphor—are not absent, but because they do not belong to the life of the New England countryside, decorum requires that they be kept from notice. Whatever happens to Frost's protagonists, no "aethereal rumours" (to compare Eliot) are going to

> Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus;

for literary allusion has no place in his rural world. Neither could Frost hope for such a swirl of vowels and consonants in the spoken language north of Boston. But if, compared with Yeats or Eliot (for one can compare Frost only with the best), his chosen limits reduce the variety and intensity of poetic effects open to him, there is a compensating gain: the diminishment in

"poetry" is felt as an augmentation in "reality." Frost's verse implies at large a typical dramatic gesture of early twentieth-century poetry in which the poet rejects the "poetic"—usually identified as the Romantic—in favor of the actual. His poetry belongs essentially to the Romantic tradition, but as a critique. He invokes Romantic convention in order to correct it.

The greatest poet of New England was born in San Francisco in 1874 and spent the first eleven years of his life there. He was named Robert Lee Frost in tribute to the Confederate general, his Yankee father thus asserting an aggressive independence of mind, a trait for which his son was also remarkable. His mother, a native of Scotland, was a woman of deep poetic and religious feeling. Frost, who went to school only sporadically until he was twelve, had most of his early education from her. His father died in 1885, and the widow returned with Robert and his older sister, Jeannie, to her husband's parents in Lawrence, Massachusetts. After graduating from Lawrence High School, where he studied Latin, Greek, and other subjects required in the college preparatory program, Frost entered Dartmouth College with a scholarship grant. He found himself unhappy, left after a few months, and spent the next four years in various employment, mainly teaching. In 1895, after a courtship marked by dramatic vicissitudes, he married Elinor White, whom he had known since high school. He attended Harvard University for two years as a special student, and in 1900, having been advised by a doctor that the state of his health required fresh air and exercise, he bought a farm in Derry, New Hampshire, and set himself up as a chicken-farmer.

The public image of Frost as a Yankee farmer-poet is accurate but may be qualified. It is true that he had, throughout his life, a succession of New England farms, on which he mended walls, split wood, went blueberrying, and the like, and he knew intimately the way of life and speech of his rural neighbors. But he was never quite a farmer. For one thing, a small legacy from his grandfather meant that he did not completely depend on his farm for a living. He was free to neglect the needs of his fields in favor of long botanical walks or day-long "sprawls" in conversation with a friend. Moreover, whenever he felt the pinch of money or a hankering to practice his ideas of education—an art in which he took much interest—he became a teacher, first in

nearby schools and later in colleges, especially Amherst. Above all he thought of himself as a poet.

He composed his first poem, a ballad based on an incident in Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico,* at the age of fourteen and read and wrote poetry ever after. But, living in Derry, he knew no other writers of significance, and he did not read the magazines of the sophisticated. He formed his poetic theories and aims in independent dialogues with his own mind. The poets most impressed on his consciousness were not Baudelaire, Verlaine, Laforgue, Mallarmé, the Pre-Raphaelites, or Dante, but the Latin classics, Shakespeare, the English Romantic and Victorian poets, and Americans such as Whittier, Bryant, Emily Dickinson, and Emerson. The poetry he wrote resembled the Georgian poetry emerging in England in reaction against the fin de siècle, though Frost was not motivated by that antagonism. So far as his verse was shaped by dislike, it was, as with Robinson, dislike of the conventional and insipid Romanticism of most magazine verse in America at that time. He was an anti-Romantic within the Romantic tradition.

In 1912, at the age of thirty-eight, Frost had sold some poems to magazines, but more had been rejected and he had not yet published a book of his verse. He decided to give up the teaching he had been doing for the last six years and settle for a while in England. The move transformed his literary fortunes. From manuscripts he had brought with him he put together *A Boy's Will.* To his delight, this first volume of lyrics was accepted by an English publisher and appeared in April 1913. Reviews were brief and not enthusiastic, but Frost's confidence was now in stride. *North of Boston,* which contained such poems as "The Death of the Hired Man," "Mending Wall," "The Wood-pile," and "After Apple-picking," came out in London the next year. Meanwhile he had been making acquaintances in literary circles. He never could get "Yates"—to use his aggressively mock-ignorant spelling—to pay him much attention, but Pound, then in London, showered peremptory helpfulness, and Frost also became friendly with Harold Monro, F. S. Flint, Walter de la Mare, Lascelles Abercrombie, Wilfrid Gibson, and most of the other Georgians. His midwifery to the poetry of Edward Thomas has already been mentioned; their friendship was so close that Thomas thought of emigrating to America. That Frost

had this success in the Georgian poetic world was not accidental, for in many respects his verse shared the Georgian sensibility and realized its poetic ideal.

Returning home in 1915 he arranged for the American publication of *North of Boston.* When it became a best seller, Frost was recognized as one of the "new" or "modern" American poets. Years of fame followed. He supported himself and his family by college teaching (though rarely full-time), public readings, lectures, royalties, and, in later years, by selling the manuscripts of his poems to collectors. (He said he had to watch nervously over his wastebasket.) His middle and later years were saddened by family crises—the insanity of his sister, the death of a daughter and, in 1938, of his wife, and the suicide of his son two years later. His reputation as a poet was assailed from several quarters in the late 1920s and 1930s. Critics such as Granville Hicks, Newton Arvin, Horace Gregory, and Rolfe Humphries complained that Frost did not deal with modern reality, the impact, in Hicks's inventory, of industrialism, science, and Freud. Whether valid or not, these criticisms were unquestionably influenced by antipathy to Frost's politics. In these years of the Great Depression and the New Deal, when most intellectuals went left, he reacted against the modish and went aggressively right, sneering at "bellyachers" and praising free individualism. At the same time he also poked fun at the Modernist movement in poetry. This may have been a reason why the formalist or so-called "New Critics" generally ignored one of the supreme formalists among twentieth-century poets. As late as 1940 the leftist F. O. Matthiessen supplied Harvard undergraduates with a reading list for modern poetry on which Frost figured not at all. To this day the small critic *à la mode* is still likely to be troubled by at least two considerations: Frost was a popular success; and he was regrettably at home in the universe.

But despite the opinions of little magazines, until his death in 1963, Frost remained one of America's more widely read and admired poets. In the 1940s some critics, notably Randall Jarrell, began to enjoy him for the obvious reasons. Meanwhile, public honors were heaped upon him. A Resolution of the United States Senate recognized his seventy-fifth birthday; honorary degrees fell like autumn leaves; he was made Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. In 1961 he received the

greatest public recognition yet paid any American poet when, at the age of eighty-seven, he was asked to read at the inauguration of President Kennedy. Subsequently he toured Russia and was able to boast of a conversation with Chairman Kruschev. He hoped the honors he obtained might help win more place for poetry in America. He always felt there should be more public support for poetry; as he said in another connection, though poetry "must remain a theft to retain its savour . . . it does seem as if it could be a little more connived at than it is."

FROST AND THE AGE

Frost belongs to a moment in the literary history of our century that is now largely forgotten. In England in 1912 the Georgian poets had just made their first impact. Repudiating the swashbuckling of Edwardian versifiers and the lapidary sterility (as they saw it) of the fin de siècle, they rendered and took pleasure in familiar sights and happenings. From these they elicited reflection or speculation, which, however, was usually handled with a light touch and often only implied. They valued an accurate and detailed presentation of the object and an easy, direct, and colloquial way of speaking. Most of the time they went, like the Edwardians, to country life and nature for subject and setting, and in their weaker moments the rural slipped over into the merely pastoral, and thoughtful if gentle realism into mere pleasantness. Nevertheless, they believed, and with much justice, that they were bringing a renewed truth and energy into English poetry, while also setting higher technical standards after such loose and rattling Edwardians as Chesterton and Noyes. They had meditative grace, kindliness, humor, and personal charm. Meanwhile in the United States what was recognized as a new and "modern" poetry had also been developing in the hands of E. A. Robinson, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, and Amy Lowell, with further example and exhortation from Ezra Pound in London. Just how large a step this "new" poetry was taking may be seen by comparing these writers with their conventionally "genteel" and "Romantic" predecessors and contemporaries—for example, Richard Watson Gilder, Louise Imogen Guiney, Richard Hovey, and Bliss

Carman. The new poetry of America combined a greater realism in subject and treatment with a more direct, vigorous, and colloquial idiom.

As compared with the English Georgians, much of this American poetry was more strongly influenced by prose fiction. It sought not only to portray character and local setting but also to trace the impact of social conventions and institutions on individual life, as well as the deeper psychological tensions within and between individuals. And the innovations of the "new" Americans against the inherited poetic forms and language were more radical and explosive. The point of this resumé is to recall to what extent Frost must be seen in relation to both the new English and new American poetry of his day. It is not simply that, having lived in England, he was acquainted with poets on both sides of the Atlantic. What matters more is that to a very considerable degree his own work fulfilled (while it also transcended) the poetic aims of his American and his English contemporaries. When in the twenties and thirties the Modernist tide came in, Frost remained prominent. The excellence of his performance insured that. But most of the contemporaries with whom he had been and should be associated were lost from view. As a result, when we look back on twentieth-century poetry, Frost seems a relatively isolated and inexplicable figure. This was not actually the case. He was the finest representative of a distinct phase in the history of twentieth-century poetry.

THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE

When in 1913 and 1914 Frost first won the attention of critics and other poets, the aspect of his poetry that seemed most admirable was his use of the spoken language—for example, in the first version of the start of "Birches":

> When I see birches bend to left and right
> Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
> I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
> But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay.
> Ice-storms do that.

In basing his idiom on the spoken language, Frost was participating in a main development of twentieth-century poetry, one already touched on in discussing Hardy, Kipling, Yeats, Synge,

Masefield, Robinson, and the Georgians and that continues in most important poets henceforth—the Imagists, Eliot, Williams, Auden, Robert Lowell. To notice what pushed Frost in this direction is to suggest some sources and motivations for this twentieth-century effort as a whole.

A prime motive was aversion, the desire of twentieth-century poets to get rid of the ornate and poetically conventional idiom found often in the weaker poets of the Victorian age, and sometimes in the major ones. (Not to mention inversions, Latinisms, pleonasms, and the like, Tennyson calls grass "the herb," a horse a "charger," poetry a "lyre"; Swinburne speaks of weary wings of love, says "I am fain," and writes "guerdon" instead of reward.) If one asks, why such adornments gradually came to seem blots and why even genuine elegance and sonority ("the deep / Moans round with many voices" in Tennyson's "Ulysses") might also give offense, the answer is partly that such phrasing seemed to seal the poem off from reality, to make of it a splendid indoor space in which the vital "fury and mire" of human life sounded dimly from far away. Twentieth-century poets have typically wanted, to cite Yeats again, "unpurged images" of actuality, confrontations. Such, at least, was the rationalization. But since it could have occurred to Tennyson and Swinburne (and did occur to Browning) as easily as to Yeats or to Frost, it does not explain why the massive reaction came when it did. Perhaps a more immediate motivation lay in what W. J. Bate aptly calls "the burden of the past," the poet's sense that the achievement of recent poets on one line compels him to choose another. Frost was quite clear about this: poetic diction and verbal melody had been carried as far as they could, and spoken language was the only possible source of a new poetic music. "The great successes," he wrote John Bartlett in 1913, "in recent poetry have been made on the assumption that the music of words was a matter of harmonized vowels and consonants. Both Swinburne and Tennyson arrived largely at effects in assonation. . . . Any one else who goes that way must go after them."

The uneasiness of poets before prose fiction has also been a source of creative self-renewal. From the moment the novel was established as a literary form it began to exert pressure on poets, forcing them to concentrate on subjects and uses of language that the novel could not easily appropriate. As the nineteenth century wore on, the novel upgraded its identity. No longer

mere entertainment and escape, it was increasingly a literary genre at least as prestigious as poetry and drama. Meanwhile novelists were widening their repertoire of verbal and technical resources and handling them with a more self-conscious sophistication. Naturally, when poets sought to revitalize their own art, they looked to the novel for hints and procedures. The situation is suggested by Ezra Pound's insistence, completely justified in its time, that poetry should be at least as well written as prose. We have seen that Robinson learned his poetic methods partly from reading and writing prose fiction. Some of T. S. Eliot's early poems probably owe much to Henry James; *The Waste Land* is deeply indebted to Joyce's *Ulysses.* In the effort of poets to write a less "poetic" language, the novel played its role. It exemplified (with aid from the drama) the perfections possible in the prosaic or the colloquial. But if the novel was as important to Frost as it was to most modern poets, little record of the fact has survived. Once, however, he asserted an indebtedness to Howells. "I learned from him . . . that the loveliest theme of poetry was the voices of the people. No one ever had a more observing ear or clearer imagination for the tones of those voices. No one ever brought them more freshly to book."

But poets learn chiefly from their own predecessors. Those from whom one or another twentieth-century poet learned a colloquial voice would include perhaps a third of the world's memorable poets. Frost's most important predecessor was Wordsworth. In his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth had attacked "poetic diction" and insisted that poetry must use the language actually spoken, the language of conversation, as he specified, in the middle and lower classes of society. In some other respects his views on poetry were shared by Frost—for example, Wordsworth's praise of spontaneous composition and his preference for subjects taken from "humble and rustic life." Frost often cited these principles and would compare his own plain idiom with that of his Romantic predecessor: for example, in *North of Boston,* "I dropped to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above." Whether Wordsworth was important to Frost as a source and example or was merely a support in expounding his own views, I do not know. In either case, plain and colloquial language was an ideal strongly advocated within the Romantic tradition which formed his poetry. If radically applied, it promised to correct the idiom of the immediate past with a new way of writing, at least a way not yet exhausted. And then, there was Frost's own extraordinary relish for conversation. He was ready to talk all day and night if he had genial company. His speech, which he practiced as an art, was richly pithy, idiosyncratic, and concrete. He paid loving notice to any fresh, racy element in the speech he heard about him. Frost's talk in poetry expressed a natural trait of his personality.

At its best, Frost's poetic idiom is a unified achievement on three lines, all deliberately pursued. It is colloquially simple; it is dramatic; and it is racy of a locality, a region. Not that these qualities are always present. Frost had more than one style, and, encountered out of context, some of his poems would not be easily recognized. He enjoyed playing the colloquial and the regional against higher-flying modes of speech, usually for humor and parody. Nevertheless, the colloquial, dramatic, and racy especially characterize his idiom, and were noticed and praised by other poets of his generation.

The impression of colloquial speech comes partly from his vocabulary and syntax. Except for particular effects, he was careful to avoid words that would seem out of the way, especially those that would seem literary. "I would never use a word or combination of words that I hadn't *heard* used in running speech." Frost was also careful to adopt locutions that, though not unbecoming, would be unexpected in poetry precisely because they belonged so much more to the spoken than the written language—for example, the elision of "is" and the word "sticking" in the first line of "After Apple-picking":

> My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree.

A special feature of his poetic talk is his use of monosyllables. They are usually numerous in his verse and they come in clumps. Sometimes a whole line (or even successive lines) will be built out of them: "And to do that to birds was why she came." In composing such lines Frost violated one of the persisting taboos of English versification. It had been thought difficult to please the ear when, as Pope put it, "ten low words oft creep in one dull line." Successful control of such lines is one of the most obvious signs of Frost's formal mastery.

The construction of his sentences tends to be coordinate

rather than subordinate, and the clauses are relatively short.

> My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
> Toward heaven still,
> And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
> Beside it, and there may be two or three
> Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
> But I am done with apple-picking now.

Lingering over these lines, one notices the effectively patterned variation of shorter and longer clauses, the rhymes handled sometimes for emphasis ("now"), and sometimes muted at the end of run-on lines ("fill / Beside it"), and the play of alliteration on "l" and "t" and of assonance on the short "i." The fresh substantive "apple-picking" is itself a distinct pleasure. The iteration of the verb "is" expresses a flat, objective finality. The declarative, coordinate clauses—"And there's a barrel . . . and there may be . . . But I am done"—permit an easy glide from image to image, thought to thought. The effect of this artistry is colloquial ease and simplicity and depends on the syntax as well as the vocabulary. Frost's syntax can be more radically colloquial. When we talk, this is what our talk often sounds like, rambling on with many whats, whiches, thats, and thises. Frost can sound just as loose and shapeless. The difference is that he is actually moving fast and toward a climax, as in "An Old Man's Winter Night":

> What kept him from remembering the need
> That brought him to that creaking room was age.

With nothing was Frost more concerned than that his idiom and syntax be dramatic, expressive of the character and mood of the speaker to the fullest possible degree. "A dramatic necessity," he said, "goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. . . . All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination." This was the basic meaning of his theory of "intonation," the aspect of poetry he claimed as his own particular discovery and forte. He also called it "the sound of sense" or "tone of meaning." In every living language meaning is conveyed not only by words but also by the sound of the voice in speaking them. One instance comes in some forms

of irony, where the tone of voice asserts a meaning that qualifies or undercuts what the words literally say. "Fine weather!" "What a shame you have to *go* now!" When one hears the tones but not the words of a conversation in the next room, one may still catch meanings. Frost wished to exploit intonation deliberately and to the fullest possible degree. He said that every sentence could be regarded as a sound, a vocal pattern or form, that itself expresses meaning. We recognize such sounds in the sentences we read because we have heard them in conversation. "Sentence-sounds . . . are gathered by the ear from the vernacular and brought into books. . . . I think no writer invents them. The most original author only catches them fresh from talk, where they grow spontaneously." No writer, he argued, should set down a sentence that lacks a distinct sound, a sentence in which the reader might not know what tone of voice to use. If this happens, the writer has failed to particularize his meaning fully. In calling it the "sound of sense" Frost distinguished this appeal to the ear from less dramatic and expressive uses of sound in poetry—for example, assonance for its own sake. His phrase the "tones of meaning" calls attention to meanings more nuanced than those stated in the words alone, the wealth of implication given in speaking by pitch, stress, and juncture. Frost knew that writers had always made use of this resource but he felt he had made it peculiarly his own, for no one before had talked about it and no one had worked it with such conscious attention.

In connection with his use of "intonation," Frost also took hold of the principle of counterpoint. The term counterpoint comes into the vocabulary of twentieth-century poetic criticism from Hopkins, who meant by it a "mounting" of one rhythm or sense on another, so that two are going at the same time. Frost did not use the word, but he talked especially about the interplay of the sentence intonation with the meter. The art lies in "skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre"; "there are the very regular preestablished accent and measure of blank verse; and there are the very irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation. I am never more pleased than when I can get these into strained relations."

Frost's speech has the flavor of rural New England. In pro-

ducing this impression, vocabulary and syntax play a relatively minor role. He occasionally uses a regionalism, at least a countryism—"*boughten* friendship"—but what especially creates the effect of New England speech is the intonation, the "sounds" of the sentences as the ear hears them. In order to hear the intonation we must first imagine the type of person speaking and what he or she would be feeling. We catch the intonation from the dramatic characterization, to which it then further contributes. Frost says that we recognize intonation on the page only because we have first heard it in "running speech." Presumably he would be appreciated more fully by readers familiar with the tones of voice of country New England seventy years ago. This is not so much an impediment as it might seem. The rural Yankee is a stock figure in American folklore, often exploited in literature and film. We all think we know the type—hard, wary, prudent, independent, fact-minded, with a dry, ironic humor. And we all suppose we know his tones of voice.

In the last stanza of "Come In," Frost activates these recognitions. I pick it as an example because Auden once remarked that only an American could have written it, though he did not say why. The poem is one of Frost's typically anti-Romantic utterances. As it opens, the speaker, standing at twilight at the edge of a wood, hears a thrush singing within—"Far in the pillared dark / Thrush music went." It seems a call to come into the dark woods "and lament." To this point the poem deploys stock Romantic images and feelings. Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" offers a parallel, though a remote one. But Frost has set up the poem for the sake of the anti-Romantic, tough-minded gesture of the last stanza:

> But no, I was out for stars:
> I would not come in.
> I meant not even if asked,
> And I hadn't been.

The refusal to come in, as he voices it, characterizes the New Englander, and wins a certain humor from the characterization. If we ask just what in these lines seems racy of New England, we may notice that there are four short, declarative clauses, made up mostly of monosyllables. Each is flat, final, and unqualified, expressing a stubborn Yankee downrightness. ("I do not choose

to run," said Calvin Coolidge, when asked if he would stand for a second term as President. And that was all he said.) There is also the effect of some phrases: "out for stars," "come in"—the Romantic allure of the dark woods and the singing bird is put with a certain homeliness in the common phrase of friendly invitation. Above all, there are the negatives: four in four lines. They bespeak the Yankee refusal to go along, a refusal rooted in practical awareness. But though the type of person speaking is familiar, what he says comes upon the reader unexpectedly and with a slight effect of wit. The wit depends on the speed of the saying and on our recognition of truth to character and also of truth (of a limited kind) in what is said. At the end the speaker is talking with a self-aware, slightly ironic humor. Even if the thrush has not been singing to him, he has almost been speaking to it ("I meant"). The last line shows him regaining his balance.

This type of humor—for Frost's humor is of many types and omnipresent—is an undernote in many of his finest sayings. It is dry and slightly reductionistic. When, in "The Death of the Hired Man," Warren says,

> "Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
> They have to take you in,"

the remark has something of what Samuel Johnson (in his discussion of the metaphysical poets) described as one of the highest forms of wit, that "which is at once natural and new, that which, though not obvious, is, upon its first production, acknowledged to be just." At the same time, the saying is completely in character. It has the grip on fact, the down-to-earthness deflating sentimental wish, that belong to our notion of the country New Englander. When, in "Birches," the speaker remarks,

> . . . Earth's the right place for love:
> I don't know where it's likely to go better.

the wry understatement expresses, again, a Yankee sense of practical reality. Humor of this kind comes to a grim crescendo in "Provide, Provide." Here Frost pretends to be the prudent, practical Yankee, mindful that one must provide for the future; with what seems a grotesque exaggeration of the attitude, he urges us to "provide" against old age and death. Since that is im-

possible, the attitude, thus carried to an extreme, is mocked. The basis of this mockery, however, is a view of life even more hard and practical than that of the provider: whatever you do, you are likely to end up miserably. But in making us see this, the poem forces us to concede—this is what appalls—that the advice, though terrible, cannot be simply rejected.

> No memory of having starred
> Atones for later disregard,
> Or keeps the end from being hard.
>
> Better to go down dignified
> With boughten friendship at your side
> Than none at all. Provide, provide!

To take this advice straight would be a silly misreading. But wholly to deny its possible relevance would also be insensitive. The poem, as is often the case in Frost, drives us to a shocked recollection of the minimal lives, the limited and dismaying choices, men and women may be brought to. If it comes to a choice between "boughten" friendship and "none at all," the first must be preferred. A truth of this kind is so shocking and bitter that it is not usually told in poetry—or even in novels and plays. One doubts if Frost would have been willing to say it in earnest as from himself. Said in dramatic character, however, it can be both presented and self-protectively repudiated; it becomes "play" in several senses of the word, including enjoyment of the characteristically Yankee attitude and speech intonation.

Dramatic characterization is one element of Frost's potent appeal in what he called the "market place." But there is much else, including the milieu and the objects that make it up. To find poetry in the familiar was one of his intentions. "Love, the moon, and murder have poetry in them by common consent. But it's in other places. It's in the axe-handle of a French Canadian woodchopper." American poetry should "drop the eternal sublime and see that all life is a fit subject for poetic treatment." When Frost first came to the attention of critics, he was often described as a poetic Realist, a label he partly connived at. But whatever it may have been in 1914, the "axe-handle of a French Canadian woodchopper" is now a relatively exotic item. Similarly with his characters and stories; they now attract more by their Romantic strangeness than by their familiarity. Readers

are now drawn to Frost for the same reason—as one reason—that they once went to James Whitcomb Riley. Not of course that Frost is at the level of Riley. He is enormously more authentic, subtle, and complex and lacks Riley's sunny sentimentalism. Nevertheless, whatever else it does, his poetry pleases like a Currier and Ives print. It engages the nostalgic interest of readers in a lost way of life, enjoyed in imagination and thought of as quintessentially American. He rarely composes set pieces of description. Instead, he suggests farm and landscape with a few, usually general references that come without ostentation in the seemingly natural flow of speech. We hear in "After Apple-picking" about a "long two-pointed ladder"—Frost typically describes his tools with loving exactness—"a barrel," apples on a bough, a drinking trough and its water iced over in the morning, frosty grass, the cellar bin, the cider apple heap. From such mentions no one could draw a picture of this farm, but the milieu becomes fixed and vivid in the imagination. In "An Old Man's Winter Night" we pick up images of empty rooms with frosted windows, an old man holding a lantern, the barrels of a storeroom, a stove, snow, icicles, the sound of trees cracking in the cold. Out of this we shape in imagination a New England farm, snowed in on a winter night.

Character, then, and setting, and there is also story, or story elements. Frost wrote the finest short narrative poems yet written in the twentieth century. In poems such as "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home Burial," and "The Witch of Coös" he resembles Chekhov in his ability to reflect nuances of changing emotion in dialogue. He has a shrewd understanding of psychological states, for example, the precarious, slightly self-deceiving self-respect of Silas, the hired man, so terribly on the defensive against his own sense of the worthlessness of his existence. He knows the workings of neurotic elements in personality and the complicated, unhappy knots people get tied into together, as in "Home Burial." He can show the state of affairs between his men and women with uncanny power of brief suggestion. He has an ability to manipulate plot for suspense. "The Witch of Coös" holds attention if it is read simply as a ghost story, though it is so much more than that: it is Frost's largest single revelation of the bleak emptiness of life and of the heart. Years ago her husband murdered her lover. She helped

bury him in the cellar. Perhaps she felt there was nothing else to be done. We do not know. In any case, she has lived with that memory "all these years," trying to keep it down and telling no one. When, finally, she tells, we see what it has done to her:

> But tonight I don't care enough to lie—
> I don't remember why I ever cared.
> Toffile, if he were here, I don't believe
> Could tell you why he ever cared himself.

The same dramatic and fictive interests appear in Frost's lyric and meditative verse. "Putting in the Seed" begins almost as a short story. "The Hill Wife" is a short story told in five brief lyrics. Even poems where there is no story as such have an action that catches attention: picking apples, swinging on birches, looking down into a well, grinding a scythe, watching a white spider, stopping by woods on a snowy evening, coming to a crossroad in a wood, two neighbors mending a stone wall. Frost is primarily a lyric and meditative poet, but the lyric and meditative utterance arises from some concrete, particular event and is related to it. The events are also metaphors; if a poem has no action as such, it usually takes hold of an ongoing metaphor, as in "Fire and Ice" or "Nothing Gold Can Stay." One may compare Frost, in this respect, with more disembodied poets such as Bridges or, later, Wallace Stevens. We do not read poems out of curiosity about facts and doings, but a poet who forfeits concrete presentation has a harder time lodging his poem in the reader's imagination. Similarly, a chain of metaphors and illustrations is not usually as effective as a central, continuing action, and a meditative action in the mind is not the same thing as a story. Moreover, when concrete plot or circumstance are not given in the poem, language will be used in a more "poetic" way—that is, with whatever type of verbal heightening or concentration may be the poetic practice of the age.

As in much Georgian poetry, the charm of the speaker's personality exerts a strong appeal. He is not always the same man; "Provide, Provide" is not spoken in quite the same persona as "After Apple-picking." But for the most part he seems humorous and shrewd, sensitive, speculative, poised, and tender. He has a basic decency of feeling. Perhaps it shows especially in his attitude to the characters he depicts. He is neither sentimental, cynical, nor melodramatic. He has a penetrating understanding, combined with half-humorous sympathy and detachment. In the play of moral judgment most people have a case to be made for them, and, as far as possible, he respects the person for what he is. So also with his attitude to natural things. He keeps his distance, though with interest, imaginative response, and intensely noting love. He immensely admires integrity in work, above all when the workman also keeps form and style. At decaying houses, burnt farms, abandoned fields, he feels the *lacrimae rerum*, a pious respect and regret for the labor that made them and the life played out in them. To say that a book or a writer is wholesome is not, to this generation, always a recommendation, but in his poetic persona Frost is, amid all the complexity of his attitudes, wholesome, and that is a large part of his appeal.

UNSAYING THE ROMANTICS

In the course of his career Frost found himself classified as a Realist, a Romantic, a Humanist, and a writer of classical, especially Horatian tendency. Perhaps he would have preferred the label he was never given, a Formalist, though he would have defined the term his own way. He particularly disliked being called a Romantic, for, as used by reviewers in the teens and twenties, the term associated him with one of the weaker types of contemporary poetry. Nevertheless, if we think of the first Romantics, such as Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats, Frost was clearly one of their followers, though in a peculiar way. He wrote against the background of English and American Romantic poetry. Against. He expressed his own attitudes by repudiating, correcting, or sometimes just refusing to go along with typical Romantic ones. Sometimes he even alluded to a particular Romantic poem. In "Birches" the description of the ice fallen from the trees—

> Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
> You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen—

recalls the famous lines in Shelley's "Adonais" that compare life to a dome of glass:

> Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
> Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
> Until Death tramples it to fragments.

Such allusion is a teasing joke, but it is also functional wit, expressing an attitude simply by the lowered tone of voice. An implicit criticism of Shelleyan afflatus, it takes on further point at the end of Frost's poem:

> I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
> And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
> *Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
> But dipped its top and set me down again.

Perhaps there is even an underthought of comparison here with the last lines of "Adonais," where, symbolically speaking, the poet "goes" up and off *to* Heaven forever.

> The massy earth and sphered skies are riven!
> I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;
> Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
> The soul of Adonais, like a star,
> Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

Since Frost invokes Romantic poems, metaphors, and general attitudes in order to deny them, the more one keeps Romantic poetry in mind, the more subtly one appreciates Frost. To show this in detail we would have to take tedious note of allusion and parody in poem after poem. The same point can be made more generally by drawing attention to his rejection of typically Romantic attitudes and metaphors. There is, for example, the Romantic assertion of a sympathy from nature to man. Frost comes back to it in many poems, but comes back to unsay it, as we have seen in "Come In." In "The Most of It" the speaker "thought he kept the universe alone," and cried out for "counter-love." Nothing came of the cry except, one day, a buck swam across the water and disappeared in the underbrush—the animal living its own life in its own world. In "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" the speaker describes a burnt-down farmhouse, the barn still standing across the way. In the fourth stanza he speaks of the birds that come to the now deserted barn:

> The birds that came to it through the air
> At broken windows flew out and in,
> Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh
> From too much dwelling on what has been.

> Yet for them the lilac renewed its leaf,
> And the aged elm, though touched with fire;
> And the dry pump flung up an awkward arm;
> And the fence post carried a strand of wire.
>
> For them there was really nothing sad.
> But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
> One had to be versed in country things
> Not to believe the phoebes wept.

These poems embody gestures of refusal. Frost—in his poetic persona—will not go along with Wordsworth. He would like to believe that sympathy flows from nature to man, he almost feels it may be so, but he rejects the feeling as sentimental self-deception. In pointing to this typical gesture I do not wish to reduce poems to arguments, much less to arguments on a single issue or theme. In his better poems Frost weaves a rich and subtle counterpoint, cross-patterns of imagery and metaphor. In "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" the main drama—in which the speaker, though tempted, holds to the factual truth of things—is mounted on a multiplicity of other meanings and suggestions. One might notice the play on ideas of dwelling and dwelling on (too much on what has been), of renewing and not renewing; more generally, the poem opposes the natural process of change and renewal to the human wish that things should stay, and even makes an irrational but subtle connection between the thought of things staying and of their being left behind and functionless, as though the one entailed the other. The chimney appears to be untouched by change and process, but there is no longer a house. It is compared in the first stanza to a pistil without petals. Or the pump, now dry. Or the hanging strand of wire.

Unable to believe that any sympathy flows from nature to man, Frost also rejected the Romantic premise of a benevolent, even ministering nature. Against this he distilled his draught of poison in "Design." Because the poem illustrates the "darker" side of Frost, it has been overpraised. In it the speaker sees a white spider holding a moth on a white heal-all flower. The scene, briefly presented, elicits horror and repulsion, and the speaker then questions:

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.

The title and the last two lines emphasize that the poem is written with reference to the theological argument from "design." This famous argument had strongly influenced thought and feeling in the eighteenth century and the Romantic period. It "proved" the existence, intelligence, and benevolence of God from evidences of design in the natural world. For, it was argued, no living thing could sustain itself apart from a natural order into which it was integrated, and how could the organization and inter-organization of living things be explained except through the existence of an intelligent organizer or designer? Frost's evidences of design would presuppose a demonic designer; thus he gives the religious optimist a teasing poke in the ribs. But if this poem shows that Frost is "a terrifying poet," as Lionel Trilling claimed, it puts him on the terrifying side of debate in the Romantic period. The argument from design had long since been exploded (and parodied) by the time Frost wrote his poem.

The Romantic poets often expressed a boldly confident humanism, idealizing man's boundless aspiration and potential greatness. For Frost's anti-Romantic challenge, we may consider "The Bear." Or there is the Romantic quest of ultimate truth, the hope, in Shelleyan metaphor, to pass beyond the colored, manifold veils of illusion and achieve a final knowledge. Frost's "For Once, Then, Something" gently mocks this hope. Or there are the Romantic metaphors of ascent to the transcendent, as in Shelley's soaring skylark. Frost too has metaphors of ascent; you climb on a birch trunk, or you go up on a ladder sticking through a tree "toward heaven." You do not get very far and you come down soon. A voyage is a recurrent Romantic metaphor. The questing mind of genius is "forever voyaging," Wordsworth says, "through strange seas of thought alone"; it is "driven," Shelley says,

Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
Whose sails were never to the tempest given.

But in Frost you do not voyage. You merely stand on the shore and look out to sea, like the people in "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep":

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

FROSTIAN IRONY

I have argued that Frost belongs essentially to the Romantic tradition in poetry, not only for the more obvious reasons—he is a "nature" poet, writing lyric and meditative verse on country sights and happenings; he emulates Wordsworth in taking the language actually spoken as his medium and the "ordinary" as his subject matter; he shares the Romantic ideal of spontaneous and "organic" composition—but also because his poetry elicits recollections of English and American poetry of the Romantic period. The comparisons thus activated indicate his own attitudes with enhanced nuance and subtlety, and the attitudes are anti-Romantic; that is, Frost takes his central concerns from the Romantic poets, but what they assert, he denies. In one all-important respect, however, Frost departs from Romantic precedent: in what we may loosely and provisionally call his irony.

Not that irony is absent from the poetry of the great Romantics. In one form or another it is omnipresent. The poetic theory of the Romantic age reinterpreted it profoundly, so that irony, heretofore thought of as one of the figures of speech in rhetoric, was viewed as a spiritual state, a way of relating to the world. But it was not for the Romantics an ultimate state. Yeats, for example, seems sometimes to have believed that all truth is polar or antithetical, hence ironical, but for Shelley or Blake such antitheses as body and soul, time and eternity, rise out of a deeper unity, and irony is an expression of man's limitation. At moments, the Romantics held, man may attain ultimate truth through his imagination. At such moments of highest insight, he is not ironical.

The lack of this faith lies at the heart of Frost's irony. Poetry is not for him what Wordsworth said it was, "Truth . . . carried

alive into the heart by passion." Frost does not hold with Shelley that poets commune with "the eternal, the infinite, and the one." A poem is, he says, a "figure"—a shape or form—though a figure that may end in a limited and provisional "clarification of life." It is "play," though for "mortal stakes." It is "metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another . . . the pleasure of ulteriority." It is "performance," and "My whole anxiety is for myself as a performer. Am I any good?" With an ironic echo of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Frost adds, "That's what I'd like to know and all I need to know." Such answers are not necessarily anti-Romantic, for mere difference is not necessarily contradiction. But the difference is considerable. Where the Romantic thinks of poetry as essentially a way of knowing (vision, imagination), Frost thinks of it as an aesthetic act with a possible, though limited, cognitive significance. But if poetry is figure, play, metaphor, or performance, so equally for Frost are other modes of thought and creative effort. Their value is practical, psychological, ethical, and aesthetic; they cannot produce ultimate knowledge.

Although Frost doubted the possibility of final truth, that did not prevent him from having opinions. He took sides in what he called the "standing argument," but, like most people, he could not feel certain. On this middle ground of perhaps and probably, irony is self-protectiveness. You may be wrong, so you do not commit yourself all the way. A poet may protect himself in other ways. He may write his poems not from himself personally but in dramatic character. Or, as Genevieve Taggard put it in a review of Frost, a poet may merely spread his metaphors, letting them take responsibility for whatever meanings are caught. But if he protects himself ironically, he is essentially taking both sides of the argument at the same time. He need not argue on both sides equally, and his appearance of concessiveness or evenhandedness may itself be ironic, something we are intended to see through. Frost characteristically interprets this in a social context. It disarms criticism. It may even win the reader for your side because you acknowledge his side. Speaking ironically, Frost calls it "cowardice."

Irony is simply a kind of guardedness. So is a twinkle. It keeps the reader from criticism. Whittier, when he shows any style at all, is probably a greater person than Longfellow as he is lifted priestlike above consideration of the scornful. Belief is better than anything else, and it is best when rapt, above paying its respects to anybody's doubt whatsoever. At bottom the world isn't a joke. We only joke about it to avoid an issue with someone; to let someone know that we know he's there with his questions: to disarm him by seeming to have heard and done justice to his side of the standing argument.

Frost's irony might be described as a social poise. "To be at all charming or even bearable," he says, "the way is almost rigidly prescribed. If it is with outer seriousness, it must be with inner humor. If it is with outer humor, it must be with inner seriousness." In poetry, grief must go no further than it can "in play . . . Taste may set the limit. Humor is a surer dependence." But, to repeat, "belief is better than anything else." Social poise and "play" become the more valued as ideals precisely to the extent that they acknowledge and substitute for a lack of belief, at least of "rapt" belief or certitude. At bottom, Frost's irony is not a social performance but an evasion, though one with which most of us can sympathize. It is a means of speaking without affirming or denying, or at least of avoiding full commitment to whatever his words may imply. There is, he says, a kind of reader "who stands at the end of a poem ready . . . to drag you off your balance over the last punctuation mark into more than you meant to say. . . . Such presumption needs to be twinkled at and baffled." As we read his poems, what baffles is how seriously he means what he says and how much more than he literally says he may mean to imply. If one admires this, one may call it balance—as Frost did. If one has no taste for it, one may call Frost a "spiritual drifter"—as Yvor Winters did. But whatever we think of it, it is undeniably important in the chemistry of his effects.

His evasion is likely to be most baffling at the conclusions of his poems. The last line of "Design"—"If design govern in a thing so small"—comes with a sudden change in mood from horror to malicious humor. It pretends to offer an "out" to the religious believer in a designing Providence, an "out" which he cannot logically accept. It is said with a sly, mock tentativeness, a feigned courteous reluctance to insist on his opinion. It is a "twinkle," to use Frost's word, and it makes the poem less "terrifying" and more teasing. In "For Once, Then, Something," the speaker has looked down many a well and never seen to the bottom, but one day he saw something white there:

What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

The major theme has been the Romantic quest for ultimate reality, which the poem treats both seriously and humorously, both enacts and parodies. The last line brings both points of view into plainer articulation and collision—"Truth? A pebble of quartz?"—and the final phrase half-humorously dismisses the problem. This typical return from speculation to Yankee wariness pokes gentle fun at whoever takes the question earnestly—the question whether transcendent truth can be known.

In the more recent critiques of Frost, even admirers rarely achieve the full-throated enthusiasm they may have for Yeats or Eliot. There seems to be a difficulty about conceding that Frost is a major poet. His ironic playfulness is one cause of this dubiety. To many minds it is simply not an adequate way of taking life. Those who feel this articulate their sense of Frost's inadequacy in different ways, but what generally they find lacking is seriousness, profundity, and commitment. They have a point. At his best Frost is never unqualified, final, and merely in earnest. As a result, some poetic or imaginative effects are not open to him. At the mysterious ethical and religious commands that conclude *The Waste Land* (doubly mysterious because they are in Sanskrit), we feel a certain awe, a piety in the presence of something ultimate. We never feel this in reading Frost. However irrational the effect may be, we feel for a moment that with Eliot's Sanskrit—DATTA, DAYADHVAN, DAMYATA—we have been given a basis for ordering our existence. The simplicity, directness, and unlimited implication of the words, their emotional weight and authority in their context, produce quasi-moral, quasi-religious satisfactions for the imagination. Such satisfactions may be had from Frost, but they are of a much less immediately powerful kind.

Whether these or any other observations and arguments necessarily mean that Frost was a minor poet, could be debated endlessly. Looking at it from Frost's point of view, I think he might have said, perhaps with only a slight trace of irony, that the wisdom of his poetry lies not so much in what he says as in the way he says it. The form is the major content. He keeps his balance, not coming down on one side or the other of arguments

that cannot be settled. He moves forward, and momentary clarifications of an attitude or point of view rise to the surface, shimmer, and are submerged in the ongoing flow. He gives order and unity not to existence, but to an episode, a figure, and the figure has some "ulteriority" about it, a meaning beyond what is said. But even the poet cannot know how far the figure carries. There is no conclusion, merely a bowing out at the end of the performance. If Frost did not take his ideas "seriously," he took seriously what he had to teach about the way we should take ideas. Whether or not this deserves such terms as "profound" and "commitment," each reader may decide. This much can be said. Other major writers of the twentieth century—Eliot, Joyce, Yeats, Lawrence—were committed to beliefs, but the beliefs to which they were committed do not always give one much confidence in the balance of their minds. If Frost was skeptical, or at least remarkably provisional and wary, he is also one of the few significant writers of the twentieth century whose work seems consistently to preserve poise and sanity of mind.