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Michael G. Cooke
Yale University

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Frost's Poetry: Breaking the Boundaries of the Hidden and the Silent

Michael G. Cooke

One of the oddities of English Romanticism is that poets like Blake and Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley were so concerned to see a better state for the world, yet still so concerned with the subjective state. It is the latter aspect of their work that has come down most emphatically in English literary culture. Not the public world but what the public world neglects or camouflages more and more occupies our poetry in English, culminating with the confessional poets and their insistence on publicized privacy.

But more than what is subjective enters into the case. There is an implied sphere of preoccupation that I would sum up in the phrase "the hidden and the silent," dealing with forces and textures and, ultimately, characters and values either unnoticed or unannounced in both public and private worlds. Perhaps Wordsworth's "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways" is the prototypical example of the emphasis in question. The poem takes an almost polemical position in its treatment of Lucy; while she is almost totally unnoticed and unloved, she has poignantly unique values that those in "trodden" ways do not know. By virtue of the metaphor, "Fair as a star when only one / Is shining in the sky," the hidden and silent Lucy is made the cynosure of attention, the figure on whom others make their wishes.

The difference between Pope's "Rape of the Lock" and Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning" illustrates the new emphasis most graphically. Pope, the Augustan poet, ties the boudoir to public life and values. Even Belinda's psychology has less interest for its tortured power than for its use as public instruction, just as her final apotheosis does not express personal spiritual growth but a public compensation and inspiration. The public scheme has, by contrast, vanished from Stevens's view. The public and indeed communal activity of "ancient sacrifice" has dwindled to an "encroachment" in the heroine's late-morning dream. We recognize, in fact, two planes of the hidden and the silent: the "divinity" that

"can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams"; and the disturbed consciousness of the woman who wants to confine her "bounty" to

Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug. . . .

She all but explicitly renounces not just the public world, but the simple presence of other people, and seeks to incorporate all experience in her solipsistic self:

Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms. . . .

The utter inwardness of her vision, of her state, is conveyed in the fact that, despite the image of "a ring of men / . . . in orgy" and the concept of "heavenly fellowship," the only other substantial presence in her world is Death, and Death too goes "alone":

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires.

Here beauty and desire have gone far from Belinda's physical, social beauty and her public, socio-sexual desires. A faintly nihilistic mysticism, a sort of black hole of introspection, marks Stevens's heroine, for whom what attracts and matters takes only the form of the hidden and the silent.

Pope also helps us to see, by contrast, another feature of the hidden and the silent in post-Romantic literature, that is, its here-ness, its suspicion or subordination or avoidance of any kind of otherworld or underworld. When Homer or Vergil or Spenser takes us into the underworld, it is for edification. When Keats takes us into the underworld, as in *Lamia*, things get fouled up: everybody dies. This is true likewise in Frost's "Paul's Wife." In both cases the disaster results from spying, from a peeping-tom approach to the merely ostentatiously hidden and silent. And it does not strike me that Frost either is or needs a peeping tom.

Frost is very much akin to the English Romantics in maintaining a public visage and vehicle, as it were, while following intensely private avenues of interest. Yet it would appear less fruitful to look for what Frost is hiding than for what he is seeking. Despite all the biographical brouhaha, and despite his own "Directive" confession to the reader that he "only has at heart your getting lost," he is not exploiting the reader or unduly competing with the reader. (Perhaps this is just as well, since the stories from Bread Loaf indicate that Frost made Bobby Kennedy look like the Marquis of Queensbury on the playing field.) "Getting lost" must be construed in the framework of our ordinary points of reference. The "lost" reader would find himself, like Livingstone or Balboa, in a new world. In the meantime, there is a difference between being "lost" and being "give[n] . . . up for lost," as "A Cabin in the Clearing" makes plain. Being lost in the manner of people who "don't know where they are" is for Frost a state with hope; such people are not closeted in a given place, but open to large, transcendent possibilities: "Where, where in Heaven am I? But don't tell me! / O opening clouds, by opening on me wide. / Let's let my heavenly lostness overwhelm me" ("Lost in Heaven").

It is well to recall how often Frost's poems involve going beyond bounds, and how equally often they involve the idiom of "thought," less in the way of analysis and ratiocination than of speculation, intuition, or even divination. The poem "In the Home Stretch," for example, is set across a border of both space and time: two quite elderly people, not unmindful of death, picking up and being "dumped down" on a farm away from "city lights," in "country darkness." In addition to the geographical and the chronological verges of the poem, we may note that the strong young movers hurry away from these old folks "at dusk"; there is a "new moon"; and from the kitchen window the wife sees "A little stretch of mowing field . . . / [and] not much of that until I come to woods / That end all."

The manner of the poem is wholly natural and unforced. No "boundary" is contrived, but even apart from the obvious instances an intimation of boundaries pervades the poem. One occurs in the indecision as to whether the old couple's move constitutes a beginning or an end; another in the citified conservatism of the young stalwarts who cry out "God!" to the thought of having a farm—they dread crossing from familiar ground; yet another in the fire getting "out through crannies in the

stove / And [dancing] in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling." Even out on the farm, itself a crossing over, other crossings besides the limiting "woods" occur:

Is it too late

To drag you out for just a good-night call
On the old peach trees on the knoll, to grope
By starlight in the grass for the last peach
The neighbors may not have taken as their right
When the house wasn't lived in?

And at every point the boundaries and crossings are freighted with thought, with the impulse or need to know. The very moving-men, all city and physique, are driven to thought by the old couple's decision; appropriately perhaps, the thought is broken off. ("We puzzle them. They think —") This cessation of thought occurs out of eagerness to return to the city, *and* out of dread of what the thought might disclose. But that is the point of the poem, that act and fact. Phenomena in and of themselves are forms of concealment, and tease us *into* thought. The question posed the woman by the man: "What are you seeing out the window, lady?", clearly establishes a desire to go beyond literal phenomena; after all, he can see as readily as she whatever she may see. But he is interested in her focus, her emphasis, her associations, her reasons, her outlook, and her spirit. The question gives a reasonable echo of God's "What do you see, Jeremiah?", with all its implications that what you see proves what you are. Partly from kindness, and partly from a self-protective impulse of privacy, she answers on the literal level, though *it* resounds deep into the wells of ontology: "woods / That end all." Here is a pregnant phrase, but the man refuses, or is too bent on his own course, to face the ultimate boundary, death. He presses on instead toward entry into some "new" condition between them: "I think you see / More than you like to own to. . . ."

The poem fluctuates between the literal world, at best incompletely known, and some unknown world of introspection that touches the obscure edges of knowledge and of being. Fire is its dominant image (from lighting pipes or lanterns or stoves), with subsidiary influence from the light of city streets or of the moon. In either case, nothing is steady or clear. The moon waxes, but "her light won't last us long," and the pipe-fire is caught at the

moment of "burning down," as the stove also will do. The fire/light image catches the poem's sense of the gap between what we have and what we seek of illumination and warmth. The woman says the man is "searching . . . / For things that don't exist," and he himself deprecatingly declares: "I don't want to find out what can't be known."

But more exists than is admitted, and more is found out than is clinically, demonstrably known. The "lady," under urging, grants that she sees "the years . . . / In alternation with the weeds, the field / The wood." And the man, "Joe," the name of America's everyman, finds out 1) that he need feel no guilt, for the lady has no regret, and 2) that there exists between them a sort of love or a relationship transcending time. (She was "never" new to him, and she could take "forever" to recite "All that's not new in where we find ourselves.") And the reader finds out that ultimately light and the life it implies cannot be denied; the world of "country darkness" is a world of irrepressible country light:

The fire got out through crannies in the stove
And danced in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling,
As much at home as if they'd always danced there.

The blended images of dancing and of being-at-home portend a certain success for our superannuated pioneers. But this is so by virtue of something analogous to the Hamlet ending, where the images, the focal phenomena, induce a state of confidence and composure very much at odds with the wider matters of fact in the case. "In the Home Stretch" comes to no resolution; it satisfies the mood rather than the mind, to draw on a distinction Frost is fond of making. The way it holds up "thought" as a lodestar might seem to be betrayed by the poem's indecision, except for the fact that it is "thought" itself, rather than any thought, the gift and ground rather than the topical fruit, which "In the Home Stretch" embodies. The act of moving is a garment for the thought of moving, and almost a shroud. The energy and genius of the poem may be found in its remaining faithful to the stubbornly naturalistic act while getting at its obscure strain of cultural and spiritual crisis. No act, no person is innocent of thought (this is one source of Frost's incessant symbolizing), and no thought is innocent of incompleteness. (This is the other source of Frost's incessant symbolizing.)

Frost himself proposes "thought" as the first essence: "There was never naught, / There was always thought" ("A Never Naught Song"). He tacitly rejects both creation *ex nihilo* and mechanistic evolutionism. Rather, he posits "the force of thought" which, "when noticed first," was "in a state / Of atomic One." Frost does not concern himself to ask who did the first noticing, and out of what state. His position is more akin to that of modern physics than to Leibniz's *Monadology*, with its postulate of a "necessary" God. But on the question of how that atom got "Clear from hydrogen / All the way to men," without creator or evolution, he is quite forthcoming. Frost invokes a Hegelian or Chardinesque "mind," and he defines "mind"—which amounts in his lexicon to an ampler, more sensitive version of "thought"—as an aboriginal impulse to go beyond the given and the known:

Mind you, we are mind.
We are not the kind
To stay too confined.

.....

... God's own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation.

.....

Have no hallowing fears
Anything's forbidden
Just because it's hidden.
Trespass and encroach
On successive spheres
Without self-reproach.

"Kitty Hawk")

If we take "Kitty Hawk" side by side with an early poem, "The Trial by Existence," it is as though Frost's work were framed by statements concerning the greatness, the innateness of "daring," while yet "obscuration" besets all experience and all is bound by "the hushed snow / Of the far-distant breaking wave." Something hidden, and something silent, stand as givens of human existence, along with a *tertium quid*, the inquisitive or questing mind. Frost

makes it a downright summons to transgress boundaries, boundaries whose efficacy stems from superstition in the mind (hallowing fears) and not from valid, intrinsic properties. In "Sunday Morning" Wallace Stevens sees the "ancient sacrifice" coming as an "encroachment" upon the mind of the woman who wants to be a "divinity . . . within herself." Frost on the other hand invites us to "encroach" upon what's hidden and hallowed. The difference is instructive for the character of the two poets. Stevens gravitates toward a "supreme fiction," toward the integral and constructive force of the imagination. Frost gravitates toward "successive spheres" of encounter with the world. Not that he eschews "thought" and its analogues. It is just that he will not stop without "risking spirit"—the shape of things in the mind—"in substantiation."

In one turn Frost will use the acquisition of a house to embody the ubiquitous and unfading quality of the impulse to realize the possible ("In the Home Stretch"). In another turn, he draws on the story of the farmer who "burned his house down for the fire insurance / And spent the proceeds on a telescope"; in fact, Frost seems smitten with this gesture, drawing it into "New Hampshire" and then placing it three times in quick succession in "The Star-Splitter" (*New Hampshire*, 1923). What the farmer does is on the face of it bizarre, but Frost insists on celebrating it on other less obvious grounds. In "New Hampshire" he treats it as unique, then in effect reverses himself in "The Star-Splitter" and places the arson-for-the-stars in the category of "mind" at work: "to satisfy a lifelong curiosity / About our place among the infinities." Of course nothing comes of the venture. The farmer is too much of a literalist: "The best thing that we're put here for's to see; / The strongest thing that's given us to see with's / A telescope." He is Plato's false astronomer, interested only in multiplying sense data, for which the telescope serves merely as an improved ocular tool. But he purblindly comes up with the virtual Frostian motto: "The best thing that we're put here for's to see." And he points toward Frost's tireless musing on astronomy for insight, or outlook, on man in the universe.

In "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations" Frost makes all but explicit the defect of the literal, materialistic "Star-Splitter" approach. That defect is two-fold. First, the star-splitter is confined to a place and a fixed posture. He is the antithesis of one who crosses boundaries, his trick being that, with the telescope, he

greatly magnifies the elements of the field he occupies. The change he experiences is simple and physical, on the surface, rather than intrinsic to the nature of his encounter with and relationship with the outer world. As Frost says:

You'll wait a long, long time for anything much
To happen in heaven beyond the floats of cloud
And the Northern Lights that run like tingling nerves.

The Northern Lights constitute some sort of apparition, to be sure, but rather predictably (especially for a Vermonter). They are not like a comet* or a new planet.

This brings up the second defect of the star-splitter approach. It is passive, and random. In the coverts of "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations" we may discern a correction of Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." The discoveries that do more than titillate a moment, Frost appears to say, do not come "by chance," though one may wait "a long, long time." We must "look elsewhere than to stars and moon and sun / For the shocks and changes we need to keep us sane."

On what basis, then, does Frost so continually turn to astronomy? How does he find in it the needed "shocks and changes," and how make of it more than a specious crossing of boundaries? "A Star in a Stoneboat" provides a cogent answer. The poem commences in the dumb physical landscape and passive dependence on accident that the star-splitter shows, and still achieves a breakthrough into a new sphere by virtue of a desire not to measure the world, or domesticate it, as with a telescope, but to encompass it in living experience. The speaker remains earthbound in all this. The boundary is crossed by the heavenly body coming to earth.

At least, it is presumed that "one star of all" must have "been picked up with stones to mend a wall." The laborer who happens upon it makes nothing more of it than another stone in the wall—despite "its weight." But the poem's speaker, "as though / Commanded in a dream," goes about seeking to discern the unique stone:

*Astronomy has recently discovered that there are 2,000 million comets. But they abide within impenetrable clouds, and are most unlikely to alter the terrestrial sense of the rarity of the phenomenon.

From following walls I never lift my eye,
Except at night to places in the sky
Where showers of charted meteors let fly.

In short, he is looking everywhere, in earth and sky, for proof of the visitation of the star, a phenomenon which will carry him beyond the humdrum walls of earth, reminding us perhaps that stones from heaven, as the first solid after hyperthermal ooze, were once seen as the origin of life. The star, in his mind, is only hidden and silent in a wall, and "only needs a spin"—that is to say, an impetus to resume its proper activity—to bring its power to bear in his life.

It is that bringing to bear that characterizes Frost's concern with things astronomical. On the face of it, the experience of the star resembles the description of "the Northern Lights that run like tingling nerves," in "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations." Once the "spin" is imparted to the star, it begins to act on the speaker, begins

To chafe and shuffle in my calloused palm
And run off in strange tangents with my arm,
As fish do with the line in first alarm.

But the "tingling nerves" of Northern Lights and human beings are at best incidentally related, while the sensation in the "calloused palm" results from direct, purposive contact. Drudgery—perhaps the very drudgery of following walls—is cancelled out, and sensitively restored. The image of the fish suggests that the star in a measure comes to the man; he does not merely happen upon it. Too, the fish and fisherman are part of one system. That metaphor, of course, has its limitations. The fish is for more than digesting into the conventional body of experience. It leads the fisherman into new paths, on "strange tangents," and contains

the prize
Of the one world complete in any size
That I am like to compass, fool or wise.

Astronomy, only inchoate here, takes a prominent place in Frost's work as a point of entry into the possible, on a grander scale than the house. In this respect it has a notable analogue in

paleontology; as the mother says in "The Witch of Coös," "Yes, there's something the dead are keeping back," and paleontology gets into that guarded storehouse just as astronomy scours the storehouse of space. Though Frost brushes "meditation" aside as a retarding oriental pastime, he really meditates on astronomy in poems like "An Unstamped Letter in Our Rural Mail-Box," "Lost in Heaven," "All Revelation," "I Will Sing You One-O," "Take Something like a Star," "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations," and the aforementioned "Kitty Hawk." The heavens, rather than astronomy strictly taken, occupy his attention in "Desert Places," "Come In," "On Making Certain Anything Has Happened," "On a Tree Fallen across the Road," "Iris by Night," and finally in "Afterflakes," where the heavens come to him in a moment of self-doubt in a snowstorm, through what he calls "frost knots"—a phrase worthy of psycho-biographical inquiry. I say Frost meditates in these poems because he is pushing at the spirit of relationship between the translunary moment or phenomenon and the human scene, not drawing on the raw poetic power of the astronomical as, say, the late American poet Robert Hayden will often do.

The meditative approach is marked also in the poems of paleontology, such as "To an Ancient," "A Cliff Dwelling," "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," and "A Missive Missile." And again the object is clear, to bring the mind closer to what was there, but also to what is here, in the mind. Thoreau says "time is but a stream" he goes fishing in. Frost, I think, has more respect for time, and space, which are for the mind both media and barriers to be overcome. Perhaps his respect is born of his belief in "substantiation," and his sense of existence as a "trial." But it is a self-confident respect, whether paleontology (time) or astronomy (space) is in question:

You can climb
 Back up a stream of radiance to the sky,
 And back through history up the stream of time.
 ("The Master Speed")

It is crucial, though, to see that Frost's search into the hidden and the silent is founded on the borders of the everyday: "Sometimes I wander out of beaten ways / Half looking for the orchid Calypso" ("An Encounter"). Again and again he talks of

solitude, but it is more an expansionist than an escapist solitude, as we see equally in "The Discovery of the Madeiras" and in "Directive." Taken all together the poetry suggests a species of claustrophobia, half personal and half American; twice Frost cries out with the echo of the great pioneering folk song: "I'm—bound—away!" In one case, he seems not to mean to allow even the burden of his own grave to remain hidden and silent for him:

I may return
If dissatisfied
With what I learn
From having died.
("Away!")

Now this may be just the fleeting playfulness of the venerable public poet. Certainly there is a tension between the public, almost sententious air Frost often puts on and the sense of singularity, almost of privacy, that the material revolves around. In a way Frost makes the hidden and the silent seem too handy and athletic and wholesome. American literature from Hawthorne to Stephen Crane and Faulkner had consistently shown a somewhat more morbid or sinister character. Is Frost then the new optimist? Or perhaps a neo-Whitmanesque voice, without the ecstasy, celebrating the everyday? In fact, his very philosophy of "mind" rules out optimism for him. His position is rendered most nearly in a poem aptly entitled "Escapist—Never":

No one has seen him stumble looking back.
His fear is not behind him but beside him. . . .
He runs face forward. He is a pursuer.
He seeks a seeker who in his turn seeks
Another still, lost far into the distance.
Any who seek him seek in him the seeker.

And the seeker, as much impelled as choosing* in his state, finds much that is on the surface grim; it is the fact that such things as "Hyla Brook" or "A Brook in the City," though hidden and silent,

*"The Trial by Existence." Actually Frost says a pre-natal choice has been made, but that is forgotten in mortal existence, and the heroic seeker feels he is undergoing harsh fate.

are not wholly lost that must give comfort—they are in their reduced way as indomitable as the seeker. Even when the seeker, who is mocked for his unsuccess, and who has sacrificed a "godlike" image of himself in quest of "something more of the depths," glimpses that something, only its color is clear, and its quality unmercifully ambiguous:

What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz?

Only a wry devotion to the search, rather than to any teleological gratification, allows the speaker a composed response: "For once, then, something." This is the response of someone who can relish the fact that "The world was a black invisible field," and only fail to rejoice in finding a "hermitage" of unflown summer birds there because they are helpless and can find no relief: "They must brook where they fell in mulch and mire" ("The Thatch").

The fact that Frost's seeker goes after a seeker is tantamount to making himself the unattainable object of his search. But this ontological Chinese-box effect is mitigated, from the earliest to the latest stages in Frost's poetry, by the projection of people actually finding, or being within an ace of finding, other people. In the early poetry Frost is candidly the object of the search, as in "A Dream Pang" and, more obliquely, "Mowing." "A Dream Pang" opens with the lines: "I had withdrawn in forest, and my song / Was swallowed up in leaves that blew away," lines that clearly make Frost the hidden and the silent that someone else is impelled to seek out. "Mowing," with its "wood" and its "scythe whispering" also connects him with the hidden and the silent, and though its imagery is more of an erotic than a critical cast it is clear that he expects someone to come and make sense of his whispering: "My long scythe whispered and left hay to make." The idea of the literary critic as making hay is pleasingly novel.

That the self as well as the farthest reaches of space and time, and the most out-of-the-way location or dislocation of a brook or a summer bird will be sought not specifically but structurally, genetically, out of the impulse of mind, seems a fair summary of Frost's position. We may stress the absence of rational calculation or formal purpose in Frost. His is not the position Stephen Crane takes up in *The Black Riders*, XVII: "There was one who sought a

new road. / He went into direful thickets" (italics added). Frost is not "pursuing the horizon" (ibid., XXIV). His exploration of the immediate embodies itself again and again in relation to scenes and personalities and phenomena aptly collected under the rubric of the hidden and the silent. The net effect, whether we take Frost's idioms of the dream or thought or soul or mind, is a fusion of naturalism and crypto-gnosticism, just as his style is a fusion of the New England folk raconteur Marshall Dodge and the philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce. Other poets of his vintage show a cleaner line: Yeats pursued politics and, beyond politics, vision; Stevens cultivated sensuous absorption and, beyond that, an autonomous imagination; Eliot went in for degenerative irony and, beyond that, religion. Only Frost, it seems to me, was both dynamic and a-teleological. Perhaps the nature of the hidden and the silent obliged him to be so, that is, obliged him to keep something always beyond and to keep what was beyond uncertain. Otherwise, *telos* would have been spelt *finis*.

But it must be noted that the hidden and the silent, as a dominant theme, invites speculation as to motive or source.

No one with the slightest intellectual inclinations, in the latter twentieth century, will fail to think of Frost's searching into the hidden and silent as a Freudian, or more bluntly, an Oedipal symptom. It seems to have the smack of looking for knowledge, and power, in forbidden places, and to mount an unsparing challenge to paternal authority and prerogative in the domain of maternal reserve. Such is the obvious symbolism, or the hidden substance of his preoccupation. But a couple of features appear to point away from this interpretation. First, Frost is studiously bent away from the city, and into the terrain into which Oedipus had been spirited away for his safety, and in which his fiercely and indiscriminately contentious spirit would not let him abide. No, Oedipus must abandon his remote and unknown heights, he must have at, and have, the fields of conventional power.

The second feature of Frost's work that repudiates a Freudian reading of the hidden and the silent is its generosity. Take the poem "Directive" again. Herbert Marks has rightly highlighted it but does not quite do it justice in his richly provocative and discerning essay on "The Counter-Intelligence of Robert Frost."* For Frost, if we may treat him as the "guide" in the poem, means

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the reader to be "lost" to what is unmanageable and injurious: "Back out of all this now too much for us," and up front gives the reassurance that he is in the same boat as the reader ("for us"). He guides the reader then to just such a humble village locale as Oedipus may have thought unworthy of him: "Weep for what little things could make them glad." And by now he has given over even the curtailed importance, or self-importance, of the guide; rather, effacing himself, he lets the village come alive in imagination and one of its number tacitly lead home:

"Someone . . . / may be just ahead of you on foot." The reader thus "finds" himself anew, whereupon it proves that he must lead the ostensible "guide": "pull in your ladder road behind you / And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me." The guide continues as informant, confirmer, the journey culminating at a brook which is—and again the Oedipal spirit seems out of place—"too lofty and original to rage." Going beyond bounds of space and time, in the typical Frostian way, the guide is giving the hidden and the silent of the past, of the imagination, of potential spiritual health, to the reader, but he gives it with a grace that makes it the reader's right: "Here are your waters and your watering place. / Drink and be whole again beyond confusion."