

THE ART OF POETRY NO.2

ROBERT FROST

Mr. Frost came into the front room of his house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, casually dressed, wearing high plaid slippers, offering greetings with a quiet, even diffident friendliness. But there was no mistaking the evidence of the enormous power of his personality. It makes you at once aware of the thick, compacted strength of his body, even now at eighty-six; it is apparent in his face, actually too alive and spontaneously expressive to be as ruggedly heroic as in his photographs.

The impression of massiveness, far exceeding his physical size, isn't separable from the public image he creates and preserves. That this image is invariably associated with popular conceptions of New England is no simple matter of his own geographical preferences. New England is of course evoked in the scenes and titles of many of his poems and, more importantly, in his Emersonian tendencies, including his habit of contradicting himself, his capacity to "unsay" through the sound of his voice what his words seem to assert. His special resemblance to New England, however, is that he, like it, has managed to impose upon the world a wholly self-created image. It is not the critics who have defined him, it is Frost himself. He stood talking for a few minutes

in the middle of the room, his remarkably ample, tousled white hair catching the late afternoon sun reflected off the snow in the road outside, and one wondered for a moment how he had managed over so long a life never to let his self-portrait be altered despite countless exposures to light less familiar and unthreatening. In the public world he has resisted countless chances to lose himself in some particular fashion, some movement, like the Georgians, or even in an area of his own work which, to certain critics or readers, happens for the moment to appear more exotically colorful than the whole. In one of the most revealing parts of this interview, he says of certain of his poems that he doesn't "want them out," the phrase itself, since all the poems involved have been published, offering an astonishing, even peculiar, evidence of the degree to which he feels in control of his poetic character. It indicates, too, his awareness that attempts to define him as a tragic philosophical poet of man and nature can be more constricting, because more painfully meaningful to him, than the simpler definitions they are designed to correct.

More specifically, he seemed at various points to find the most immediate threat to his freedom in the tape recorder. Naturally, for a man both voluble and often mischievous in his recollections, Frost did not like the idea of being stuck, as he necessarily would be, with attitudes expressed in two hours of conversation. As an aggravation of this, he knew that no transcript taken from the tape could catch the subtleties of voice which give life and point to many of his statements. At a pause in the interview, Mr. Robert O'Clair, a friend and colleague at Harvard who had agreed to sit in as a sort of witness, admitted that we knew very little about running a tape recorder. Frost, who'd moved from his chair to see its workings, readily agreed. "Yes, I noticed that," he laughed, "and I respect you for it," adding at once—and this is the point of the story—that "they," presumably the people "outside," "like to hear me say nasty things about machines." A thoroughly supple knowledge of the ways in which the world tries to take him and a

confidence that his own ways are more just and liberating was apparent here and everywhere in the conversation.

Frost was seated most of the time in a blue overstuffed chair which he had bought to write in. It had no arms, he began, and this left him the room he needed.

—*Richard Poirier, 1960*

ROBERT FROST

I never write except with a writing board. I've never had a table in my life. And I use all sorts of things. Write on the sole of my shoe.

INTERVIEWER

Why have you never liked a desk? Is it because you've moved around so much and lived in so many places?

FROST

Even when I was younger I never had a desk. I've never had a writing room.

INTERVIEWER

Is Cambridge your home base now pretty much?

FROST

In the winter. But I'm nearly five months in Ripton, Vermont. I make a long summer up there. But this is my office and business place.

INTERVIEWER

Your place in Vermont is near the Bread Loaf School of Writing, isn't it?

FROST

Three miles away. Not so near I know it's there. I'm a way off from it, down the mountain and up a side road. They connect me with it a good deal more than I'm there. I give a lecture at the school and a lecture at the conference. That's about all.

INTERVIEWER

You were a cofounder of the school, weren't you?

FROST

They say that. I think I had more to do with the starting of the conference. In a very casual way, I said to the president [of Middlebury], "Why don't you use the place for a little sociability after the school is over?" I thought of no regular business—no pay, no nothing, just inviting literary people, a few, for a week or two. The kitchen staff was still there. But then they started a regular business of it.

INTERVIEWER

When you were in England from 1912 to 1915, did you ever think you might possibly stay there?

FROST

No. No, I went over there to be poor for a while, nothing else. I didn't think of printing a book over there. I'd never offered a book to anyone here. I was thirty-eight years old, wasn't I? Something like that. And I thought the way to a book was the magazines. I hadn't too much luck with them, and nobody ever noticed me except to send me a check now and then. So I didn't think I was ready for a book. But I had written three books when I went over, the amount of three books—*A Boy's Will*, *North of Boston*, and part of the next [*Mountain Interval*] in a loose-leaf heap.

INTERVIEWER

What were the circumstances of your meeting Pound when you were in England?

FROST

That was through Frank Flint. The early Imagist and translator. He was a friend of Pound and belonged in that little group there. He met me in a bookstore, said, “American?” And I said, “Yes. How’d you know?” He said, “Shoes.” It was the Poetry Bookshop, Harold Monro’s, just being organized. He said, “Poetry?” And I said, “I accept the omen.” Then he said, “You should know your fellow countryman, Ezra Pound.” And I said, “I’ve never heard of him.” And I hadn’t. I’d been skipping literary magazines—I don’t ever read them very much—and the gossip, you know, I never paid much attention to. So he said, “I’m going to tell him you’re here.” And I had a card from Pound afterwards. I didn’t use it for two or three months after that.

INTERVIEWER

He saw your book—*A Boy’s Will*—just before publication, didn’t he? How did that come about?

FROST

The book was already in the publisher’s hands, but it hadn’t come out when I met Pound, three or four months after he sent me his card. I didn’t like the card very well.

INTERVIEWER

What did he say on it?

FROST

Just said, “At home, sometimes.” Just like Pound. So I didn’t feel that that was a very warm invitation. Then one day walking past Church Walk in Kensington, I took his card out and went in

to look for him. And I found him there, a little put out that I hadn't come sooner, in his Poundian way. And then he said, "Flint tells me you have a book." And I said, "Well, I ought to have." He said, "You haven't seen it?" And I said, "No." He said, "What do you say we go and get a copy?" He was eager about being the first one to talk. That's one of the best things you can say about Pound: he wanted to be the first to jump. Didn't call people up on the telephone to see how they were going to jump. He was all silent with eagerness. We walked over to my publisher; he got the book. Didn't show it to me—put it in his pocket. We went back to his room. He said, "You don't mind our liking this?" in his British accent, slightly. And I said, "Oh, go ahead and like it." Pretty soon he laughed at something, and I said I knew where that was in the book, what Pound would laugh at. And then pretty soon he said, "You better run along home, I'm going to review it." And I never touched it. I went home without my book and he kept it. I'd barely seen it in his hands.

INTERVIEWER

He wrote perhaps the first important favorable review, didn't he?

FROST

Yes. It was printed in the States, in Chicago, but it didn't help me much in England. The reviewing of the book there began right away, as soon as it was out. I guess most of those who reviewed it in England didn't know it had already been reviewed in Chicago. It didn't sound as though they did. But his review had something to do with the beginning of my reputation. I've always felt a little romantic about all that—that queer adventure he gave me. You know he had a mixed, a really curious position over there. He was friends with Yeats, Hueffer [*Ford Maddox Ford*], and a very few others.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know Hueffer?

FROST

Yes, with him. And Yeats, with him.

INTERVIEWER

How much did you see of Yeats when you were in England?

FROST

Oh, quite a little, with him nearly always—I guess always.

INTERVIEWER

Did you feel when you left London to go live on a farm in Gloucestershire that you were making a choice against the kind of literary society you'd found in the city?

FROST

No, my choices had been not connected with my going to England even. My choice was almost unconscious in those days. I didn't know whether I had any position in the world at all, and I wasn't choosing positions. You see, my instinct was not to belong to any gang, and my instinct was against being confused with the—what do you call them?—they called themselves Georgians, Edwardians, something like that, the people Edward Marsh was interested in. I understand that he speaks of me in his book, but I never saw him.

INTERVIEWER

Was there much of a gang feeling among the literary people you knew in London?

FROST

Yes. Oh, yes. Funny over there. I suppose it's the same over here. I don't know. I don't "belong" here. But they'd say, "Oh, he's that fellow that writes about homely things for that crowd, for those people. Have you anybody like that in America?" As if it were set, you know. Like Masefield—they didn't know Masefield

in this gang, but, “Oh, he’s that fellow that does this thing, I believe, for that crowd.”

INTERVIEWER

Your best friend in those years was Edward Thomas?

FROST

Yes—quite separate again from everybody his age. He was as isolated as I was. Nobody knew he wrote poetry. He didn’t write poetry until he started to war, and that had something to do with my life with him. We got to be great friends. No, I had an instinct against belonging to any of those crowds. I’ve had friends, but very scattering, a scattering over there. You know, I could have . . . Pound had an afternoon meeting once a week with Flint and Aldington and H. D. and at one time Hulme, I think. Hulme started with them. They met every week to rewrite each other’s poems.

INTERVIEWER

You saw Hulme occasionally? Was it at these rewriting sessions, or didn’t you bother with them?

FROST

Yes, I knew Hulme, knew him quite well. But I never went to one of those meetings. I said to Pound, “What do you do?” He said, “Rewrite each other’s poems.” And I said, “Why?” He said, “To squeeze the water out of them.” “That sounds like a parlor game to me,” I said, “and I’m a serious artist”—kidding, you know. And he laughed and he didn’t invite me any more.

INTERVIEWER

These personal associations that you had in England with Pound and Edward Thomas and what you call the Georgians—these had nothing to do with your establishing a sense of your own style, did they? You’d already written what were to be nearly the first three volumes of your poetry.

I only say it as worth thinking of
But loyalty in friendship and in love
In times like these there must be a different thing
From what ~~we~~ ^{they} say ~~it~~ ^{it} used to be O King.

1

I do not like the way you shut your eyes
When you say that ^{with} the King replies,
"Stand up and say it." The Vizier stood up
So suddenly he overthrew his cup.

2

Never more dangerous than when affable
The King enjoys the moment to the fact
He looks from face to face all down the board
To see with whom he has or hasn't scored.

3

The statesman stumbled: "I don't know what starts
This ~~argument~~ ^{argument}. But would you call fair-headed
The one who ^{and} from divine disavowal
Have an attachment up for an attraction?"

3

you stand ^{with} ^{me} ^{right} of ^{extinction}.
You would ~~the~~ ^{the} bog get down in ^{any} ^{situation}.
Just what are you preparing to forsake
If you can tell us so we stay awake."

4

The banqueters with awails with fear
Of what was happening to the Vizier.
Their only comfort in the ^{night} ^{thought}
That they were not the traitors being caught
" that shocks

5

1

FROST

Two and a half books, you might say. There are some poems out in Huntington Library that I must have written in the nineties. The first one of mine that's still in print was in '90. It's in print still, kicking round.

INTERVIEWER

Not in *A Boy's Will*—the earliest poem published in there was written in '94, I think.

FROST

No, it's not in there. First one I ever *sold* is in there. The first one I ever had printed was the first one I wrote. I never wrote prose or verse till 1890. Before that I wrote Latin and Greek sentences.

INTERVIEWER

Some of the early critics like Garnett and Pound talk a lot about Latin and Greek poetry with reference to yours. You'd read a lot in the classics?

FROST

Probably more Latin and Greek than Pound ever did.

INTERVIEWER

Didn't you teach Latin at one time?

FROST

Yes. When I came back to college after running away, I thought I could stand it if I stuck to Greek and Latin and philosophy. That's all I did those years.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read much in the Romantic poets? Wordsworth, in particular?

FROST

No, you couldn't pin me there. Oh, I read all sorts of things. I said to some Catholic priests the other day when they asked me about reading, I said, "If you understand the word 'catholic,' I was very catholic in my taste."

INTERVIEWER

What sort of things did your mother read to you?

FROST

That I wouldn't be able to tell you. All sorts of things, not too much, but some. She was a very hard-worked person—she supported us. Born in Scotland, but grew up in Columbus, Ohio. She was a teacher in Columbus for seven years—in mathematics. She taught with my father one year after he left Harvard and before he went to California. You know they began to teach in high schools in those days right after coming out of high school themselves. I had teachers like that who didn't go to college. I had two noted teachers in Latin and Greek who weren't college women at all. They taught Fred Robinson.* I had the same teachers he had. Fritz Robinson, the old scholar. My mother was just like that. Began teaching at eighteen in the high school, then married along about twenty-five. I'm putting all this together rather lately, finding out strolling round like I do. Just dug up in Pennsylvania the date of her marriage and all that, in Lewistown, Pennsylvania.

INTERVIEWER

Your mother ran a private school in Lawrence, Massachusetts, didn't she?

FROST

Yes, she did, round Lawrence. She had a private school. And I taught in that some, as well as taking some other schools. I'd go out and teach in district schools whenever I felt like springtime.

* Chaucerian scholar and formerly a professor of English at Harvard.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you then?

FROST

Oh, just after I'd run away from Dartmouth, along there in '93, '94, twenty years old. Every time I'd get sick of the city I'd go out for the springtime and take school for one term. I did that I think two or three times, that same school. Little school with twelve children, about a dozen children, all barefooted. I did newspaper work in Lawrence, too. I followed my father and mother in that, you know. I didn't know what I wanted to do with myself to earn a living. Taught a little, worked on a paper a little, worked on farms a little, that was my own departure. But I just followed my parents in newspaper work. I edited a paper a while—a weekly paper—and then I was on a regular paper. I see its name still up there in Lawrence.

INTERVIEWER

When you started to write poetry, was there any poet that you admired very much?

FROST

I was the enemy of that theory, that idea of Stevenson's that you should play the sedulous ape to anybody. That did more harm to American education than anything ever got out.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever feel any affinity between your work and any other poet's?

FROST

I'll leave that for somebody else to tell me. I wouldn't know.

INTERVIEWER

But when you read Robinson or Stevens, for example, do you find anything that is familiar to you from your own poetry?

FROST

Wallace Stevens? He was years after me.

INTERVIEWER

I mean in your reading of him, whether or not you felt any—

FROST

Any affinity, you mean? Oh, you couldn't say that. No. Once he said to me, "You write on subjects." And I said, "You write on bric-a-brac." And when he sent me his next book he'd written "S'more bric-a-brac" in it. Just took it good-naturedly. No, I had no affinity with him. We were friends. Oh, gee, miles away. I don't know who you'd connect me with.

INTERVIEWER

Well, you once said in my hearing that Robert Lowell had tried to connect you with Faulkner, told you you were a lot like Faulkner.

FROST

Did I say that?

INTERVIEWER

No, you said that Robert Lowell told you that you were a lot like Faulkner.

FROST

Well, you know what Robert Lowell said once? He said, "My great-great-uncle's dialect—the New England dialect, *The Biglow Papers*—was just the same as Burns's, wasn't it?" I said, "Robert!

Burns's was not a dialect, Scotch is not a dialect. It's a language." But he'd say anything, Robert, for the hell of it.

INTERVIEWER

You've never, I take it then, been aware of any particular line of preference in your reading?

FROST

Oh, I read 'em all. One of my points of departure is an anthology. I find a poet I admire, and I think, well, there must be a lot to that. Some old one—Shirley, for instance, "The glories of our blood and state"—that sort of splendid poem. I go looking for more. Nothing. Just a couple like that and that's all. I remember certain boys took an interest in certain poems with me in old times. I remember Brower one day in somebody else's class when he was a student at Amherst—Reuben Brower, afterwards the Master of Adams House at Harvard. I remember I said, "Anyone want to read that poem to me?" It was "In going to my naked bed as one that would have slept," Edwards's old poem. He read it so well I said, "I give you A for life." And that's the way we joke with each other. I never had him regularly in a class of mine. I visited other classes up at Amherst and noticed him very early. Goodness sake, the way his voice fell into those lines, the natural way he did that very difficult poem with that old quotation—"The falling out of faithful friends is the renewing of love." I'm very catholic, that's about all you can say. I've hunted. I'm not thorough like the people educated in Germany in the old days. I've none of that. I hate the idea that you ought to read the whole of anybody. But I've done a lot of looking sometimes, read quite a lot.

INTERVIEWER

When you were in England did you find yourself reading the kind of poetry Pound was reading?

FROST

No. Pound was reading the troubadours.

INTERVIEWER

Did you talk to one another about any particular poets?

FROST

He admired at that time, when I first met him, Robinson and de la Mare. He got over admiring de la Mare anyway, and I think he threw out Robinson too. We'd just bring up a couple of little poems. I was around with him quite a little for a few weeks. I was charmed with his ways. He cultivated a certain rudeness to people that he didn't like, just like Willy Whistler [*James McNeill Whistler*]. I thought he'd come under the influence of Whistler. They cultivated the French style of boxing. They used to kick you in the teeth.

INTERVIEWER

With grace.

FROST

Yes. You know the song, the nasty song: "They fight with their feet—" Among other things, what Pound did was show me bohemia.

INTERVIEWER

Was there much bohemia to see at that time?

FROST

More than I had ever seen. I'd never had any. He'd take me to restaurants and things. Showed me jujitsu in a restaurant. Threw me over his head.

INTERVIEWER

Did he do that?

FROST

Wasn't ready for him at all. I was just as strong as he was. He said, "I'll show you, I'll show you. Stand up." So I stood up, gave him my hand. He grabbed my wrist, tipped over backwards and threw me over his head.

INTERVIEWER

How did you like that?

FROST

Oh, it was all right. Everybody in the restaurant stood up. He used to talk about himself as a tennis player. I never played tennis with him. And then he'd show you all these places with these people that specialized in poets that dropped their aitches and things like that. Not like the "beatniks," quite. I remember one occasion they had a poet in who had a poem in *The English Review* on Aphrodite, how he met Aphrodite at Leatherhead.* He was coming in and he was a navy. I don't remember his name, never heard of him again—may have gone on and had books. But he was a real navy. Came in with his bicycle clips on. Tea party. Everybody horrified in a delighted way, you know. Horror, social horror. Red-necked, thick, heavy-built fellow, strong fellow, you know, like John L. Lewis or somebody. But he was a poet. And then I saw poets made out of whole cloth by Ezra. Ezra thought he did that. Take a fellow that had never written anything and think he could make a poet out of him. We won't go into that.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder about your reaction to such articles as the recent lead article by Karl Shapiro in *The New York Times Book Review* which praised you because presumably you're not guilty of "Modernism" as Pound and Eliot are. [*Telephone rings.*]

* Frost is thinking of a poet named John Helston, author of "Aphrodite at Leatherhead," which took up fifteen pages of the *English Review* for March 1913. Frost's recollection gives a special flavor, if one is needed, to the footnote provided by the editors of the magazine: "Without presuming to 'present' Mr. Helston after the manner of fashionable actors, we think it will interest the public to know that he was for years a working mechanic—turner, fitter, etc.—in electrical, locomotive, motor-car, and other workshops."

FROST

Is that my telephone? Just wait a second. Halt! [*Interruption. Frost leaves for phone call.*]

FROST

Where were we? Oh yes, you were trying to trace me.

INTERVIEWER

I wasn't trying to trace you. I was—

FROST

Oh, this thing about Karl Shapiro. Yeah, isn't it funny? So often they ask me—I just been all around, you know, been out West, been all around—and so often they ask me, "What is a modern poet?" I dodge it often, but I said the other night, "A modern poet must be one that speaks to modern people no matter when he lived in the world. That would be one way of describing it. And it would make him more modern, perhaps, if he were *alive* and speaking to modern people."

INTERVIEWER

Yes, but in their way of speaking, Eliot and Pound seem to many people to be writing in a tradition that is very different from yours.

FROST

Yes. I suppose Eliot's isn't as far away as Pound's. Pound seemed to me very like a troubadour, more like the troubadours or a blend of several of them, Bertran de Born and Arnaut Daniel. I never touched that. I don't know Old French. I don't like foreign languages that I haven't had. I don't read translations of things. I like to say dreadful, unpleasant things about Dante. Pound, though, he's supposed to know Old French.

INTERVIEWER

Pound was a good linguist, wasn't he?

FROST

I don't know that. There's a teacher of his down in Florida that taught him at the University of Pennsylvania. He once said to me, "Pound? I had him in Latin, and Pound never knew the difference between a declension and a conjugation." He's death on him. Old man, still death on Ezra. [*Breaks into laughter.*] Pound's gentle art of making enemies.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever hear from Pound? Do you correspond with him now?

FROST

No. He wrote me a couple of letters when I got him out of jail last year. Very funny little letters, but they were all right.

INTERVIEWER

Whom did you speak to in Washington about that?

FROST

Just the Attorney General. Just settled it with him. I went down twice with Archie [MacLeish] and we didn't get anything done because they were of opposite parties, I think. And I don't belong to any party.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, but weren't you named Robert Lee because your father was a staunch Democrat around the time of the Civil War? That makes you a Democrat of sorts, doesn't it?

FROST

Yeah, I'm a Democrat. I was born a Democrat—and been

unhappy ever since 1896. Somebody said to me, “What’s the difference between that and being a Republican?” Well, I went down after we’d failed, and after Archie thought we’d failed, I just went down alone, walked into the Attorney General’s office and said, “I come down here to see what your mood is about Ezra Pound.” And two of them spoke up at once. “Our mood’s your mood; let’s get him out.” Just like that, that’s all. And I said, “This week?” They said, “This week if you say so. You go get a lawyer, and we’ll raise no objection.” So, since they were Republicans, I went over and made friends with Thurman Arnold, that good leftish person, for my lawyer. I sat up that night and wrote an appeal to the court that I threw away, and, in the morning, just before I left town, I wrote another one, a shorter one. And that’s all there was to it. Ezra thanked me in a very short note that read: “Thanks for what you’re doing. A little conversation would be in order.” Then signed, in large letters. And then he wrote me another one, a nicer one.

INTERVIEWER

Did you see him before he left for Italy?

FROST

No, no, I didn’t want to high-hat him. I wanted him to feel kind of free from me. But he feels, evidently, a little gratitude of some kind. He’s not very well, you know. Some of them didn’t want . . . [*What Frost was about to say here, it turned out later in the interview, not recorded, was that some friends of Pound—he mentioned Merrill Moore—felt Pound would be better off staying in St. Elizabeths Hospital. Moore said that Pound had a room to himself and a cabana!*] Well, it’s a sad business. And he’s a poet. I never, I never questioned that. We’ve been friends all the way along, but I didn’t like what he did in wartime. I only heard it secondhand, so I didn’t judge it too closely. But it sounded pretty bad. He was very foolish in what he bet on and whenever anybody really loses that way, I don’t want to rub it into him.

INTERVIEWER

I've been asking a lot of questions about the relationship of your poetry to other poetry, but of course there are many other non-literary things that have been equally important. You've been very much interested in science, for example.

FROST

Yes, you're influenced by the science of your time, aren't you? Somebody noticed that all through my book there's astronomy.

INTERVIEWER

Like "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus"?

FROST

Yes, but it's all through the book, all through the book. Many poems—I can name twenty that have astronomy in them. Somebody noticed that the other day: "Why has nobody ever seen how much you're interested in astronomy?" That's a bias, you could say. One of the earliest books I hovered over, hung around, was called *Our Place among Infinities*, by an astronomer in England named Proctor, noted astronomer. It's a noted old book. I mention that in one of the poems: I use that expression "our place among the infinities" from that book that I must have read as soon as I read any book, thirteen or fourteen, right in there I began to read. That along with *The Scottish Chiefs*. I remember that year when I first began to read a book through. I had a little sister who read everything through, lots of books, everybody's books—very young, precocious. Me, I was—they turned me out of doors for my health.

INTERVIEWER

While we're thinking about science and literature, I wonder if you have any reaction to the fact that Massachusetts Institute of Technology is beginning to offer a number of courses in literature?

FROST

I think they'd better tend to their higher mathematics and higher science. Pure science. They know I think that. I don't mean to criticize them too much. But you see it's like this: the greatest adventure of man is science, the adventure of penetrating into matter, into the material universe. But the adventure is our property, a human property, and the best description of us is the humanities. Maybe the scientists wanted to remind their students that the humanities describe you who are adventuring into science, and science adds very little to that description of you, a little tiny bit. Maybe in psychology, or in something like that, but it's awful little. And so, the scientists to remind their students of all this give them half their time over there in the humanities now. And that seems a little unnecessary. They're worried about us and the pure sciences all the time. They'd better get as far as they can into their own subject. I was over there at the beginning of this and expressed my little doubts about it. I was there with Compton [*Karl Compton, president of MIT, 1930-1948*] one night—he was sitting on the platform beside me. “We've been short”—I turned to him before the audience—“we've been a little short in pure science, haven't we?” He said, “Perhaps—I'm afraid we may have been.” I said, “I think that better be tended to.” That's years ago.

INTERVIEWER

You just mentioned psychology. You once taught psychology, didn't you?

FROST

That was entirely a joke. I could teach psychology. I've been asked to join a firm of psychiatrists, you know [by Merrill Moore], and that's more serious. But I went up there to disabuse the Teacher's College [*now: Plymouth State University*] of the idea that there is any immediate connection between any psychology and their classroom work, disabuse them of the notion that they could

mesmerize a class if they knew enough psychology. That's what they thought.

INTERVIEWER

Weren't you interested at one time in William James?

FROST

Yes, that was partly what drew me back to Harvard. But he was away all the time I was around here. I had Santayana, Royce, and all that philosophy crowd, Munsterberg, George Herbert Palmer, the old poetical one. I had 'em all. But I was there waiting for James, and I lost interest.

INTERVIEWER

Did Santayana interest you very much at that time?

FROST

No, not particularly. Well, yes. I always wondered what he really meant, where he was headed, what it all came to. Followed that for years. I never knew him personally. I never knew anybody personally in college. I was a kind of—went my own way. But I admired him. It was a golden utterance—he was something to listen to, just like his written style. But I wondered what he really meant. I found years afterward somewhere in his words that all was illusion, of two kinds, true and false. And I decided false illusion would be the truth: two negatives make an affirmative.

INTERVIEWER

While we're on things other than poetry that you were and are interested in, we might get onto politics for a moment. I remember one evening your mentioning that Henry Wallace became somehow associated with your poem, "Provide, Provide."

FROST

People exaggerate such things. Henry Wallace was in Washington when I read the poem. Sat right down there in the first row. And when I got to the end of it where it says, “Better to go down dignified/With boughten friendship at your side/Than none at all. Provide, provide!” I added, “Or somebody else will provide for ya.” He smiled; his wife smiled. They were right down there where I could see them.

INTERVIEWER

Well, you don't have a reputation for being a New Dealer.

FROST

They think I'm no New Dealer. But really and truly I'm not, you know, all that clear on it. In “The Death of the Hired Man” that I wrote long, long ago, long before the New Deal, I put it two ways about home. One would be the manly way: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there/They have to take you in.” That's the man's feeling about it. And then the wife says, “I should have called it/Something you somehow haven't to deserve.” That's the New Deal, the feminine way of it, the mother way. You don't have to deserve your mother's love. You have to deserve your father's. He's more particular. One's a Republican, one's a Democrat. The father is always a Republican toward his son, and his mother's always a Democrat. Very few have noticed that second thing; they've always noticed the sarcasm, the hardness of the male one.

INTERVIEWER

That poem is often anthologized, and I wonder if you feel that the poems of yours that appear most often in the anthologies represent you very well.

FROST

I'm always pleased when somebody digs up a new one. I don't know. I leave that in the lap of the gods, as they say.

INTERVIEWER

There are some I seldom see; for example, "A Servant to Servants" or "The Most of It" or "The Subverted Flower." All of these I noticed the other day are omitted, for instance, from Untermeyer's anthology of your poems. Strange, isn't it?

FROST

Well, he was making his own choice. I never said a word to him, never urged him. I remember he said [Edward Arlington] Robinson only did once. Robinson told him, "If you want to please an old man you won't overlook my 'Mr. Flood's Party.'" That is a beautiful poem.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that any particular area of your work hasn't been anthologized?

FROST

I wouldn't know that. "The Subverted Flower," for instance, nobody's ever touched. No—I guess it is; it's in Matty's [*E. O. Matthiessen's*] anthology. That's the one he made for the Oxford people.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, but its appearance is extremely rare in any selection of your work. It doesn't seem to fit some people's preconceptions about you. Another neglected poem, and an especially good one, is "Putting In the Seed."

* Author of historical and descriptive studies of New Hampshire.

FROST

That's—sure. They leave that sort of thing out; they overlook that sort of thing with me. The only person ever noticed that was a hearty old friend of mine down at the University of Pennsylvania, Cornelius Weygandt.* He said, "I know what *that's* about."

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever read that poem in public?

FROST

No, I don't bother with those. No, there are certain ones. I wouldn't read "The Subverted Flower" to anybody outside. It isn't that I'm afraid of them, but I don't want them out. I'm shy about certain things in my books, they're more—I'd rather they'd be read. A woman asked me, "What do you mean by that 'subverted flower'?" I said, "Frigidity in women." She left.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that it was to correct the public assumption that your poetry is represented by the most anthologized pieces such as "Birches" that Lionel Trilling in his speech at your eighty-fifth birthday emphasized poems of a darker mood?

FROST

I don't know—I might run my eye over my book after Trilling, and wonder why he hadn't seen it sooner: that there's plenty to be dark about, you know. It's full of darkness.

INTERVIEWER

Do you suppose he imagined he was correcting some sort of public ignorance—some general mistake about your work?

FROST

He made the mistake himself. He was admitting he made it himself, wasn't he? He was telling what trouble he'd had to get at me. Sort of a confession, but very pleasant.

INTERVIEWER

That's true, but many admirers of yours did object to his emphasis on the "darkness" or "terror" in your poems.

FROST

Yes, well, he took me a little by surprise that night. He was standing right beside me and I had to get up right after him. Birthday party. And it took me—it didn't hurt me, but I thought at first he was attacking me. Then when he began comparing me to Sophocles and D.H. Lawrence I was completely at sea. What the two of them had to do with me, you know. Might be I might like it about Sophocles, but I'd be puzzled, oh, utterly at sea about D. H. Lawrence. It's all right, though. I had to get up and recite soon after that, and so I was a little puzzled what to recite to illustrate what he was talking about. And right there—new to me: I hadn't read his paper. I'd never read him much. I don't read criticism. You see no magazines in the house.

INTERVIEWER

Did you feel better about his talk when you read his substantiation of it in the *Partisan Review*?

FROST

I read his defense of it. Very clever, very—very interesting. Admired him. He's a very—intellectual man. But I read very little, generally, in the magazines. Hadn't read that Shapiro thing you mentioned. That's news to me what he said. Is he a friend of mine?

INTERVIEWER

Oh, yes. He's a friend of yours, but he's like many friends of

yours: he chooses to see in you something more simple than your best friends see. It's a bit like J. Donald Adams, also in the *Times*, angrily defending you against Trilling, only J. Donald Adams doesn't understand you very well either.

FROST

What was Shapiro saying?

INTERVIEWER

He was saying that most modern poetry is obscure and overdifficult, that this is particularly true of Pound and Eliot, but that it isn't true of you.

FROST

Well, I don't want to be difficult. I like to fool—oh, you know, you like to be mischievous. But not in that dull way of just being dogged and doggedly obscure.

INTERVIEWER

The difficulty of your poetry is perhaps in your emphasis on variety in tones of voice. You once said that consciously or unconsciously it was tones of voice that you counted on to double the meaning of every one of your statements.

FROST

Yes, you could do that. Could unsay everything I said, nearly. Talking contraries—it's in one of the poems. Talk by contraries with people you're very close to. They know what you're talking about. This whole thing of suggestiveness and double entendre and hinting—comes down to the word "hinting." With people you can trust you can talk in hints and suggestiveness. Families break up when people take hints you don't intend and miss hints you do intend. You can watch that going on, as a psychologist. I don't know. No, don't . . . no don't you . . . don't think of me . . . See, I haven't led a literary life. These fellows, they *really* work away

with their prose trying to describe themselves and understand themselves, and so on. I don't do that. I don't want to know too much about myself. It interests me to know that Shapiro thinks I'm not difficult. That's all right. I never wrote a review in my life, never wrote articles. I'm constantly refusing to write articles. These fellows are all literary men. I don't have hours; I don't work at it, you know. I'm not a farmer, that's no pose of mine. But I have farmed some, and I putter around. And I walk and I live with other people. Like to talk a lot. But I haven't had a very literary life, and I'm never very much with the gang. I'm vice-president, no, I'm Honorary President of the Poetry Society of America. Once in a great while I go. And I wish them well. I wish the foundations would take them all, take care of them all.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of foundations, why do you think big business, so long the object of literary ridicule for being philistine, should now be supporting so much literary effort?

FROST

It's funny they haven't sooner, because most of them have been to college and had poetry pushed into them. About half the reading they do in all languages will be in verse. Just think of it. And so they have a kind of respect for it all and they probably don't mind the abuse they've had from our quarter. They're people who're worried that we just don't have enough imagination—it's the lack of imagination they're afraid of in our system. If we had enough imagination we could lick the Russians. I feel like saying, "Probably we won the Civil War with Emily Dickinson." We didn't even know she was there. Poor little thing.

INTERVIEWER

Would you agree that there are probably more good prizes for poetry today than there are good poets?

FROST

I don't know. I hate to judge that. It's nice for them—it's so nice for them to be interested in us, with their foundations. You don't know what'll come of it. You know the real thing is that the sense of sacrifice and risk is one of the greatest stimuli in the world. And you take that all out of it—take that away from it so that there's no risk in being a poet, I bet you'd lose a lot of the pious spirits. They're in it for the—hell of it. Just the same as these fellows breaking through the sound barrier up there, just the same. I was once asked in public, in front of four or five hundred women, just how I found leisure to write. I said, "Confidentially—since there's only five hundred of you here, and all women—like a sneak I stole some of it, like a man I seized some of it—and I had a little in my tin cup." Sounds as if I'd been a beggar, but I've never been consciously a beggar. I've been at the mercy of . . . I've been a beneficiary around colleges and all. And this is one of the advantages to the American way: I've never had to write a word of thanks to anybody I had a cent from. The colleges came between. Poetry has always been a beggar. Scholars have also been beggars, but they delegate their begging to the president of the college to do for them.

INTERVIEWER

I was suggesting just now that perhaps the number of emoluments for poets greatly exceeds the number of people whose work deserves to be honored. Isn't this a situation in which mediocrity will necessarily be exalted? And won't this make it more rather than less difficult for people to recognize really good achievement when it does occur?

FROST

You know, I was once asked that, and I said I never knew how many disadvantages anyone needed to get anywhere in the world. And you don't know how to measure that. No psychology will ever tell you who needs a whip and who needs a spur to win races.

I think the greatest thing about it with me has been this, and I wonder if others think it. I look at a poem as a performance. I look on the poet as a man of prowess, just like an athlete. He's a performer. And the things you can do in a poem are very various. You speak of figures, tones of voice varying all the time. I'm always interested, you know, when I have three or four stanzas, in the way I *lay* the sentences in them. I'd hate to have the sentences all lie the same in the stanzas. Every poem is like that: some sort of achievement in performance. Somebody [*Thomas Nashe*] has said that poetry among other things is the marrow of wit. That's probably way back somewhere—marrow of wit. There's got to be wit. And that's very, very much left out of a lot of this labored stuff. It doesn't sparkle at all. Another thing to say is that every thought, poetical or otherwise, every thought is a feat of association. They tell of old Gibbon [*Edward Gibbon, author of The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—as he was dying he was the same Gibbon at his historical parallels. All thought is a feat of association: having what's in front of you bring up something in your mind that you almost didn't know you knew. Putting this and that together. That click.

INTERVIEWER

Can you give an example of how this feat of association—as you call it—works?

FROST

Well, one of my masques turns on one association like that. God says, "I was just showing off to the Devil, Job." Job looks puzzled about it, distressed a little. God says, "Do you mind?" And, "No, no," he says, "No," in that tone, you know, "No," and so on. That tone is everything, the way you say that "no." I noticed that—that's what made me write that. Just that one thing made that.

INTERVIEWER

Did your other masque—*A Masque of Mercy*—have a similar impetus?

FROST

I noticed that the first time in the world's history when mercy is entirely the subject is in Jonah. It does say somewhere earlier in the Bible, If ten can be found in the city, will you spare it? Ten good people? But in Jonah there is something worse than that. Jonah is told to go and prophesy against the city—and he *knows* God will let him down. He can't trust God to be unmerciful. You can trust God to be anything but unmerciful. So he ran away and—and got into a whale. That's the point of that and nobody notices it. They miss it.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you suppose, Mr. Frost, that among religious groups the masques had their best reception among Jesuits and rabbis?

FROST

Amusing you say that—that's true. The other, the lesser sects without the law, you see, they don't get it. They're too apt to think there's rebellion in them—what they go through with their parents when they're growing up. But that isn't in them at all, you know. They're not rebellious. They're very doctrinal, very orthodox, both of them. But how'd you notice that? It's amusing to me too. You see, the rabbis have been fine to me and so have the SJ's particularly, all over the country. I've just been in Kansas City staying with them. See, the masques are full of good orthodox doctrine. One of them turns on the thought that evil shows off to good and good shows off to evil. I made a couplet out of that for them in Kansas City, just the way I often do, offhand: "It's from their having stood contrasted/That good and bad so long have lasted."

INTERVIEWER

Making couplets “offhand” is something like writing on schedule, isn’t it? I know a young poet who claims he can write every morning from six to nine, presumably before class.

FROST

Well, there’s more than one way to skin a cat. I don’t know what that would be like, myself. When I get going on something, I don’t want to just—you know . . . Very first one I wrote I was walking home from school and I began to make it—a March day—and I was making it all afternoon and making it so I was late at my grandmother’s for dinner. I finished it, but it burned right up, just burned right up, you know. And what started that? What burned it? So many talk, I wonder how falsely, about what it costs them, what agony it is to write. I’ve often been quoted: “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.” But another distinction I made is: however sad, no grievance, grief without grievance. How could I, how could anyone have a good time with what cost me too much agony, how could they? What do I want to communicate but what a *hell* of a good time I had writing it? The whole thing is performance and prowess and feats of association. Why don’t critics talk about those things—what a feat it was to turn that that way, and what a feat it was to remember that, to be reminded of that by this? Why don’t they talk about that? Scoring. You’ve got to *score*. They say not, but you’ve got to score, in all the realms—theology, politics, astronomy, history, and the country life around you.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the performances of the poets who have made your birthplace, San Francisco, into their headquarters?

FROST

Have they? Somebody said I saw a lot of them in Kansas City at the end of my audience. They said, “See that blur over there?”

That's whiskers." No, I don't know much about that. I'm waiting for them to say something that I can get hold of. The worse the better. I like it anyway, you know. Like you say to somebody, "Say something. Say something." And he says, "I burn."

INTERVIEWER

Do young poets send you things?

FROST

Yes, some—not much, because I don't respond. I don't write letters and all that. But I get a little, and I meet them, talk with them. I get some books. I wonder what they're at. There's one book that sounded as if it might be good, *Aw, hell*. The book was called *Aw, hell*. Because *aw*, the way you say *aw*, you know, "Aw, hell!" That might be something.

INTERVIEWER

Most of the titles are funny. One is called *Howl* and another *Gasoline*.

FROST

Gasoline, eh? I've seen a little of it, kicking round. I saw a bunch of nine of them in a magazine in Chicago when I was through there. They were all San Franciscans. Nothing I could talk about afterwards, though, either way. I'm always glad of anybody that says anything awful. I can use it. We're all like that. You've got to learn to enjoy a lot of things you don't like. And I'm always ready for somebody to say some outrageous thing. I feel like saying, "Hold that now, long enough for me to go away and tell on you, won't you? Don't go back on it tomorrow." Funny world.

INTERVIEWER

When you look at a new poem that might be sent to you, what is it usually that makes you want to read it all or not want to read it?

FROST

This thing of performance and prowess and feats of association—that's where it all lies. One of my ways of looking at a poem right away it's sent to me, right off, is to see if it's rhymed. Then I know just when to look at it. The rhymes come in pairs, don't they? And nine times out of ten with an ordinary writer, one of two of the terms is better than the other. One makeshift will do, and then they get another that's good, and then another makeshift, and then another one that's good. That is in the realm of performance, that's the deadly test with me. I want to be unable to tell which of those he thought of first. If there's any trick about it, putting the better one first so as to deceive me, I can tell pretty soon. That's all in the performance realm. They can belong to any school of thought they want to, Spinoza or Schopenhauer, it doesn't matter to me. A Cartesian I heard Poe called, a Cartesian philosopher, the other day . . . tssssss . . .

INTERVIEWER

You once saw a manuscript of Dylan Thomas's where he'd put all the rhymes down first and then backed into them. That's clearly not what you mean by performance, is it?

FROST

See, that's very dreadful. It ought to be that you're thinking forward, with the feeling of strength that you're getting them good all the way, carrying out some intention more felt than thought. It begins. And what it is that guides us—what is it? Young people wonder about that, don't they? But I tell them it's just the same as when you feel a joke coming. You see somebody coming down the street that you're accustomed to abuse, and you feel it rising in you, something to say as you pass each other. Coming over him the same way. And where do these thoughts come from? Where does a thought? Something does it to you. It's him coming toward you that gives you the animus, you know. When they want to know about inspiration, I tell them it's mostly animus.