Speaking of Frost

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Richard Wilbur and
William H. Pritchard

Interviewed by Donald G. Sheehy

The Friends of the Amherst College Library
Amherst, Massachusetts
1997

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Preface

Among the many pleasures afforded by the creation of *Robert Frost: Poems, Life, Legacy,* a multimedia CD-ROM (Henry Holt & Co., 1997), none was greater than the opportunity to "talk Frost" with poets and scholars, such as Richard Wilbur and William Pritchard, whose work, and whose work on Frost, I had so long admired. The readiness and warmth with which my requests for interviews and other contributions were met bespeaks, I think, not only the graciousness of these individuals but also the respect and genuine affection with which Robert Frost is remembered by those who knew him.

For any audience conversant with contemporary American literature, Richard Wilbur and William H. Pritchard require little introduction. Former Poet Laureate of the United States (1987-88) and President of the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1974-76), Richard Wilbur (Amherst '42) has twice been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, for *Things of This World* (1956) and *New and Collected Poems* (1988). Over the course of a distinguished career as poet, translator, critic, and editor, he has been accorded nearly every honor the literary community can bestow, including a National Book Award (1957), a Bollingen Prize in Poetry (1971), a MacDowell Medal (1992), and a National Medal of Arts (1994). In 1996, he was awarded the Frost Medal for career achievement by the Poetry Society of America.

William H. Pritchard (Amherst '53) is Henry Clay Folger Professor of English at Amherst College. In a body of critical work distinguished by the traditional virtues of taste and judgment, he has written with clarity and grace across a broad range of modern literary subjects in such books as *Wyndham Lewis* (1968), *Seeing through Everything* (1977), *Lives of the Modern Poets* (1980; 1997), *Randall Jarrell: A Literary Life* (1990), and *Playing It by Ear* (1994). His *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (1984) remains a landmark study of the poet. *English Papers: A Teaching Life,* his 1995 memoir, is a cogent commentary on the present state of literary studies.

My interviews with Richard Wilbur and William H. Pritchard were conducted at Cummington and at Amherst in the autumn of 1995 and filmed under the direction of Joe Matazzoni, producer of *Poems, Life, Legacy.* In the interest of a coherence occasionally disrupted by the accidents of filming, the interviews have been edited for continuity and clarity with the full cooperation of both subjects. I am grateful to them, and to John Lancaster, Curator of Special Collections at Amherst College Library, for his help and encouragement. Portions of each interview appear in video format on the CD-ROM. With the generous support of the Friends of the Amherst College Library, and the kind permission of Holtzbrinck Electronic Publishing and Henry Holt & Company, they are published in their entirety for the first time here.

Donald G.Sheehy
Edinboro University of Pennsylvania
June 1997

Interview with Richard Wilbur

Do you recall your first encounter with Frost?

I don't think I can clearly recall the very first encounter with Frost. I'm not sure in what room it happened or on what day. But when my wife and I went to Cambridge in '46 to attend Harvard graduate school and do an MA in English, Frost was there in town, and we pretty soon had made his acquaintance.

I had a kind of happy entree with him because my wife was the granddaughter of William Hayes Ward, editor of *The Independent,* in which Frost's first published poem had appeared. The poem was called "My Butterfly," a strange Pre-Raphaelite poem for Frost to have written. It's hard to think of Frost using a phrase like "the daft sun-assaulter."[1]

In any case, Frost was immediately a little more at home with us because of that family connection. I don't think he was very fond of William Hayes Ward himself; he was regarded as a little pompous, a little overbearing. At one point, Dr. Ward told Frost he would do better if his meters were a little more regular and he made him a present of Sidney Lanier's 1880 volume *The Science of English Verse.* Frost was much more fond of Dr. Ward's sister, Susan, whom he always referred to as "the first friend of my poetry." When nobody in America was giving him a break, he found it possible to show his poems to an appreciative Susan Hayes Ward, who was rather a brilliant woman I gather. She was an expert in hymnody and she was also the poetry editor of *The Independent,* then an important Congregational magazine.

That connection helped Frost quickly to accept us. I think he was also gratified by the fact that I had a great part of his poetry by heart. I hadn't set out to memorize it, it forced itself on my grateful memory. I proved to him once or twice how well I remembered his poems, and I think he thought well of that. I didn't—on occasions

when we had dinner with him, or otherwise saw him—I didn't force *my* poems on him. But I guess my first book did find its way into his hands. And my wife has told me recently that Frost telephoned her in 1947 to say that he liked my work. I know that he did gradually warm to it and decided to be encouraging to me over the next few years. In 1950 or so, I remember him saying to me about a little poem called "The Puritans" that it was the best little poem he had seen for several years.[2]

In about the same year, according to Louis Untermeyer, Frost told Louis he ought to put some of my poems into his anthology.[3] Louis, telling me about this years later, said that he didn't know my work at all and that Robert's recommending me had not led him to look me up, because he felt sure that Frost would not recommend anyone to him who might ultimately prove competition for anthology space. I guess that's probably true about Frost at all stages in his life, that he was highly competitive and that everybody knew it.

He was also extremely generous towards me, as he was to many more young poets than is generally acknowledged. I think of a number of poets, actually, to whom Frost was very kind, regardless of what they might do to his anthology space. Early in the game, as I was just now recalling to Stanley Burnshaw,[4] Frost was very encouraging to John Holmes, wrote a blurb for one of his books. And as we know, he was very supportive of Robert Francis's poetry, as indeed he should have been.

And there were a number of younger people—William Meredith, with whom he had a very long and warm relationship....[5] And when I was running through a list of people toward whom he had been generous, I thought also of Howard Nemerov. Now I'm not sure if Frost had read a great deal of Nemerov's poetry. Kay Morrison told me that it was very hard to get him to read the poetry of his juniors. But Frost did say to me that he thought very well of Howard Nemerov and liked his personal austerity. I dare say he looked into the poems too.

His kindness to me was not peculiar. There were many poets, many a good deal younger than he, whom he supported, encour-

aged—a fact not acknowledged by his bitterer biographers. I realize now that I left out the names of Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke, whose work Frost did appreciatively read, although I remember that he always regretted that they "gazed into their craziness" a little too often.

Quite often in the summers, I was invited to go up to Bread Loaf for its writing conference sessions and to lecture on poetry on alternate days with John Ciardi. We'd go up and sit with Frost and chat in his Ripton cabin and that was always leisurely and delightful. I have two memories of the Ripton cabin that might be amusing.

Once Bill Sloane[6] and the publicity people came to Robert's cabin bearing a copy of his collected poems which had been signed by all the staff at the conference. The book was to be conferred on Mr. Stetson, the man who had run the Bread Loaf Inn and was about to retire. And so this book with all the signatures of the members of the conference was handed to Robert. He looked at the book, and looked at the flyleaf, and looked at the space which had been left for him, and asked, "If you had this much space to write your name in, would you write your name large or would it be more impressive to write it small and leave that space around it?"

"I don't care what you do, Robert," said Bill. "Just sign it!"

"You know," said Robert, "if I were really egotistical, I wouldn't give a damn whether I signed it or not."

Another time, John Kelleher of Harvard had brought Frank O'Connor, the Irish short story writer and translator, to Bread Loaf for a visit. In Treman Cottage, the staff cottage, the night before a visit to Frost's cabin, O'Connor had gloriously recited his translation of "Kilcash," throwing back his head, a fine Irish head, and reciting, "What shall we do for timber?/The last of the woods is down...."[7]

The next day, up at Frost's cabin, I was there when O'Connor came visiting. Frost said, "I hear you were chanting, singing, some poems last night with the staff. I don't do that myself, I just say my poems. But would you let me hear one of your poems?" And so O'Connor, despite the challenge, recited grandly once again "Kilcash." Frost then asked me—thinking I would be loyal—"What should I say for him?" I threw Frost a curve by not mentioning a prosaic poem, by choosing his most lyric poem, "Spring Pools." Frost winced a little when I said that, but he did it, and he almost managed to reduce it to prose, saying it in his most relentlessly prosaic fashion.

In what way did the Frost poems you carried around in your head in those days intersect with the poems you were writing? Can you think of any of your contemporaries whose poetry came under the sway of Frost at some point?

I think it would not have been possible to have so much of Frost by heart, and not be profoundly influenced by him in my own poems. Of course I cared about a lot of other poets. In my sixteenth year, I was given, at my request, the collected poems of Hart Crane, and I could name many another poet who had gotten in my memory and would consequently be a helpless influence in my work.

I still think that of the poets of our century, Frost is the best and the one I would most like to resemble. Which is not to say that I'm happy when I find that I'm too like him, echoing him. I've always wanted to have certain qualities of his. I've wanted to have a feeling for the live language as it is spoken in my poetry and to underline, to emphasize, the cadences of speech by playing them against the meters as he so handsomely did.

I've also always wanted to share his ability to deal with a democracy of material, to handle the minutest, simplest, most earthy thing with proper attention. He seems to me the reverse of a transcendental poet. He's never heading for a noble altitude; he's always shy of carrying his idealism, real as that is, too far above the treetops.

There are many things I have wanted to emulate in Frost. One of my favorite Frost poems is "After Apple Picking." I never get tired of it. It seems to me that it has almost all of his virtues. It's a straightforward poem, written on the whole in colloquial language, but a beautifully refined and charged colloquial language. It has to

do with a bit of finite work, a finite ordering of the world, that it describes in convincing sensuous detail. And at the same time, it has in it a number of what Frost would call *displacements.* You come across one in the very second line of the poem, where the long ladder that is mentioned in the first line is said to be pointing "toward heaven still." By the time you come to earth later on in the poem, you begin to see how he suggests "overtones" about the activities of an exhausted and perfectionist orchard keeper. And there are other words and phrases in the poem that have followable suggestions in them, and point towards other possible versions of work, other possible quests for perfection.

I wish I could make a lot of sense about Frost's expression "the sound of sense." I know that I understand it, I know that his work embodies it, and I hope that mine does. But I cannot give a snappy definition of what he means. I know that there is a kind of music to some of his lines, which you would emotionally understand if they were being said on the other side of a wall and you were not catching the words themselves. And I'm sure that has something to do with what he means by the phrase. There are passages in "After Apple Picking" which would illustrate that, if I could just pull them out.

"It melted, and I let it fall and break."

There are inevitable motions in the lines as they are laid down on the page. You can't say them without putting weariness and surfeit into your voice, and I think if you didn't hear the words themselves, you would hear in the tone and movement the kind of emotion that orchardist is feeling.

You once observed that while Frost shifted the "properties" of his poetry, he found his fundamental concern—his great subject—in human limitation.

When I was first talking about Frost's notions of human limitation in my classes at Harvard, I think I concentrated generally on the figure of the wall, which is so pervasive in his work, especially in his early work. The wall takes many forms in his work: It takes the

form of a wall to be mended as in "Mending Wall," of fences, of a mountain—as in the poem "The Mountain," where the mountain is indeed described as a protective wall. House walls. National boundaries. There are all kinds of versions of the wall in his poetry, always expressing, I think, the desirability of being protected from too much, of recognizing one's limitations and not going too far out; or simply the recognition that there is in our lives only so much certain potentiality, that love between two people can go only so far, for example.

It's so pervasive a theme that to develop it farther would be to talk about almost all his work. If one starts out to distinguish Frost from his contemporaries, it is the stress upon limitations, finite realizations, that makes him very different from many of them. Some of his contemporaries were the sort of people who feel that unless you have found the final answers to things, you don't have any answers. Unless you've discovered an all-embracing order, you don't have any order. Frost differed from people of that persuasion by stressing, as in his phrase "a momentary stay against confusion," how satisfying it can be to make some sort of small sense, temporary though it may be.

One thing, to go back to my favorite poem "After Apple Picking," one thing about his making of small order. Though you may draw back from the "too-much" chaos of all that out there that's unformulated and uncertain, if you make the finite order well enough, you'll compensate for it by something like an upward reach, toward the transcendent. I think that is what that ladder is doing, that ladder that we meet in the longest line in the poem. "My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree"—that line's a six-footer, it's quite suitable to talk about a long ladder that way—"sticking through a tree/Toward heaven still...." The orchardist is not trying to get to heaven; he's not directly concerned with heaven; he's concerned with a kind of half-mad perfectionism in his finite task. But somehow, in coming as close to perfection as he does in harvesting his apples, he comes into some relationship with the higher perfection that the ladder is pointing to. So I read the poem.

Like Frost, you have often been described, and I know Frost despised the term, as a "formalist." Many poets and critics today use the term dismissively to suggest that poetry in traditional forms is overly mannered and constrained. Do you share Frost's belief that form enables, rather than disables, the poet?

I don't think Frost could ever have found traditional formal means confining. He was so much the master of them that he could be free within them and forever expressively endanger them. If you can do that, there comes to be nothing artificial about these forms of which one is taking advantage. They completely desert to the side of the words which are being employed.

I remember Frost somewhere says that it's just strict iambic and loose iambic, that almost everything can be scanned in that manner. I expect that's true. I'm sure that he never counted a metrical line in his life. I'm sure that he knew meters the way the best poets always do, the way in which a waltzer knows waltzing and doesn't have to say "1-2-3, 1-2-3." To go back to the idea of endangering the meters, I should think that Frost had put the pentameter line through more violent exercise than just about anyone in our time. Gerard Manley Hopkins was a very great agitator of the line, and one can think of John Milton in his sonnets. It's an outstanding quality about Frost, that he does such wonderful expressive violence to the meter and at the same time keeps it always scannable.

One thing I've noticed in reading him, especially in the *North of Boston* poems, is that if you read aloud his iambic pentameter lines, in such a way as to get five feet out of each one of them, you find you are talking with a New England accent. It can force a deep Southerner into talking Vermont.

I can't guess what percentage of Frost's poems would be in iambic pentameter, a very high percentage. I always love that thing he said when asked why he wrote poems. He said, "to see if I can make them all different." He certainly managed to use that fundamental meter, which some people consider "tummmitytum" and boring, in forever changing ways, because he was so interested in the sound of

sense. There are no two lines alike in Frost, as far as I can see. Of course, he used many forms, stanzas, and meters, but I think fundamentally he was a great artist of our fundamental meter, the iambic pentameter, and of rhyme.

In prefaces, essays, talks, and letters over the years, Frost laid out, if not a formal poetics, then at least a vivid account of the process of writing. Do his descriptions of the act of composition strike any chords with you?

Frost wrote some wonderful prose about how it was to have a poem "come" to him. I wish I could quote it all verbatim right now. What I remember about his description of the poetic process is how *passive* he makes it all sound. There's the image of ice melting on a hot stove, there's the idea of falling in love, all these things that *happen to you* are in his prose accounts of writing poetry. I find his descriptions very sympathetic, because for me the process of writing is also a process in which one is sought out by a subject; one is taken by it, taken with it, and obliged to do it justice. I remember the word "clarification" in his description of the process, and for me that's the case too. A poem for me begins as a kind of hunch or compulsion; I'm forced to cope with some material. I end by knowing why and, if I'm lucky, it turns out to be a good poem. I end in a clarification of this material that came to me and wanted to be written. Frost's account of the passivity of the working poet corresponds very closely to my experience. I have never said, "Now I think I'll write a sonnet." And I'm sure Frost never said such a thing. I'm sure that things came to him and, in the cases where they are sonnets, *had* to be sonnets.

It's been said that one of qualities that distinguishes you from many of your contemporaries is that your work refuses bleakness, that it is suffused with humor and optimism. "Acquainted with the night" though he was, Frost too refused a grim "wasteland" ethos.

Yes, Frost's humor is delightful in itself. But it seems to me that it

also has certain functions for which I wish I could find words. In a beautiful lyric like "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," there's an element of amusement which makes possible the extent of the lyric flight. I know that's true; I don't know whether I could prove it to a class if I were trying to play the teacher. But I know that the humor has a kind of enabling character in Frost's poems. Sometimes it will gesture, in the middle of a cheerful poem, toward a darkness that he doesn't want to confront as a darkness. There are times, in Frost's quiet or cheerful poems, when humor enters as an element almost of menace, as a way of acknowledging darkness without confronting it or specifically being dark about it. Without imitating Frost, I think I've used the same device.

I think that in some of my poems humor occurs as a way of acknowledging that something I'm sounding very confident about may actually be more dangerous than I've said. I think I have found the same thing in some of Frost's poems. I dare say I'm not modeling myself on him when I do that; it may have been a tactic that came to me independently, but I recognize it in Frost. I recognize that his humor often enables him to be dark without being heavily dark. He is never very far from an awareness of chaos and of the fearful, but he doesn't want to talk about them all the time.

I remember on one occasion, similar to this, I said to some camera or other that I thought one of the unusual things about Frost was that he was the poet of the *sympathico-adrenal* system, that he writes openly and bravely about fear, and about its cousin hate, in a way in which very few other poets have ever done. He can't be fearing and hating all the time; he can't forever be acknowledging that beyond that wall, beyond that fence, lies too much, lies chaos. And humor serves him very often as a way of reminding us that he's not so safe and sure as he sounds.

Fear and hate, humor and generosity, idealism and doubt—clearly Frost presented a challenge to his biographers as well as to his readers. How did you feel when you first encountered the "monster" of Lawrance Thompson's official biography?

I read Elizabeth Sergeant's biography all the way through;[8] I liked it pretty well. I didn't get very far with the Thompson biography because I rather early perceived that I didn't like what it was doing, that there was a certain amount of animus in it that I was not going to be able to take. In a way it didn't surprise that a highly critical and somewhat negative biography should have been written by Thompson. I remember that many people in Cambridge or at Bread Loaf said to me at one time or another that Frost was not the kindly, twinkly-eyed professor he appeared to be on the lecture platform.

Well of course there was some truth in that. I rather thought that a big biography of Frost would say as much. But Thompson goes far beyond that and denies Frost many good qualities that those of us who knew him knew that he had.

One other memory, just as a sample of him. I was walking away from his cabin once after a talk we'd had. He called me back. And standing at the screen door, he said, "I just wanted to say that we're friends, aren't we." Which from a man as reserved as Robert was an extreme display of emotion. I was touched to the point of speechlessness by his calling me back to say that. He could be that way. I'm sorry there aren't more stories like that in Thompson's biography.

All of Frost's biographers have talked about the cost of fame, of the performance "persona," of being what Randall Jarrell called "the Only Genuine Robert Frost in Captivity." Would it have been better for Frost to have gone into a quiet retirement, or was there some intrinsic value in the very public nature of the late career?

It's hard to imagine Frost having gone past his fortieth year in the obscurity which he suffered for so long. Perhaps a less extravagant success would have made for a few more poems and a few less performances. But I truly couldn't wish that for him. Manly as he was, confident as he became, in the latter years, he was still a man who had been radically rattled in his early days and painfully neglected. I

remember his saying once, and he was in his eighties, that he could still, having been poor so long, still never enter a bank without a certain amount of trembling, without a feeling that he wasn't worthy of the place, that they might find him out. There were all those insecurities left from his early years, the neglect and all the sorrows of those years, and I'm glad that he had so much warm acceptance in the second half of his life.

I have heard it said that Frost at a certain time in his life unhappily discovered that he could be charming to an audience. Most certainly, he was aware of being charming and a great milker of applause and a great enjoyer of the spotlight. There was also the fact that he was supporting some family members by all these readings, that it was a necessity as well as a pleasure for him. He became sensitive to the feeling people had that he was overexposed. I remember being at a luncheon at Mrs. George Whicher's[9] house in New York and an older woman said to him, "I understand you're going to be in yet another film. Robert, you're becoming more noted than famous." And he was not amused; he was very upset by that little turn of phrase. "Noted," I suppose, implies underfoot.

And I think he brought poetry to a lot of people who would not readily have sought it elsewhere. When I was in high school, who was riding the lecture circuits and reading poetry? Not too many people. Carl Sandburg, Edna Millay, and, at a slightly earlier time, Vachel Lindsay. But having said those names and Frost, one has pretty well said it. It wasn't until the later 1940s that poetry began to establish itself as a popular concert form in America. People who lacked the fame and the performing ability of the people I mentioned could nevertheless draw an audience. But Frost, after the 1930s, indeed for the rest of his life, was a great draw for people who otherwise who would not have sought out the poetry reading, even as it became more popular. He brought them into poetry. And one can't feel that that time was wasted.

Frost also served as a kind of pathbreaker in America for the position of a poet-in-residence.

I do think it's true that Frost was one of the strongest influences on the development of the institution of the poet-in-residence. I guess our first poet-professor in America was Longfellow. But of course the terms of his employment were more onerous than Frost's. He was a hard-working teacher at Bowdoin and Harvard. Which is not to say that Frost wasn't a hard-working man too, but I think Frost always put his poetry well ahead of everything else in his life. The pattern he set for the poet-in-residence has made it possible for some later people, like me, to be forgiven this or that course, to be given free time with pay in which to write. He did a lot of good for those who followed him.

NOTES

[1] "My Butterfly." *The Independent.* 8 Nov. 1894.

[2] From *Ceremony and Other Poems* (1950):

The Puritans

Sidling upon the river, the white boat
Has volleyed with its cannon all the morning,
Shaken the shore towns like a Judgment warning,
Telling the palsied water its demand
That the crime come to the top again, and float,
That the sunk murder rise to the light and land.

Blam. In the noon's perfected brilliance burn
Brief blooms of flame, which soil away in smoke;
And down below, where slowed concussion broke
The umber stroll of waters, water-dust
Dreamily powders up, and serves to turn
The river surface to a cloudy rust.

Down from his bridge the river captain cries
To fire again. They make the cannon sound;
But none of them would wish the murder found,
Nor wish in other manner to atone
Than booming at their midnight crime, which lies
Rotting the river, weighted with a stone.

"The Puritans" from *Ceremony and Other Poems,* copyright 1949 and renewed 1977 by Richard Wilbur, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company.

[3] Poet and critic Louis Untermeyer was a close friend of Frost's and the editor of a series of influential anthologies of modern American poetry.

[4] Poet and critic Stanley Burnshaw is the author of *Robert Frost Himself* (New York: Braziller, 1986).

[5] Meredith has recalled the relationship in "In Memory of Robert Frost." *Partial Accounts: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

[6] Editor and publisher William Sloane served regularly on the faculty of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference from 1945 until 1972.

[7] Frank O'Connor, trans. *Kings, Lords, & Commons: An Anthology from the Irish.* (New York: Knopf, 1959). In his Preface, O'Connor calls attention to W. B. Yeats's contribution to the translation of "Kilcash."

[8] Elizabeth Sergeant. *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence.* (New York: Holt, 1960).

[9] Harriet Whicher, wife of George Frisbie Whicher (1889-1954), Frost's friend and colleague in the Amherst College English Department.

Interview with William H. Pritchard

You had the good fortune to know Frost in a variety of ways—as a student, colleague, critic, biographer, friend. When you think back, what stories come to mind?

I was a sophomore at Amherst college when Robert Frost came to read his poetry, as he did every fall, to various fraternities.[1] One of the professors in the English Department brought him around. The members were instructed beforehand that they should show up to hear this great man, listen to his poetry, and ask him questions... preferably about baseball.

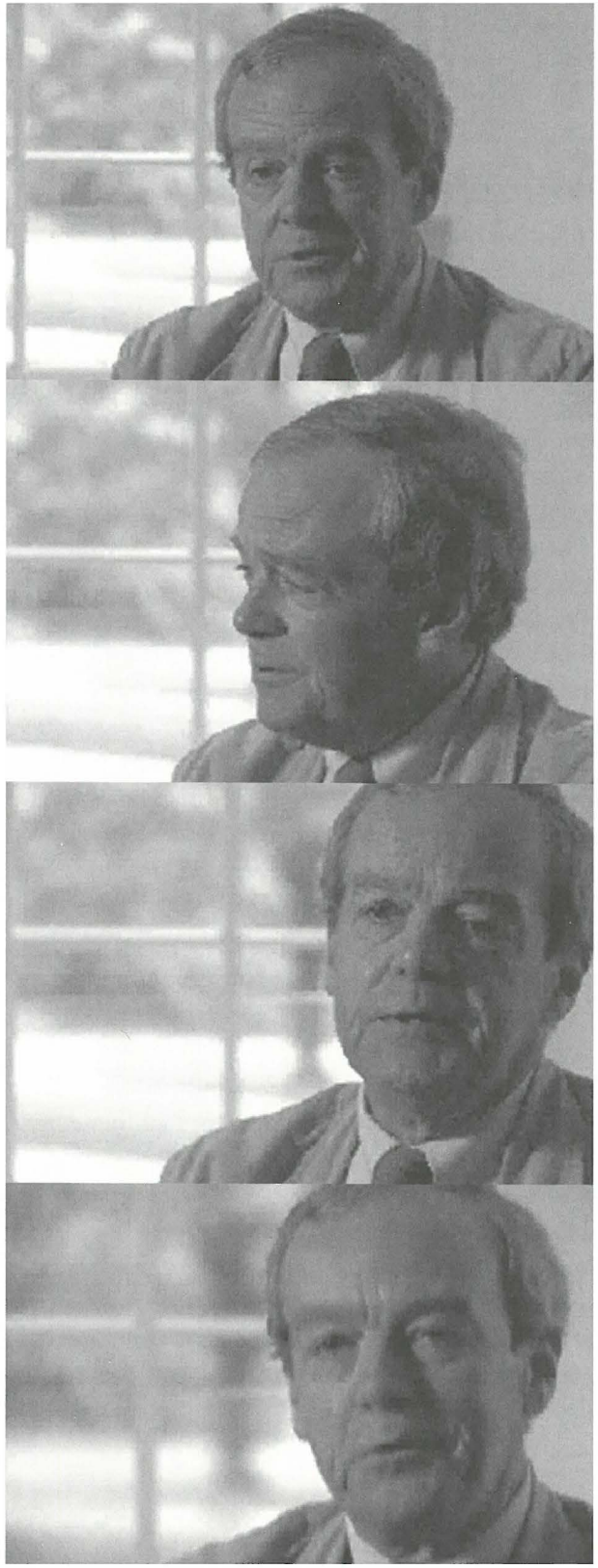
So we dressed up in our white bucks, striped ties, sweaters, and chinos, and showed up. Frost gave a good reading, and at the end there was a question period. I decided I wanted to ask a question. Frost's poem "Bereft," which I guess we had been studying in a course, ends "Word I was in my life alone,/Word I had no one left but God." I thought a clever question would be, "How much is that? God?" I wanted to find out if he was a Christian, or perhaps an atheist, or being sardonic or sarcastic, or whether he was holding out some kind of hope.

So I asked him, "Just how much is that, when you have no one left but God?" He wagged his finger and said, "We poets draw a line and we don't cross over that line."

Well, I subsided. After the reading, a tall fraternity brother, whom I found rather obsequious and authoritarian, said to me, "You know, Bill, you should not have asked Mr. Frost about his poetry."

So that was the beginning.

We were invited to go down and see him at the [Lord Jeffrey] Inn, ask him questions, take a poem one had written, but I didn't do any of that. Indeed, I never saw him again, except at his lectures and readings, never saw him again at all personally, until I came



back to Amherst as a young instructor in the fall of 1958.

I was put in charge of the bard's two-week schedule. I was very worried about this, but, since I was writing a dissertation on him, the powers-that-be had decided that I would be the appropriate person.

What the job consisted of mainly was seeing that he got to bed at a reasonable hour, going down in the morning to the Inn and asking him how things were, asking him what his schedule was for the day, and keeping him in a good mood—because he had some bad moods.

But what I remember most about those times, and I suppose a lot of other people have had this experience too, was getting him back to the Inn at night. Don't let *him* stay up too late! Well, I had classes to teach at 9 and 10 o'clock in the morning and sets of papers to grade every day, so *I* didn't want to stay up too late. We would finish dinner and he had by then talked for two hours or so. By then it'd be 11 o'clock, and I'd say, "It's time to go home." I'd say, "I'll walk you to the Inn, Mr. Frost." "That's fine," he'd say. So I'd walk him to the Inn, and I'd be about to bid him "Good-night, I'll see you in the morning," and he'd say, "Well, let me just walk you around to the Chi Phi house there. We'll see how that goes." And he'd walk me there, and then I'd say, "Well, why don't you let me walk you back to the Inn." So this would prolong the evening by half an hour, at least.

What was especially good and memorable for me at moments like that, because I was interested in discovering new poems, was that more than once Frost would begin to quote from one. And I'd say, "What was that?" "Browning," he'd say. "Well, what Browning?" "Well, you look it up."

In an essay I wrote about Frost once, I used the phrase "elevated play" for the way he engaged you.[2] I felt some of that elevated play when one great October night we crunched along through the leaves on Amity Street, where his friend George Whicher had lived.[3] Suddenly Frost is quoting these lines, which I later found to be from Browning's "Amphibian," about a swimmer and a butterfly "a handbreadth over head… Both of us were alone…."[4] He managed

to put in a line or two, making you feel elevated, and, at the same time, engaging in a kind of playful "Who said this? Where did he say it? Walk me back and I'll walk you back."

I remember one dangerous moment when I had to drive him back to Cambridge because he'd suddenly gotten tired of hanging around Amherst. I had an old Dodge that burned oil like crazy, and I was prepared to drive it and get out and change the oil if necessary, but I didn't want to do that with America's first poet sitting in the front seat. We made it to Cambridge, however, without needing an oil change.

The man you're describing is very different from the man we meet in Lawrance Thompson's biography. When you wrote Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered,[5] *part of your purpose was to address what you felt had been distorted in accounts of Frost's life. What was it in Thompson you felt demanded a response?*

It was the second volume of Thompson's biography, *The Years of Triumph,*[6] that sparked me, I suppose, infuriated me, and eventually drove me to write a book about Frost to correct him, to redress some of the charges he made. I had the book for review for the *Hudson Review,*[7] and I was struck by the index Thompson had made of the most salient moral qualities of Frost: Malevolence, Hatred. Jealousy, Envy. I went right down the list. There may have been one or two positive qualities, but the overwhelming preponderance was of unpleasant, self-serving, self-deluding, vindictive traits. How very strange, I thought, that this biographer had fixed on a Frost that I'd seen some of, but really only in a very minor way. I had been much more impressed by Frost's humor, Frost's brilliant, mischievious, humorous, poetical nature, which Thompson seemed to have very little time for. His only interest in the poems was to explain that Frost wrote this or that at such a time or place. But Thompson, rest his soul, had no real insight into poetry, no sense of poetry as a use of metaphor, no sense of a delightful and moving presence in those poems.

So what I hoped to do in writing *A Literary Life Reconsidered*—the "Reconsidered" was at the suggestion of Oxford University Press—was to try to put the poetry into perspective and, of the man, to present, insofar as I could, a more mixed character than Thompson's relentless portrait had achieved. I think I did that. There are two things I'm pleased about; I think they're still useful. First, the biographical. In no way is it a full biography, but I think I got the moral slant righter than Thompson did. Second, I think I was able to move chronologically through Frost's volumes of poetry—without engaging in too much extensive close reading of the sort that Poirier did so well in his book that had already appeared[8]—to give some shape to the literary career, from *A Boy's Will* through *Steeple Bush* and beyond.

The crucial early days of Frost's career and married life were idealized by early biographers and then made into dark melodrama by Thompson. How do you envision them?

It must have been no easy task to live with Frost as wife or son or daughter during those years at the farm in Derry when Frost was most uncertain and troubled about his career. What he would do? Was he a poet? Was he going to be published? Would he ever have a *book* of poems? He lived during those years a life of relative solitude. He liked to say how seldom, except for going on a walk or "prowl," he went far from the house. It must have been, as a family, an intense, sometimes claustrophobic, although at the same time, I am sure, agreeable life. We can't have a sense of the intensity and strain and wear and tear they put upon each other on their farm north of Boston. But who is to say that it was any more intense, any more troubled, than any lively family with children growing up, with mother and father not always quite sure where they were, that they were doing the right thing.

I like to think of Frost's life as a father, as a family man, at least back in those days, as a very rich and engaged and interesting life.

In reconsidering Frost's later life, we see that it was in many ways tragic, that he suffered some terrible blows, that just to carry on as a poet was a triumph of the will. Were you moved by recording that experience?

Frost's life in the 1930s was really one shock after another, his personal life. First there was the death of his daughter, Marjorie, after childbirth, of puerperal fever ... after agonizing days. Her death provoked Frost into some of the most eloquently sad and memorable letters. This correspondence contains attempts at reconciling himself to the loss by quoting Matthew Arnold and Tennyson, looking to poetry for contentment in this great moment of confusion, and finding lines that are really heart-stirring.

Marjorie's death was followed, in 1938, by the very sudden death of his wife Elinor, the unspoken presence that had been with him since the first poem in *A Boy's Will.* Elinor's death was followed two years later by the suicide of his son, Carol. The deaths of his daughter and wife, of Marjorie and Elinor, certainly had an effect on the deepened note that one finds in Frost's volume of 1942, *A Witness Tree.* The first ten poems are some of the finest lyrics Frost ever wrote. Lyrics he hadn't matched in ten or fifteen years. Suddenly you had this very impressive outpouring from "The Silken Tent" to "All Revelation," to "The Most of It," to "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," to that very strange poem no one talks about called "The Wind and the Rain," which must have come out of griefs.

Frost had said in his essay on Robinson, in 1935, that he was interested in the poetry of griefs, not grievances.[9] A poetry of griefs is what you get *par excellence* in the opening section of *A Witness Tree.* He was never again, in anything he wrote after that, able to come close to the intensity and sadness which informs those poems.

They were also a response, not a throwback, a response in a different key, to a mode of poetry writing that since *New Hampshire* in 1923, Frost had been practicing more and more. I mean the relaxed, relatively garrulous, talking poem, spoken not by an anonymous

speaker, but by Robert Frost the poet, the wise man, the clever jokester, whom Randall Jarrell later cruelly, but accurately, called "the Only Genuine Robert Frost in Captivity."[10] There are many triumphs in poems written in that style, but they don't quite touch the deeper note that so many of Frost's earlier lyrics and dramas did, preeminently in *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston,* in such poems as "A Servant to Servants" and "Home Burial."

A Witness Tree, written when Frost was in his sixties, seems to me a triumphant return to all that was richly complicated and lyrically poignant in Frost's career. I am very fond of those poems. I take the opportunity to recommend them to everybody.

As poignant as those poems are as a response to grief, they are not—so to speak—"confessional." Always in Frost there is what I think you have called elsewhere a certain reticence or reserve or decorum.

Of course *A Witness Tree* contains an early poem which Frost had kept around—I don't think anyone knows exactly when he wrote it —"The Subverted Flower." I won't say he never read it aloud, but when audiences asked him to read it he said no. There were certain poems he never read aloud as far as my experience went ... "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers," "Home Burial," "The Subverted Flower."

But he would talk about it; he would even make jokes about it. "When they ask me what 'The Subverted Flower' is about, I tell 'em frigidity in women," and there'd be a kind of nervous silence in the audience. There was always that curious doubleness, "No I won't get into that. No, some things should be held back, they're too personal." And at the same time, this devilish impulse to tease and to flout.

I think about a wonderful story, though I wasn't present. Allen Tate, the poet and critic, was lecturing at Smith, and Frost went to hear him, or to see him. At any rate, when Tate was taken to the train in Springfield, Frost and another Amherst professor went along. Tate was a converted Catholic at this point, and a priest was

traveling with him. At one point, Frost says to the priest, "Are you a convert, Father?" and the priest says, "No, Mr. Frost," and Frost says, "Shake," and puts out his hand.

Well he comes back to Amherst and says to the professor, "Don't tell anybody I said that. I shouldn't allow myself to make those kinds of jokes." And then the next week somebody hears Frost telling the story himself, with great pleasure, at a fraternity house.

Thompson didn't seem to me to make enough of a playfulness that could be exasperating and embarrassing but was also delightful.

Frost felt that many people missed, or misunderstood, his humor. What do you think he meant when he said that "the way of understanding is partly mirth"?

The sentence of Frost I find myself quoting is, "I am never more serious than when I am joking." I teach a course called "Modern Satire," novelistic satire, and it's hard to get students to believe that. Students like to separate serious and humorous. They mean by serious something more like solemn. Frost didn't like solemnity very much, but he was intensely serious, and his seriousness was absolutely instinct with humor. You could not tell just exactly how something was to be said.

Frost talked always about the importance of hearing the special "sound-posture" of each sentence in his work, of knowing exactly how a line should be said, exactly what word should be emphasized and with what degree of weight. Yet, he continually, time and again, wrote poems and lines in which it is difficult to detect this special posture, in which the intertwining is so strong in the play between seriousness and humor. You're at a loss for words with certain moments in Frost. Take "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows," the penultimate line of "Mowing." How is that to be said? What is the special posture there? What is the emphasis?

That mixture of "I'm never more serious than when I'm joking" is what makes Frost both attractive and difficult to read. Poirier has written about this in his book. As he says, Frost is a modern poet,

though he is not a modernist. He's not difficult the way Eliot or Pound is difficult, but he's a very difficult poet indeed. For that reason, he's also a very teachable poet to undergraduate students, who themselves have a little playfulness, variety, and expressiveness in their voices.

How do you respond to Frost as the "good, grey, household bard"? Some have said that his very success in reaching a wide audience ultimately diminished him.

Back in the 1950s, though it really started in the 1930s, Frost began to be the object of a certain Frost cult, of people who wouldn't be caught dead reading T.S. Eliot or Wallace Stevens, but who thought they loved Frost. These people, I'd say—unkindly perhaps—didn't care much about poetry, but they liked the idea of this white-haired New England sage who wrote about cows and apples and nice things, rather than a "wasteland." In the 1930s, in response to the Frost cult, to Frost as the purveyor of good cheer, academic critics, some of the very best critics of poetry of that time, Blackmur, Rolfe Humphries, began to speak harshly in their reviews against Frost as somehow having betrayed the "true" heritage of modern poetry, which should be difficult and complex and ambiguous, not easily available, not spoken in the voice of a bard who gave out consoling wisdom.[11]

In the 50s and 60s, that version of Frost as the purveyor of country wisdom reached its peak. It'll never get back there again, and that's fine. It was left for Lionel Trilling to try to undo that image during his famous talk, on Frost's 85th birthday, about how Frost was really a poet of tragedy, comparing him to Sophocles and to D. H. Lawrence.[12] Jarrell had already addressed this in an essay seven years before, and it may have been disingenuous for Trilling not to mention that Jarrell had been there in the field before him.[13]

The fall-out was that critics and readers then began to say, "Ahh, he seems to be light, but he's really dark." They got rid of the humor again; they forgot that the way of understanding is partly

mirth, that serious and joking go together. Frost, they said, is *either* a benign sage *or* he's full of dark and tragic thoughts about suicide and death. So I think the attempt has been to get those two parts back into some organic relationship, not to think of them as this rather than that, either this or that, but as containing multitudes, this and that and, by god, that too.

How do you present Frost to your students and what types of responses do you get? In other words, how successfully can Frost be read and taught today?

Teaching at Amherst, where the library is named after Frost, I suppose that students expect to encounter a poem by this name someplace along the way. I teach Frost in my course on modern poetry, along with Hardy, Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens—that's my major five. He takes his place, naturally, among those modernists, even though his brand of difficulty, of complexity, is significantly different from theirs. They are all different from each other. You don't need too many footnotes to read Frost, although an annotated edition which glossed many of the country terms—the flowers, plants—would be extremely useful.

The use I put Frost to in classes, how I find him most helpful, is in getting students to take more interesting, freer, less humorless attitudes toward the reading of poetry, humorless attitudes they'd had instilled in them in high school: "What does the poet mean?" "What is the poet really saying?"—that search for "truth" behind the words. I find it very useful to have them read bits of Frost's prose, maybe an essay, maybe only a paragraph, such as where he defines the figure of a poem to be the same as a figure for love. "It inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down...."[14]

Just this fall—with first-year students in a class called "Reading and Criticism," where we begin to read different poets, not Frost—I brought in a number of sayings, apothegms, that Frost had collected under the title "Poetry and School" and published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1951.[15] They are really fascinating for their subversive and surprising *unordinariness.* The *unordinariness* of Frost is what is so engaging, and what you want to get ordinary students to have a sense of. "Why should we have poetry in the schools?" "Why should we teach it in the schools, why not outside?" He plays around with questions like this. Because it's good to read poems in school. Where else are you likely to read them? Where else are you likely to read Robert Frost, if you don't come across him in sixth grade or high school or college? Probably not on your own, outside the classroom.

I read Frost, still read Frost, on my own, although some of the poems I don't need to read—they're in my head. Still, it's good to go back and see what you've got wrong. This new edition in the Library of America is terribly useful, since you can see uncollected poems, unpublished poems, and read through the published poems from "Into My Own" in *A Boy's Will,* to the last poem in *In the Clearing* in 1962, and see what we missed.[16] Frost's overall output is not immense as, say, Hardy's is; he didn't write 900 or so poems. Still, you can never look through the book without finding something you didn't know before.

Why should we want to do this? I think I put first of all, even before the humor and playfulness, the sense of life that these poems give, the sense in which Frost is a *complete* poet—as Jarrell put it nicely back in 1952 —in that he does give you a sense of what living in the world is like. The world in his poems is, for all its differences, the world in which we find ourselves. But even above and before that is the intense, musical pleasure that one takes in a poet who had as good an ear—maybe the best ear—as any poet of this century, certainly as good as Yeats' or Eliot's, better than Stevens'. There's no need to compare, of course. It's just that Frost provides such metrical and rhythmic pleasures—the rhyming, the wonderful blank verse in *North of Boston* that some early readers didn't even think was poetry. You may say that those pleasures are peculiar to a specialist in poetry, but I think that anybody can educate his ear, and imagination, by a pleasant submission to the discipline of reading Frost's poems.

NOTES

[1] Amherst Class of 1953, Mr. Pritchard was a member of Phi Alpha Psi.

[2] "Robert Frost: Elevated Play." *Lives of the Modern Poets.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

[3] George Frisbie Whicher (1889-1954), Frost's friend and colleague in the Amherst College English Department.

[4] The fifth stanza of a "Prologue," titled "Amphibian," to *Fifine at the Fair* (1872):

> A handbreadth over head!
> All of the sea my own,
> It owned the sky instead;
> Both of us were alone.

[5] William H. Pritchard. *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

[6] Lawrance Thompson. *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph.* New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1970.

[7] William H. Pritchard. "Frost Departmentalized." *The Hudson Review* 23, 4 (Winter 1970-71): 747-753.

[8] Richard Poirier. *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

[9] Robert Frost. Introduction. *King Jasper.* By E. A. Robinson. New York: Macmillan, 1935. v-xv.

[10] Randall Jarrell. "The Other Robert Frost." *Nation* 165 (1947): 590-601. Reprinted as "The Other Frost" in *Poetry and The Age.* New York: Noonday Press, 1953. 28-36.

[11] R. P. Blackmur. "The Instincts of a Bard." *The Nation* 142 (June 24, 1936): 817-819.

> "Mr. Frost does not resort to the complete act of craft. His instincts as a bard do not drive him to the right labor, the complete labor, except by accident and fragmentarily, in a line here and a passage there."

Rolfe Humphries. "A Further Shrinking." *New Masses* 20 (August 11, 1936): 41-42.

> "The further range to which Frost has invited himself is an excursion into the field of the political didactic, and his address is unbecoming.... *A Further Range?* A further shrinking."

[12] Lionel Trilling. "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode." *Partisan Review* 26 (Summer 1959): 445-452.

[13] Randall Jarrell. "To the Laodiceans." *Kenyon Review* 14 (Autumn 1952): 535-561. Reprinted in *Poetry and The Age.* 37-69.

[14] Robert Frost. "The Figure a Poem Makes." Introduction. *Collected Poems of Robert Frost.* New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1939.

[15] Robert Frost. "Poetry and School." *Atlantic Monthly* 178 (June 1951): 30-31.

[16] Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson, eds. *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays.* New York: Library of America, 1995.