

Foundations of American Literature

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The Twentieth Century

(Part Six)

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FROST ON EDUCATION AND TEACHING

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Incidents and Experiences in the Life of Robert Frost

Contributing to

The Formation of His Educational Attitudes

and to

His Unique Role as an American Educator

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Robert Frost has certainly been the most widely known and perhaps the most fully appreciated American poet of the twentieth century.¹ When one considers that he is a poet pure and simple, the pervasive extent of his fame and influence is somewhat amazing. Other writers have received much greater and better publicity than Frost, but Frost's fame was achieved without his having been the least bit *avant garde* or bohemian. The secret of his success lies, I believe, in his genuineness. In all his writings and person he exuded that characteristic in particular, exemplifying the simple life in an overly complex world, and twentieth century denizens predictably responded by clinging to this. His works typify lost dreams of rural innocence,² and fellowcitizens, snared in "a squirrel cage of urbanity," reached out for that irretriev-

1 Philip L. Gerber, *Robert Frost*, p. 7.

2 Frost had high regard for Walter de la Mare, and much of his work bears thematic resemblance to these lines from "All That's Past":

Very old are we men;
Our dreams are tales
Told in dim Eden
By Eve's nightingales;
We wake and whisper awhile,
But, the day gone by,
Silence and sleep like fields
Of amaranth lie.

able past like a drowning man who makes a grab for the proverbial straw.

On education and teaching, Frost presented a somewhat complex mosaic, even an enigmatic one. The following incident will serve to illustrate.

On the morning of Friday, February 11, 1916—and at twelve below zero in the dead of winter—a Boston newspaper reporter, having hired a sleigh at the railway station in Littleton, New Hampshire to take him to the home of Robert Frost, stopped by the village store in Franconia for directions. The storekeeper faithfully pointed him to the mountain home of “Mr. Frost.” During the course of the ensuing interview, the poet revealed:

Some day I'll have a big farm where I can do what I please....I always go to farming when I can. I always make a failure of it, and then I have to go to teaching. I'm a good teacher, but it doesn't allow me time to write.¹ I must either teach or write: can't do both together. But I have to live....I've had a lazy, scrape-along life, and enjoyed it. I used to hate to write themes in school. I hate academic ways. I fight everything academic. The time we waste in trying to learn academically—the talent we starve with academic teaching!²

Frostian utterances such as this may seem strange—or even shocking³—to the reader unacquainted with what was actually meant. His reasons, therefore, must be properly fathomed and factors contributing to the formation of such ideas carefully analyzed if his attitudes and opinions regarding modern education are to be understood and appreciated. By drawing upon pages from his life and experience, the present paper will attempt to do just that.

During the months immediately preceding and following publication of *Mountain Interval* (1919), Frost delivered the first of his famous campus lectures and readings at colleges such as Bates in Maine and at Tufts, Harvard, and Amherst in Massachusetts. For nearly fifty years these engagements continued to carry him the length and breadth of the nation, and through them Frost became a familiar visitor both to small schools and to large universities. Although the poet habitually assumed a cynical attitude toward colleges, this may have been no more than a pose he struck in keeping with his already established rural image, for Frost accepted these academic invitations gladly, in spite of apparent traces of Emerson's scorn for “the education at college of fools.”⁴

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

The most lasting impression upon young Frost's early life and education was,

1 See p. 12 on “teaching...farming...poetry.”

2 Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph*, p. 67. (Hereinafter cited only as *...Triumph*).

3 Sidney Cox, *A Swinger of Birches*, p. 86: “...this refusal to pretend to be logical and complete is the fierce, radical trait that makes Robert Frost.”

4 Gerber, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

unquestionably, that made by his mother, Isabelle Moodie of Scotland. Immigrating to the United States in 1856, she was at first orthodox in religious belief (Scotch-Presbyterian), but readily turned heterodox (Unitarian) and mystic (Swedenborgian) in quick succession. Belle Moodie doubtless became the greatest single influence for fashioning the educational ideals and character of young Robert. Thompson, in a biographical sketch, says this in praise of Belle: "Isabelle Moodie—born in Leith, the seaport town of Edinburgh, fathered by a sea captain who went down with his ship in a storm at sea not long after his only daughter was born, and mothered by a hussy who ran away from the arduous duties of motherhood—had been reared by her father's devout Scotch-Presbyterian parents. Only the death of her grandfather had caused the move from Scotland... From early childhood she had been sharing the religious convictions of her grandparents and had been developing her own mystical Scottish sensitivities. In truth, she inherited from both of them a strong belief that she was blessed with powers of second sight. Her intense concern for spiritual matters made her face light up with a glow which increased her natural beauty. It found expression in her fondness for writing poetry and for singing hymns."¹

One of Isabelle Moodie Frost's poems was published in the San Francisco *Daily Evening Post* of March 29, 1884. A thematic indication of the strong appeal that Emerson and Browning held for her is to be found in "The Artist's Motive," and part of that theme can be expressed in so many words: "The artist is at his best when motivated to make his work reflect a transcendent and ultimate Reality, Truth, and Love."² Under Belle Frost's influence, Robert built into his esthetic the same ideals. Because it provides important evidence concerning the literary interests and religious concerns, both of son and mother, the poem is here quoted in its entirety:

The Artist's Motive

'Tis nearly done! And when it is—my picture, here,
I'll cast it forth as naught into the hand that gives
To me what most I need—gold, gold!
Oh, weary heart, press on this hand
So weary that it seems as if
The cord which joins ye were unloosed;
And cold and hunger make me weak,
While famished eyes of wife and babes
Bring forth the wish that theirs and mine
Were closed forever in eternal sleep.

*

The picture's bought, and we have bread.
Thank God for this! We will not sigh,
For that it hangs upon the wall
Of him who only knows 'tis real

¹ Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years*, p. 4. (Hereinafter cited only as *...Early Years*).

² *Ibid.*, p. 492.

Because his purse is lighter than before.
The work so forced, perchance, is worth no better
place.

But see, dear wife, how bright the little ones appear
Since food and warmth have smiled upon them.
I loathe this work whipped from me
By the lash of dire distress.
Let thy sweet face, dear one, shine forth
Encircled by these cherub babes
Which God hath given—bud and blossom
Bloom between me and the canvas.
Then from my soul my best shall come,
Drawn by their magnet power.

*

The rich have bought my work until I'm rich myself.
How affluent in joy at seeing dear ones free from care
I ne'er may tell. And now I paint, no longer poor and
tired:

Fingers no longer stiff and cold.
But supple with a fever, so delicious and intense
My blood seems coursing through my veins
To unheard music, grand, sublime.
My name is often heard upon the lips of men
In words of praise: and critics, far and wide,
Dare not reveal a flaw, lest they undo themselves.
But what is wrong with me to-day?
I strive in vain to give this nun a look of sweet
humility.

Adorned in robes expressive of her life
Of such sweet self-loss, she seems to walk
With haughty mien: so, too, the child,
In rags, she's leading by the hand,
Looks proud as any queen—
I'll try once more! Oh, weary hours!
Oh, heartsick soul! In vain! In vain
I work—each form is born in pride.
And e'en the flowers, those fairest types of innocent
humility,

Flaunt proudly in the air. From off my easel,
Mirror of a haughty soul, I'll take thee.
Thou mayst not go unto the world
And blazon forth my secret soul.
Into the flames I cast thee now.
As thou dost burn, so burn—oh, conscience—
Every low, false thought of pride
That gave so foul a birth.

*

Months have rolled by, dear easel,
Since thus I sat before thee:
And I have gazed with faithful eye

Upon the face of nature since
 This hand, most false, dared to caress thee.
 While gazing thus, fair truth so grandly
 Dawned upon my soul that pride
 Hath fallen nevermore to rise.
 Take, then, unto thine arms, dear friend,
 The offspring fair of truth alone.
 So I have toiled all day for truth.
 Sometime with steady hand, and then
 Again so tremblingly and slow,
 That heart turned sick at the poor line
 Which needs must be erased, and said:
 "Alas! thou art not ready for this work divine.
 Thou must attend once more God's School:
 Yea, many times, and add to thy poor soul of truth
 Rich gems from his exhaustless store."
 Yet I have striven patiently
 To give what I had gained, and now—
 Why, what's the matter with our boy?
 Oh, darling one, he's crying for the roses
 Blooming here upon my canvas.
 And he says they smell so sweet.
 Enough! Enough! I asked for honest toil not more
 than this.
 But much more came, for God doth give,
 To him that hath, abundant store.
 Men bought and said: "How true to life;"
 And once a man of noble mind—
 Rich, too, in worldly goods—gave wealth
 For one, the best of all, to chase
 The gloom that hovered round the bed
 Of his dear, dying wife. She had
 Not looked upon the grass and flowers
 For many a day. Her eyes, too weak
 To gaze on nature dipped in dyes
 Of heaven's own light, looked fondly on
 This soft and fair landscape of mine.
 One day she fell asleep and dreamed
 Of wandering by that stream with those she loved,
 Then woke and said: "I shall see the tree of life that grows
 Close by the stream of God." And so
 She passed, consoled by my poor work,
 To landscapes of the world beyond.
 Thus labor took unto itself diviner form
 Poured into molds of use for dear humanity.
 So tasks grew easy, and there came
 A time of wonder to my soul.
 While working on a piece that all
 Great artists love, "Christ blessing little children,"
 'Twas there a new sense thrilled my soul:

For Truth with gentle hand had led
 Me over rough, uncertain roads
 Into a place serene with holy light
 Where dwelt her fairer sister, Love.
 And now the picture glows before me.
 Heart, mind and hand, so closely
 Wedded are they, act in perfect unison.
 Oh! Such a fire doth burn within my soul,
 That it must be consumed, did not it give
 Unto the world the light and warmth thereof.
 The scene is a most holy one.
 'Twas thou, oh Truth, that led my soul
 To lean upon the heart of God
 Which burst in sacred light before mine eyes
 Whence flowed to me the spark divine
 Upon my canvas here. Oh, face of Christ, God seems to
 shine
 From you as once He did when thou,
 The lowly one, didst walk here on the earth,
 "God manifest in flesh."
 And as I gaze, so sweet a sense
 O'er-sweeps my soul that from its power
 I kneel not to the picture
 But to that divinity which gave it birth.
 I rise baptized in love: henceforth
 To work, with truth to point the way
 And love to speed me on rejoicing.
 I rose and lo! men knelt beside me
 Worshipping. Thanks be to God, not me
 Nor mine. Ah no, but to the Infinite
 Which shone therefrom and touched their hearts
 With its most gracious benediction.

UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY

Frost made the statement at Princeton in 1937 that he had had a great leaning toward philosophic thinking since the age of forty. He thought that young people had insight, "a flash here and a flash there—like stars in the early evening sky," but that it was not until later, "in the dark of life," that a man was able to see clearly the forms, or "constellations," and these were philosophy.¹ He had warned his friends repeatedly that, as he grew older, it seemed more and more likely that he would become a preacher, and with the passing of the years he did not hesitate to say things more openly than he had ever said them before.²

The person who gets close enough to poetry, he is going to know more about the word *belief* than anybody else knows, even in religion nowadays. There are two or three places where we know belief outside of religion. One of them is at the age of fifteen to twenty, in our self-belief.

1 Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence*, p. 258.

2 Thompson, *...Triumph*, p. 250. (See also p. 21, this thesis.)

A young man knows more about himself than he is able to prove to anyone. He has no knowledge that anybody else will accept as knowledge. In his foreknowledge he has something that is going to believe itself into fulfilment, into acceptance.

There is another belief like that, the belief in someone else, a relationship of two that is going to be believed into fulfilment. That is what we are talking about in our novels, the belief of love. And the disillusionment that the novels are full of is simply the disillusionment from disappointment in that belief. That belief can fail, of course.

Then there is a literary belief. Every time a poem is written, every time a short story is written, it is written not by cunning, but by belief. The beauty, the something, the little charm of the thing to be, is more felt than known....

Now I think—I happen to think—that those three beliefs that I speak of, the self-belief, the love-belief, and the art belief, are all closely related to the God-belief, that the belief in God is a relationship you enter into with Him to bring about the future....¹

BASIC NONCONFORMITY

Frost's refusal to acquire a college degree shows him to be very much "in character" and not a freak as others have attempted to portray him. Neither being regimented by tradition nor burdened with mere academic information has preserved his own humanity and love for humanity in general—if not for humanism (the latter concept Frost detested with a passion). His love for things and for people is never entirely divorced from—and by no means contradicts—his love for truth, however. Sidney Cox says, "Anything less than the truth has a ring of the brave and the honest. But most of us catch ourselves attributing a little that is not at present there...That 'anything more' should be scrupulously avoided is a strange thought. It recurs constantly in the poems of Robert Frost, and it means that the truth itself, bare and exact, is so good, to one who sees it fully, or so much preferable to any misguided efforts of wishers, at worst, that any literary enhancement is a violation. He likes—and loves—the actual, and when he uses it he will not at all distort it. That is Robert Frost—for better or for worse; anything 'more' is vulgar and cheap."²

ON LIMITATIONS OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE VERSUS THE ABSOLUTE

During the war years, he dealt primarily with young soldiers attending Dartmouth in the Army Specialized Training Program. He took particular delight in leading these sharp young minds above and beyond the ultimate limitations of man's knowledge. He used a special technique for leading his soldier-students into confrontation with the larger questions of life. For example, he might quote from Shakespeare's sonnet, "Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds," and then—

1 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, pp. 364-5.

2 Cox, op. cit., p. 34.

You've got to have something to say for yourself if you are going to hold your own with your teachers. Presuppose something to hold—don't drop it at the first word—don't chuck everything you had at home—for instance, God.

Get up a rigmarole to throw at them—something to laugh them off. See, here's what I use about science:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! It is an ever-fixèd mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken....¹

After that, he would pause knowingly.....

With that last line (I told 'em) of his famous sonnet Shakespeare divides the world. Science measures height, but can't measure worth. *Science will never know.*

Take this other Shakespearean line:

Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly:²

Is it true? How true is anybody's love? There is no measure for it. *Science will never know.*

Then I drew a circle, dividing it in half horizontally.

Science has half the world—the lower half. All science is domestic science—domesticated on earth. Here I place the practical men, gadgeteers and engineers—here, in the upper right hand corner, pure science, creative science, because curiosity is the highest thing in man. The loveliest part of science is the courage to *know*—for we can't *see* what is the matter.³

It was in Frost's nature to be cynical of science and particularly of the material progress which for too many was synonymous with improvement of the race. There was just enough of his mother's Transcendentalist in him to bring out real fire on the issue. He adamantly argued that science was earthbound; it could *never* discern value. It could measure weight, height, speed, and mass. But how could it ever expect to provide a satisfactory approach to the measurement of friendship? Or of love?

MEN OF INFANTILE MINDS

What disturbed Frost more than anything else was the cocksure attitude on the

1 Sonnet 116, lines 1-8.

2 As sung by Amiens, *As You Like It*, 2.07.181.

3 Daniel Smythe, *Robert Frost Speaks*, p. 101.

part of "little men of little minds" whose objective seemed to be that of reducing all understanding of the universe to the lowest common denominator of crass materialism. He was never anti-science; only anti-scientism.¹ The word "science" for him could be simultaneously fascinating and repulsive. He was always deeply absorbed by details concerning any new scientific discovery, but at the same time he was always offended by any arrogant "scientific" manner which chose to use human revelations for purposes of mocking poetic and religious concerns for true mysteries. Stated Frost:

Keats mourned that the rainbow, which had been for him as a boy a magic thing, had lost its glory because the physicists had found it resulted merely from the refraction of the sunlight by the raindrops. Yet knowledge of its causation could not spoil the rainbow for me. I am so sure that it is not given to man to be omniscient. There will always be something left to know, something left to excite the imagination of the poet and those attuned to the great world in which they live.

Only in a certain type of *small scientific mind* can there be found cocksureness, a conviction that a solution to the riddle of the universe is just around the corner. There was, for example, Jacques Loeb, the French biologist, who felt he had within his grasp the secret of vitality. Give him but ten years and he would have it fast. He had the ten and ten more, and in ten more he was dead. Perhaps he knows more of the mystery of life now than ever he did before his passing....²

I inspected a young Harvard Ph.D. and found him of the opinion that there was no God and that we all ought to commit suicide...I asked him at once if one followed from the other on the ground that it wasn't polite for his creature to exist when God the Creator didn't exist...His face lighted with intelligence for a moment at the unexpected reinforcement. Such is the infant mind...³

Frost certainly had little patience for those either in or out of the sciences whose "fond faith" it was that learning generally, and science in particular, could so reduce the world to quantifiable, rational data that God would be quite left out of the universal equation. "I...[am very] fond of seeing our theories knocked into cocked hats,"⁴ he stated. When reminded of Einstein's theory of relativity he is quoted as saying: "Wonderful, yes, wonderful but no better as a metaphor than you or I might make for ourselves before five o'clock."⁵ Frost delighted in making remarks like

1 *Scientism*, a kind of "science" falsely so-called, has been defined as that which parades in the name of true, demonstrable knowledge (L. *scientia*), but which is not capable of laboratory re-production. Hence, it has no legitimate claim to empirical inquiry as *true science*, and can be reckoned only as philosophy (the thoughts of man) or mere speculation incapable of proof, inestablishable as fact. (See also: "Foundations of American Education," *Culture and Language*, March 1979, pp. 19ff, and "Foundations of American Literature," *Culture and Language*, March 1980, pp. 33-4.)

2 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 288.

3 Ibid., pp. 249-50.

4 Ibid., p. 300.

5 Ibid., p. 649.

these for the purpose of trying to denigrate modern "scientism" masquerading as true, scientific, laboratory-induced knowledge capable of producing demonstrable proof.¹ When he read in the paper that there was a professor of biology in one of our ivy-league colleges who was not completely convinced of the exactitude of Darwin's improbable theory, and that the professor wanted *first to see* "the missing link," before he became "a believer," Frost was immensely delighted.²

"What I like about [Henri] Bergson and [J. Henri] Fabre is that they have bothered our evolutionism so much with the cases of instinct they have brought up..."

What Frost liked, in addition, about Bergson and Fabre was that each of them had acquainted himself with the results of modern science and then had found his own ways to attack some of the most cherished scientific hypotheses. Fabre's distrust of evolution as a scientific theory had attracted new attention in America following the publication of one of his works translated under the title, *The Hunting Wasps*; Bergson's distrust of scientific reasoning, and of the scientific concept of time, had been admired by Frost since his first reading of *Creative Evolution*, soon after its American publication in 1911....

To Frost, one of the most important elements in Bergson's highly poetic Philosophy was the denial of essentially deterministic elements in the Darwinian theories. In his gently contrary manner, Bergson insisted that the human spirit has the freely willed power to resist materialism through creative acts which pay tribute to God.³

Since high-school days, when atheist Carl Burrell had first exposed him to Darwinism, Frost had been of two minds about new realms of knowledge and theory. But as he grew older, he found help, fortuitously, in William James's scornful references to the uses of reason based merely on the limited facts of science, and he apparently felt with James that science did not leave enough room for the wonder-working providences of God. This conviction received reinforcement from his earlier guest-written editorial in which he had referred sympathetically to literature in which "the traveller reviews God's thoughts (nature) and praises them."⁴ His mother also had taught him that it was the proper goal of a poet to explore, imaginatively, fresh ways to represent the wonders of metaphysical design. Such thoughts proved to be his best sea anchor in stormy moments of doubt, and the astronomer Proctor had mentioned God's design in a way which continued to produce satisfaction in his heart and mind:

We may believe, with all confidence, that could we but understand the whole of what we find around us, the wisdom with which each part has

1 True, empirical knowledge must *always* be clearly and explicitly distinguished and differentiated from *that which is merely supposed*, i.e., from "scientism."

2 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 630.

3 Ibid., pp. 300-01.

4 Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost and the Lawrence, Massachusetts, 'High School Bulletin,'* p. 18.

been designed would be manifest...¹

This concept in Frost is borne out both by what he wrote and by what he said—not only in what he wrote but by *how* he wrote it; not only in what he said but by *how* he said it.

PHILOSOPHY DETERMINES CHARACTER

Frost came under the spell of good writers at a formative age,² although he later admitted that he had never read a book until he was fully fourteen.³ Perhaps the most outstanding philosophical influences of those early years were William Ernest Hocking (*The Meaning of God in Human Experience*), Henri Bergson (*Creative Evolution*), and William James of Harvard (*The Will to Believe*, *Pragmatism*, and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*). In the first chapter of *Pragmatism*, James wrote:

In the preface to that admirable collection of essays of his called *Heretics*, Mr. [G. K.] Chesterton writes these words: "There are some people—and I am one of them—who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe...." I think with Mr. Chesterton in this matter. I know that you...have a philosophy, each and all of you, and that the most interesting and important thing about you is the way in which it determines the perspective in your several worlds.⁴

While at Harvard, Frost had heard Santayana say something about how beliefs determine perspectives, but he was incensed to discover that Santayana had been trying all the while to illustrate the supposed ease with which men accept as "truth" any philosophy or belief which seems practical because it promises in the end to be profitable. He later described Santayana as "the enemy of my spirit."⁵

What Frost admired most about Fabre, James, and Bergson was that no matter how theologically heretical they might be, they did view life as God-centered. He disliked the then new humanist leader, Irving Babbitt, because of Babbitt's insistence that human life should be man-centered. Thompson says:

The deeper reasons why Babbitt's humanism offended Frost were contained in Babbitt's controversial book, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, particularly in the first chapter entitled "The Terms Classic and Romantic." There offering a brief historical survey of meanings assigned to those very slippery terms, Babbitt claimed that a sensible corrective for imaginative unrestraint could be derived from the classical virtues of moderation and good sense. At the same time, he went beyond the terms

1 Thompson, ...*Early Years*, p. 120.

2 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 643: "The most valuable teacher I had at Harvard I never had...He was William James. His books meant a great deal to me."

3 See pp. 30, 31, 33.

4 Thompson, ...*Early Years*, p. 384.

5 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 691.

“classic” and “romantic” to endow the word “humanism” with classical weight. He showed that while medieval Christianity had insisted that man’s life on earth was significant only insofar as it affected the soul’s expectation of God’s mercy after death, the Renaissance humanists invoked classical ideals for purposes of resisting such a belittlement of man’s natural condition, and of asserting that man fulfills the greatness of his potential in this life without reference to either God or immortality.

To Frost, such views were offensive because they contradicted his own cherished belief in the essentials of Christian teaching, especially the belief in God’s mercy after death.¹

BIGGER THAN SCIENCE

Facing the press on his eighty-fifth birthday in 1959, Frost responded to his questioners:

Question: With the rise of science, poetry seems to be playing a lesser role. Has Mr. Frost any comment on that?

Answer : Poetry has always played a lesser role... When you’re in college, half of all you read is poetry. When you’re out, not so. Funny, isn’t it? Out of all proportion.

When I was young, my teachers used to recite, not knowing that I was going to be a poet, a little rhyme:

Seven cities claimed blind Homer, being dead,
Through which the living Homer begged his bread...

It’s only luck when a poet gets too much notice.

I may say I’ve never got on by setting poetry in opposition to science or Big Business or academic scholarship, although some poets seem to live on that contrast... Science cannot be scientific about poetry, but poetry can be poetical about science. It’s bigger, more inclusive... Get that right, you know...²

TEACHING...FARMING...POETRY

In a letter to his South Shaftsbury neighbor, Charles Monroe, under dateline of November 9, 1943, Frost wrote:

I am back at my original college—and first college I ever ran away from... I seem not to be able to let the colleges alone. I seem divided pretty equally into three parts, teaching, farming, and poetry...³

But Frost had long since become too deeply enmeshed in the ways of poet and educator to allow for any measure of success in farm enterprises that might be termed other than diversionary—for the purpose of relaxation or inspiration for works yet to come. His whole heart, soul, mind, and body were deeply interwoven with his very

1 Thompson, *...Triumph*, p. 324.

2 Edward Connery Lathem, *Interviews with Robert Frost*, pp. 195–6.

3 Lawrence Thompson and R. H. Winnick, *Robert Frost: The Later Years*, p. 396.

existence as a bard. For Frost, this existence was a battle for literary excellence. On April 28, 1939, at the Rocky Mountain Writers Conference in Colorado Springs, Frost enlarged on thoughts expressed earlier at the January meeting of the National Institute of Arts and Letters:

Does the artist, he began, have any standard like the scientist's to tell him of the success of his art? Yes, he said, the artist has the "trial by market": "The fact that things go out, that I am not an amateur, that I'm a professional, that people will pay blood money for what I've done—blood in the form of money, a mortal trial, for people care for their money. I, for instance, would just as soon give a poem I'd written to a magazine for nothing, except that I know what editors are, and I like to make them at least unhappy enough to have to part with some money. I know very well that to the world at large money talks, money speaks. Everybody has got to have it." That, however, was not enough, for artists also wanted to be safely beyond "the carp of critics." "I wish," he continued, "we had something like the prize ring where we could fight to a finish, where work went down on the mat or had its arm lifted by the judges at the end. I hate prize fights where the victory is dependent on the referee's decision; it seems too much like the arts."¹

Again he is reported as saying, "There is nothing so satisfactory in literature as the knock-out in prize fighting..."²

In a letter to Professor George F. Whicher of Amherst College, Frost remarked:

Prizes are a strange thing for me to have come by, who have hated competition and never wanted to be anybody's rival. I could never have written a single poem if I had had to have even in a remote corner of my mind the least thought that it might beat another poem. Poetry is "too high for rivalry." It is supposed to differ in kind rather than degree. Still I can accept the fate of prize winners with fortitude and if my victory pleases my friends, not care too much if I annoy my enemies....³

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLING

The writer's studied conclusion as to Frost's secondary and higher academic record is simply the fact that it was impeccable—as far as it went. He took top honors upon graduation from Lawrance High School as co-valedictorian with Elinor White, his rival and fiance-to-be. Following publication in the school *Bulletin*⁴ of initial poems "La Noche Triste" and a fragment entitled "Tenochtitlan," the young idealist knew inwardly that he could now add to his stature as scholar, leader, and athlete (like

1 Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., p. 46.

2 Ibid., p. 52.

3 Ibid., p. 111.

4 Vol. XI, No. 8, April 1890. See Lathem and Thompson, op. cit., pp. 11-2 (facsimile reprint).

his father before him) the more coveted appellations "writer and poet." Little did he realize, however, at this juncture in his literary career, how very rough and thorny the road taken would prove to be. But his mind was made up, and he set about burning his bridges behind him.

He enrolled as a student at Dartmouth in the fall of 1892, and at Harvard in 1897. Although he was a straight-A student at both, he did not linger long at either. At Dartmouth Frost quickly discovered that an incipient poet is no fraternity brother, nor can he force himself to be. He did not take well to the excessive hazing of new students by their seniors, nor did he enjoy the company of rumpus-makers. Gould states that Rob's aversion to the "hale-fellow-well-met [sic] atmosphere" grew, and he stayed away from meetings altogether. He also felt "a large indifference" to his teachers—mostly because he wanted instinctively to be at the top of the system, himself a teacher, and not an everlasting pupil underneath.¹

Frost's need of solitude for reflection and thought—the building materials of philosopher and artist—and the failure of his fraternity brothers at Dartmouth to understand that need, is described by Thompson:

If there was anything about Frost which disturbed and perplexed his fraternity brothers it was his way of indicating that he was not quite so fraternal as they wished him to be. He liked walking, but he liked to walk alone. Throughout the fall of 1892, he took advantage of good weather and explored the countryside in one direction after another, until he had established his favorite circuits. One of the best took him down over the hill to the west, toward the Connecticut River, and then north along the river and through what was already known as the Vale of Tempe; finally back east and south to the campus. A longer walk which pleased him led in the opposite direction, starting almost due east toward the village of Etna, which lay under the shadow of Moose Mountain, and then around through country roads to the north of Hanover and back to the campus. He liked the countryside and he liked to be alone with his own thoughts during these walks. He had the feeling that he could somehow assimilate his experiences better if he used this method of getting off by himself. In his peregrinations he was surprised that he so seldom met any other Dartmouth students. Nobody else seemed to enjoy his kind of walking. His fraternity brothers became suspicious enough to challenge him. What on earth did he do, they asked, when he went off into the woods alone? The question seemed insolent enough to deserve his mocking retort, "Gnaw bark."²

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant states:

Frost has not sought the radio or the television screen but he has sought to *communicate*. Both the inspired and inborn teacher in him and the inspired and witty conversationalist and aphorist have, in this, helped and

1 Jean Gould, *Robert Frost: The Aim Was Song*, p. 46.

2 Thompson, ...*Early Years*, p. 141.

governed him more than the poet—who always has his needs of *solitude*, his doubts of what Frost has called “publicity”: a self-made word, which has a different meaning than “publicity.”¹

Frost grew increasingly bored with the routine of classroom assignments and dormitory life at Dartmouth, (being told what to study, when to study, and just how to meet deadlines for written assignments), but this was only half his problem. The other half was Elinor White, and Frost quickly persuaded himself that she was becoming too deeply enthralled by social and academic affairs at St. Lawrence.² Depressed, lovesick, and homesick, he began to tell himself that he had just about had enough of higher education.

His mother unintentionally provided Frost with “the excuse needed” for his exit from Dartmouth. She was anything but a strict disciplinarian, and some of the rough-neck boys in her school at Methuen, she felt, would respond more readily to a firm masculine hand. This proved to be the catalyst that Rob sought. Convinced that there was nothing worthwhile for him at Dartmouth, he was off like a light. *Nobody* left Dartmouth, however, without formal excuses and official permission—but Frost did! This decisive act was far more significant to him than were all the days he had spent at the school. Thompson states that if Dartmouth had taught him anything of benefit for later years, it was that “for him education was likely to be a matter of self-teaching rather than classroom learning,” and that for the time being, at least, he resented formal instruction. He was particularly annoyed by those students who placed an inordinate emphasis on the “marks” they might or might not receive. What others might think of his quitting was not nearly so important as what he himself thought.

Frost himself has often remarked that the most important part of his Dartmouth experience was the discovery of *Palgrave*. Quite by accident he had stumbled across and purchased in the local bookstore a volume which contained poems of love which he could never before have enjoyed in a vicarious sense. The book was Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics*.

Following Dartmouth, a period of three and a half years elapsed before Harvard. In the meantime, he had wooed and won Elinor White, and they were both teaching in his mother’s school. There were, actually, at least two valid reasons why Frost wanted to enter Harvard. Under the radical leadership and influence of President Eliot, the school had launched a new program of encouraging students to shape any special direction for study by means of the elective program. This seemed to meet and satisfy Frost’s own particular individualistic needs, but there was also another reason: his desire to study psychology and philosophy at the feet of the celebrated

1 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 401.

2 Elinor completed four years of college work at St. Lawrence in three, thus adding to the fires of jealousy in Rob’s heart. Frost made a stab at two schools, but failed to complete either his freshman year at Dartmouth or his sophomore year at Harvard.

William James. Thompson describes James as a man who

...did manage to convey a quality of optimism and fervor, even through the printed words of his essay "Is Life Worth Living?" He began by granting that many individuals must experience the tug-of-war between what he called "the nightmare view of life" and "the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is." He built his arguments persuasively to urge that the strongest defense against suicide is provided by religious belief: "A man's religious faith...means for me essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained." Science, he admitted, has a discouraging way of insisting that human beings cannot find any justification for the religious claim that the pains and evils of this earth serve a positive function in a metaphysical plan. Going even further, he granted that agnostics and non-believers could advance the counterargument that we have no right to suppose anything about the unseen part of the universe. But he pointed out that psychologists can help us understand that the "maybe" of the doubter is often more cowardly and dangerous than the "maybe" of the believer:

"So far as man stands for anything, and is productive or originative at all, his entire vital function may be said to have to deal with maybes. Not a victory is gained, not a deed of faithfulness or courage is done, except upon a maybe; not a service, not a sally of generosity, not a scientific exploration or experiment or textbook, that may not be a mistake. It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true."

These assurances and encouragements were particularly needed by Robert Frost at the time William James published them in *The Will to Believe*. It may have seemed to Frost that James was speaking directly to him, at precisely the time when Frost was determining to give more scope to his own higher faculties. Hence his decision to go to Harvard not only as a student of the classics but also as one who sought direct inspiration from courses taught by Professor William James.¹

That Frost was desperate in his bid to enter Harvard is reflected in the following letter to Dean LeBaron Russell Briggs:

...I desire to enter Harvard this fall if possible as a candidate for a degree from the outset. It came to me as a surprise only the other day that I might reasonably hope to do so consequently I find myself somewhat unprepared for examination. This is the great difficulty. I graduated from the Lawrence High School as many as five years ago (having in 1891 passed examinations for admission to Harvard occupying seven hours for which I hold a certificate.) It is true that since that time I have been teaching school and tutoring more or less in Latin Algebra and Geometry. Still my studies are all at loose ends. In particular I have neglected my Greek. If proficiency in English were any consid-

1 Thompson, ...*Early Years*, pp. 231-2.

eration, I make no doubt I could pass an examination in that. You will find verses of my inditing in the current number of the Independent and others better in back numbers. I might possibly pass in French also and in Physics and Astronomy for that matter but in Greek I fear not. You'll say it doesn't sound very encouraging....

...Let me say that if I enter college it must be this year or never. It will be hard if a fellow of my age and general intelligence (!) must be debarred from an education for want of technical knowledge representing less than two months work. All I ask is to be admitted. I don't care how many conditions you encumber me with. I will take the examinations if you say so, or I will enter as a special....¹

Success on entering Harvard for his freshman year in the fall of 1897 pleased Frost greatly, but the pleasure did not last long. Very soon thereafter, the old Pandora's Box of misgivings about the then "orthodox" system of higher education began to release its haunting goblins to plague the aging student—who was, intellectually speaking, far in advance of his fellow students. Frost was most infuriated by an effeminate assistant in English whom the students quickly christened "the bearded lady"—Alfred Dwight Sheffield. The assistant woefully underrated Frost and belittled his talent. Frost finally unburdened himself with the following quatrain which he would have submitted as an exercise but for the restraining influence of his own self-control:

Perhaps you think I am going to wait
Till I can write like a graduate
Before I write to my friends any more.
You prig stick, what do you take me for.²

The second great disappointment for Frost at Harvard came when he returned as a Sophomore in the fall of 1898. He had particularly looked forward with special eagerness to a course in philosophy under William James, but learned that because of illness James had been granted a year's leave.

The third Harvard disappointment was to be found in the grating incongruity of artist-philosopher George Santayana's naturalistic and materialistic viewpoint opposing his own, and in Santayana's sly and subtle attacks against Jamesian concepts.³ Frost thereafter referred to Santayana as "the enemy of my spirit."⁴

Frost's most difficult problem at this time, however, remained his awkward relationship with his wife, whose responses troubled and often baffled him. She had offered absolutely no encouragement to him in his desire to complete schooling. Her only response had been a cold and total silence.⁵

1 Thompson, ...*Early Years*, p. 233.

2 Ibid., p. 234. (See also p. 29, this thesis.)

3 Ibid., pp. 244-5.

4 See Thompson, ...*Triumph*, pp. 691-2.

5 Thompson, ...*Early Years*, p. 232.

The last straw at Harvard came about as a result of observing the behavior of fellow-students in a course devoted to John Milton and conducted by George Lyman Kittridge. When Kittridge in characteristic manner began his spirited reading and analysis of Milton's "On Time," Frost was totally enthralled in, by, and with the presentation. Almost unconsciously he glanced around to see how others were responding, only to find the whole class furiously trying to take down every word spoken by Kittridge. Frost was completely disgusted with such an attitude toward the study of literature, and determined shortly to leave Harvard before the end of the spring semester and completion of his sophomore year. On March 31, 1899, he stopped by the office of Dean Briggs to announce his resignation. Frost's discouragement much in evidence, the Dean with genuine sympathy insisted that he not leave without first taking along a personal statement. While Frost waited, the Dean penned:

I am glad to testify that your dismissal from College is honorable; that you have had excellent rank here, winning a Detur as a result of your first year's work; and that I am sorry for the loss of so good a student. I shall gladly have you refer to me for your College record.¹

Thus the curtain rang down on Robert Frost's repeated attempt at securing a higher education. Disappointed in and with education, yes, but by love also. His worst wounds had been caused by Elinor's apparent rejection.²

PINKERTON AND PLYMOUTH

The next five or six years were spent on the farm near West Derry (NH) where Frost "piddled with poultry"³ and otherwise enjoyed a rather rustic existence, writing some poetry and taking in a good, deep breath of fresh air from the surrounding countryside for future volumes. His attention was soon arrested by a teaching opportunity at the nearby Pinkerton Academy, and his propensity in the direction of the classroom got the best of him. (He could not long endure it, but neither could he leave it alone.)⁴

Already familiar with the history of Pinkerton, he was attracted by its Scottish flavor. Scottish immigrants from the northern part of Ireland had settled in this part of New Hampshire in the year 1718, and the academy was founded in 1815 by two of their merchantmen: Major John and Elder James Pinkerton. Thompson said that the loftiness and severity of their academic plan had been reflected in the early catalogues, and quotes from them:

"The school is a good, safe one for diligent people who have a definite purpose...Others are not desired." Religious emphasis, no longer Presbyterian or Congregationalist, remained strong:

1 Thompson, ...*Early Years*, p. 248.

2 Ibid., p. 249.

3 See p. 12.

4 Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., p. 396.

"While it is not sectarian it is truly Christian. It is not forgotten that character is more than scholarship, that 'life is the highest of the arts,' that education means knowing how to live so as not to fail of life's great end. Chapel exercises are held daily and are so conducted as to furnish an incentive to scholarly ideals, true manliness and purity of character."¹

There followed a near bout with death when Frost came down with pneumonia in April of 1907, but the storm weathered, he continued for the next four years at Pinkerton. Through the good offices of Henry C. Morrison,² Frost was invited to make the move with Principal Ernest Silver of Pinkerton to the State Normal School at Plymouth in 1911. Gerber reports:

...it seemed evident that he was flirting with danger. Schoolteaching, after all, was his avocation, but it was also the way he earned his bread; and bread-winning had its way of insinuating itself into the center of attention...It was increasingly plain that he was going to have to choose between the two. He solemnly promised himself that the new post in Plymouth would last "for one year" and no more.³

Frost proved true to himself and better than his own word. With his little family aboard the *SS Parisian*, he sailed out of Boston harbor for Glasgow on August 23, 1912.

THE AMHERST IDEA

Frost's next tryst with education did not come until after his journey to England, the publication of his first volumes,⁴ *The Great War*, and his return to America and fame. It was "The Amherst Idea,"⁵ begun in January, 1917 and lasting until January, 1920. His students quickly discovered that their new nonconformist teacher was indeed set against the customary academic approach to the study of literature. His fertile mind was simply too pregnant with innovations—both in teaching content and method—to be bound by staid custom and tradition.

After he had taught at Amherst for two full years, however, Frost began to be troubled by serious questions throughout the spring of 1919—questions having to do with problems at Amherst, yes; but more important still, questions having to do with life. He kept asking himself why he had made the fateful mistake of nearly abandoning his life as a poet, and of becoming a mere teacher. Building up steam toward resignation (it was not *altogether* affected!), his indignation against Stark Young and President Meiklejohn had reached the boiling point. Their talk about "academic freedom" seemed to him far too liberal to be tolerated. In addition, Meiklejohn was so obsessed with the pleasures of debate and argument that he had encouraged the

1 Thompson, ...*Early Years*, p. 322.

2 See p. 32.

3 Gerber, op. cit., p. 25.

4 *A Boy's Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1914).

5 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, Chapter 8, p. 97.

Amherst students to express attitudes which were downright treasonable. Frost was convinced that Meiklejohn's leanings were immoral, undemocratic, and atheistic. In a private session with the president, he delivered the following ultimatum: Stark Young must be fired because he was a bad moral influence on the students. If he stayed, Frost would quit. And he did.

Meiklejohn tried to reason with Frost by suggesting that "nobody's perfect" and that, idealistically speaking, he would have Frost help the students build their own defenses against imperfections in men like Young. Frost should try to counteract whatever might be immoral in Young's influence. "I did not come here to counteract," replied Frost, and resigned.

There followed a brief one-year stint with the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. The welcome to Michigan was effulgent, but subsequent developments both on and off campus led the poet-philosopher to conclude that he had been "used." An unsigned article appearing in the *Washtenaw Post* of October 27, 1921, had echoed the general consensus initially:

The University of Michigan is welcome to Mr. Frost and his theory of God's ways...¹

On September 20, 1922, however, Frost wrote to his friend John Haines:

I came back from Michigan University all puffed out with self-hate that would have curdled the ink in my pen if I had tried to write you at that time.²

Frost felt that this one year at Michigan had taken many off his life and rendered him artistically emasculated. If he were invited back for another year, he told President Burton, he would expect provision to be made for protecting him from so many intrusions and social functions that had kept him from doing his own work. According to the original agreement, he had been promised as much free time for writing as he chose, with no regular classes. But, in reality, he was simply overwhelmed during that year by the whirlwind of multiple teas, parties, dinners, talks, lectures, conferences, readings et alii *ad infinitum*. Thompson reports³ the president having assured him that if he could see his way clear to return, he should have the liberty to disappear from campus—even from Michigan—whenever he liked, "for sensible periods of time."

There appeared in the *Detroit Free Press* of June 25, 1922, the following statement attributed to Frost:

I cannot work unless I am utterly free. I would like to plan things so that if I felt like writing I could go off to some quiet spot where inter-

1 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, pp. 178, 577.

2 Ibid., p. 188.

3 Ibid., p. 189.

ruptions could not possibly occur, because when I sit down to write I must see before me a few days of undisturbed concentration.¹

While Frost had been in residence at Ann Arbor, the unexpected had happened at Amherst without his knowing it. President Meiklejohn had been dismissed by the Trustees, and fourteen of the faculty members hired by Meiklejohn—including Stark Young—had submitted their resignations in protest. This cleared the air for Frost's eventual return to Amherst. The new president, George Daniel Olds, had made an enticing offer: If he came back, he could teach any two courses he might propose in the English department; otherwise, he would have no duties and could serve as "poet-in-residence." This pleased Frost, and in token of gratitude he immediately set out to help President Olds find a man fit to teach philosophy, about which he himself held very strong convictions. He felt that the course had been thoroughly "botched" by the influence of Meiklejohn and Young. He approached William Ernest Hocking of Harvard (*The Meaning of God in Human Experience*)² who, but for the press of his own previous commitments, would probably have gladly accepted the offer and stepped in to fill the vacancy. Hocking gave him a list of recommendations, and Frost checked them out thoroughly. The man he was looking for had to combine both philosophy and theology in an acceptable blend, and Frost's task proved to be a formidable one. An atheist professor would never serve to offer the philosophy course Frost had in mind for Amherst. After futile searchings and heartsearchings, Frost confided to Lincoln MacVeagh of New York:

I have to report having found the philosopher I was on the hunt for in *myself*. On my way home from our talks together I said Why not? And the next day being called on the telephone from Amherst to say what courses I would announce for this year in English, I proposed to give one in philosophy on judgments in History, Literature, and Religion—how they are made and how they stand, and I was taken on by the department like odds of a thousand to one... Here begins what probably won't end until you see me in the pulpit.³

So Frost found himself back at Amherst in the fall of 1923. On August 12, 1924, he confided the following to Louis Untermeyer about that first year as teacher:

The boys had been made uncommonly interesting to themselves by Meiklejohn. They fancied themselves as thinkers. At Amherst you *thought*, while at other colleges you merely *learned*. (Wherefore if you love him, send your only son and child to Amherst.) I found that by thinking they meant stocking up with radical ideas—a harmless distinction, bless their simple hearts. I really liked them. It got so I called them the young intelligences—without offense. We got on like a set of cogwheels in a clock. They had picked up the idea somewhere that the time was past

1 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 582.

2 See p. 11.

3 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 250. (See also p. 6, this thesis.)

for the teacher to teach the pupil. From now on it was the thing for the pupil to teach himself using, as he saw fit, the teacher as an instrument. The understanding was that my leg was always on the table for anyone to seize me by [,] [anyone] that thought he could swing me as an instrument to teach himself with. So we had an amusing year.¹

In a letter to Professor George Roy Elliott at Bowdoin, however, dated July 26, 1924, Frost hinted:

One year more of little Amherst and then surcease of that particular sorrow. I like to teach, but I don't like to teach more than once a week now. I'm become a spoiled child of fortune. I may be drawn back to Michigan or I may take to the woods.²

As it turned out, Frost wound up at Michigan again. Gardner Jackson of the *Boston Sunday Globe*, November 23, 1924, wrote:

When Mr. Frost takes up his residency at Ann Arbor next fall as permanent Fellow in Letters at the University of Michigan, he will be officially freed from all obligation to conform to any of the rules of that educational community. Naturally, he is pleased. No regular classes to meet, no routine duties, social or academic; nothing but the spur of his own spirit to prod him. He is simply going to live in that college community and do whatever he pleases.³

The *Boston Evening Transcript* of November 4, 1924, had earlier reported:

Robert Frost... His fellowship at the University of Michigan has been created especially for him, and will exist for life. The fellowship entails no obligations of teaching and it provides for all living expenses. He will have entire freedom to work and write.

In accepting the fellowship, Professor Frost feels that he will be able not only to write but also to carry on as he has done in... his theory of "detached education." This theory of education is one in which the students are encouraged to do more and more work for themselves and to expect from the teacher more of guidance than of tutoring...

Professor Frost is quoted as saying... "It might be described as no more than a slight interference with students in their self-teaching. I have never been able to care much about following boys up with detailed daily questions..."

Commenting on his departure from Amherst, the poet declared that "it will cost me something in broken ties to leave Amherst, but I haven't seen how I could refuse the advantages offered me at Michigan. Chief of these will be the freedom to get my writing done. The fellowship will give me practically all my time to do with it as I please."⁴

1 Louis Untermeyer, *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, p. 170.

2 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 266.

3 Lathem, op. cit., p. 54.

4 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 270.

But Frost grew weary of battling the faithless at Michigan also. In a letter to Sidney Cox dated (circa) May 17, 1926, he scornfully attacked all the "scientific know-it-alls" on campus at Ann Arbor who did not appreciate either religion or the humanities:

Nobody knows it here but the President: I'm not coming back next year. Going to have another aberration back to the land. You should have heard me standing off a club of scientists the other night on the subject of evolution. I'm not a good debater but they are so sure of themselves in evolution that they haven't taken the trouble to think out their position. All I had to do was ask them [Socratic] questions for information. The last one led up to was, Did they think it was ever going to be any easier to be good. I wouldn't call it an evolution unless there was hope of screwing virtue to the sticking point so it would cost less effort and vigilance than now to maintain. Amelioration was as much as they could make me see. The funny thing was their surprise at my unscientific-ness. They made more awful breaks. Sometime I'll tell you about them. I believe I'll never forget them. They just jumped off the edge. Me, I didn't have to expose myself. I was just out for information. Tell me, I'd say.¹

Following the above episode, Frost agreed with President George D. Olds of Amherst to return on a part-time basis but with the rank of full Professor and a starting salary of \$5,000 per annum. President Olds made the terms clear:

Mr. Frost will not be in residence throughout the year, but will spend one term or its equivalent at college. He will conduct no classes, but will lecture and meet students in conference with entire informality. Whatever is done under his inspiration and guidance will be done as he would have it, as a labor of love without academic credit.²

Frost held the position until the death of his wife in 1938, at which time he penned the following note of thanks (and resignation) to President Stanley King:

...Elsewhere I began my educational life as a full-time teacher. At Amherst I have had the chance to taper off into a part-time teacher and at last into a no-time teacher—a no-time teacher and yet as I should like to think a teacher, specializing in the kind of teaching every teacher does more or less of. A teacher who influenced me most I never had.³ A book that influenced me most I never read.⁴ The mere name of it carried in mind for years did the work. There has been ample time (twelve years) to carry out the idea of detached attachment.⁵

In the interim, Frost had consented to give the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard during the spring term of 1936, and he seemed to be none the worse for the

1 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, pp. 296-7.

2 Ibid., p. 621.

3 Reference to philosopher William James. See pp. 15-7.

4 *The Vision Concerning Piers Plowman*.

5 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 506.

experience. He had received so many flattering attentions from President James Bryant Conant and from various members of the faculty that at one point he began to believe Harvard was going to offer him a permanent appointment. But a rule of the house was that no permanent appointments to Harvard faculty would be made in the absence of an earned doctorate, and this Frost did not have.¹

Meanwhile, a group calling themselves "Friends of Robert Frost" had donated enough money to Harvard University for creation of the "Ralph Waldo Emerson Fellowship in Poetry," and Frost was asked to take this appointment as of September 1, 1939. The following is an excerpt from his letter of acceptance to President Conant:

I should have written you weeks ago how proud I am to be made Ralph Waldo Emerson fellow in poetry at Harvard University. Such great names as Harvard and Emerson are not just nominal. But in letting myself in for the office, I can hardly help wondering if I am fitted for the duties of a fellow. David McCord could tell you my story. My teaching in the last twenty-five years has been no more than a sequence of philosophical positions taken and rather skilfully acted out for the symbol. I havent enough going on for three classes a week forty weeks in the year or half that. I am a peculiarly advanced case of what I am, good or bad. Much of education in school I have never believed in. At the first serious suggestion of my pretending to Latinity or any other kind of scholarship I am struck as school-shy as in the nineties when I fled uneducated to the Philistines. What has brought me back in and partly disarmed me is the kindness the colleges have shown my poetry. I find myself even anxious to be useful to them in requital. I may be expected to stay round them I suppose as long as there is a reasonable doubt that they belong entirely to the sound scholars and the graduates going out into the world to earn our living. Only compromise must be made with my [cunctations?]. Nothing I am likely to do will lend itself to cataloguing; or so I fear...²

Upon completion of the Emerson Fellowship, President Conant invited him to stay on at Harvard for an extra year as "Fellow in American Civilization." Frost thoroughly enjoyed this, and termed his position as that of "a roving consultant in History and Literature."³ All he had to do was make himself more or less regularly available for group discussions on American Civilization "in the larger sense of the word."

In 1943 Frost was offered a position at Dartmouth as Ticknor Fellow in the Humanities, which he readily accepted. His responsibilities at Dartmouth would not interfere with occasional lectures elsewhere. In his letter to President Ernest M. Hopkins under dateline July 9, 1943, Frost wrote:

1 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 448.

2 Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., p. 49.

3 Ibid., p. 78.

...I am accepting your call back to Dartmouth with pride and satisfaction. Let's make it mean all we can. Call back, I call it...

The idea is that, in addition to what I do at Dartmouth for Dartmouth, I shall belong to Dartmouth in what I do for my publishers and my public. The bulk of my college time is to be spent at Dartmouth. Grenville Clark has your consent for me to give a few, say half a dozen, talks to the student soldiers at Harvard as a sort of honorary leave-taking there. I shall look forward to my beginning with you in October.¹

After six consecutive years at Dartmouth, Frost resigned the Ticknor Fellowship to accept his final call: the Amherst appointment as Simpson Lecturer in Literature. President Charles Woolsey Cole wrote Frost in a letter dated November 2, 1948 (Comments by Thompson):

"I have been hoping that we could work out some arrangement that would bring you to Amherst for much longer periods than an annual lecture..." He outlined a proposal that the trustees had unanimously approved: Frost would come to Amherst and stay in residence there for at least one month each semester; his title would be Simpson Lecturer in Literature; his annual stipend would be \$3,000 a year, and his obligations minimal: no faculty duties requiring attendance at meetings, service on committees, or the like; at least one lecture and reading in Johnson Chapel to the entire college each year; other duties consisting of visiting classes and seminars as a guest teacher, informal conferences with faculty and students, and "such other engagements as might seem desirable to the faculty and students and acceptable to you..."²

From about this time there followed an avalanche of accolades and honors (including degrees and citations) in praise of Frost and his works from such halls of prestige as Kenyon (1945), Berkeley (1947), Amherst (second honorary degree—1948), Duke (1948), Marlboro (1950), Colgate (1950), Durham (1952), Cincinnati (1954), Dartmouth (unprecedented second honorary doctorate—1955), Cambridge (1957), Oxford (1957), London (1957), Manchester (1957), and Detroit (1962). Frost was twice nominated to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature—in 1950 and again in 1963—and it seemed a great personal disappointment that fate had conspired to deny him either bid. In 1942, however, *A Witness Tree* had successfully rooted out all others to take first place as the Pulitzer Prize's best volume of poetry.

CRITICISM OF EDUCATIONISTS

It should be recognized that not all the foregoing educational experiences were of a negative nature, and that Frost, of course, matured a great deal over the years. Nevertheless, his criticism of "educationists" was more often than not negative, and sometimes caustic. His basic educational philosophy seems to have been that expressed

1 Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., pp. 112-3.

2 Ibid., p. 172.

by (Episcopal) Bishop Henry Wise Hobson of Ohio:

Robert Frost's search for truth¹ was constant and unwavering. He believed that the source of all truth is God, and the passion of his life was to discover more truth... Yet he never felt it was possible to gain more than a very partial knowledge of the whole truth. "There is such a thing," he said, "as not being old enough to understand." He realized that "My thoughts are not your thoughts."²

Frost often expressed the conviction that "Something has to be left to God."³ He also said, in the same connection, "Science⁴ will never know [everything about everything]," and he is absolutely right.

FROST ON EDUCATION

Frostian opinions on the subject of education include, among others, the following:

Education doesn't change much. It just lifts trouble to a higher plane of regard.⁵

You know, they put helpless old people in the hospital. Well, they put helpless young people in college.⁶

My great complaint of education is that it is so loaded with material you never move in the spirit again.⁷

One who craves to be wise—as distinguished from learned or mechanically intellectual—must achieve his own homemade freedom.⁸

There are a lot of completely educated people in the world and of course they will resent being asked to learn anything new.⁹

Cox states that "when he lectures he doesn't confine himself to alleged facts and the opinions of opposed authorities... What good listeners get from listening to him is not opinions they can accept or reject; what they get, even from lectures, is an experience.¹⁰ It may cause thoughts to dawn on them... He would not ask questions to which he knew the answers, and foster the perennial schoolboy mentality that

1 Knowledge *and* wisdom: true education.

2 Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., p. 443. The reference is to Isaiah 55.8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

3 Last line from "Good-by and Keep Cold."

4 Human store of empirical knowledge as opposed to theory or speculation.

5 As recorded by Thomas Wolfe for the *Washington Post*, May 2, 1961. (Lathem, op. cit., p. 265)

6 Idem.

7 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 410.

8 Cox, op. cit., p. 49.

9 Lawrance Thompson, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p. 141. (To Sidney Cox, December 1914, from The Gallows)

10 Cox, op. cit., p. 48.

recalls facts 'in the order learned...' He wants no part in the increase of stuffed selves. 'The latest modern stuffing,' he said, 'is no more fruitful than reactionary stuffing.' A stuffed shirt is blown up with what is not digested; a stuffed shirt 'doesn't care what he thinks of himself, provided the world thinks well.'"¹

Frost wrote Sidney Cox from his hideaway in England (The Gallows) on January 2, 1915, concerning his apprehensions as to the nature of American education:

I wish you would read [the article by George Woodberry in the Encyclopedia Britannica] or the last part of it just to see that we are not alone in thinking that nothing literary can come from the present ways of the professionally literary in American universities. ...Everything is research for the sake of erudition. No one is taught to value himself for nice perception and cultivated taste. Knowledge knowledge. Why literature is the next thing to religion in which as you know or believe an ounce of faith is worth all the theology ever written. Sight and insight, give us those. I like the good old English way of muddling along in these things that we can't reduce to a science anyway such as literature love religion and friendship. People make their great strides in understanding literature at most unexpected times. I never caught another man's emotion in it more than when someone drew his finger over some seven lines of blank verse—beginning carefully and ending carefully—and saying simply "From there to—there." He knew and I knew. We said no more. I don't see how you are going to teach the stuff except with some such light touch. And you can't afford to treat it all alike, I mean with equal German thoroughness and reverence if thoroughness is reverence. It is only a moment here and a moment there that the greatest writer has. Some cognizance of the fact must be taken in your teaching.²

Education, in Frost's sense of the word, declined to make any shut-eye assumption that man has a monopoly on "any universal reason." Frost indignantly denounced college teaching that "frisks Freshmen of their principles." At the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in 1925 he declared, in effect:

A boy with all his beliefs drawn out of him is in no condition to learn. Or even to live. Everybody needs some beliefs as unquestionable as the axioms of geometry. No postulates deliberately adopted can ever have the force. We have to have unarguable, undemonstrable, unmistakable axioms, just three or four. And if we don't abuse our minds we shall surely have them. One such is that genuineness is better than pretense. Another is that meanness is intolerable in oneself. And another is that death is better than being untrustworthy.... Something should save the students from thinking they can be given the answer. They must learn that there is no way to get out of suffering.³

Frost always urged the value of poverty for the young. He never regretted that

1 Cox, op. cit., p. 49.

2 Lawrence Thompson, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p. 146.

3 Cox, op. cit., p. 45.

he and Elinor had it rough and "lived poor," not just of necessity but "on principle," through their most creative and formative years. It was considered a form of character building—an education in itself not gained by means of books or in the classroom.¹

LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

Not only were these sentiments on education born of disappointment and often bitter experience in the life of Frost himself; the resulting influence and effect could not help but rub off onto the lives of his children. Of the six,² only Lesley made a stab at any form of higher education, but met with the same disillusionment and fate as that which had betaken and overcome the elder Frost. She grew weary of college life after only one year, although she had received excellent marks and liked most of her teachers. Frost, in a letter to Harriet Moody, stated: "The poor kid is rather sick of this institution and that through no fault of hers. She's had splendid marks and likes seventy-five per cent of her teachers."³ (Aha—, Mr. Frost...but what about the other twenty-five per cent?)

Frost was afraid that her restlessness was due to his profound influence over her, which had not exactly been calculated to make her fond of any institution. No doubt he had often quipped in her presence, "You know how I'm always at it against colleges, in a vain attempt to reconcile myself with them."⁴

Lesley pleased her father tremendously by withdrawing from Wellesley at the end of her freshman year, and never again darkened the doors of academe.⁵ Frost had been quick to take sides with his daughter against two of her teachers. He spared no mercy, either for her Latin teacher (Miss Fletcher), or for her French teacher (Mr. Coe), both of whom had given her mid-term marks which she considered disgracefully low and unfair. Her father wrote a diatribe to Miss Fletcher and then expressed his "thanks" to Professor Young of Wellesley, excoriating both teachers in the process. Excerpts from the letter to Young follow:

As for that precisian in snytax [Miss Fletcher] I can't quite get over her... I had begun to fool myself into the notion that I had talked her off the face of the earth—laughed her off the face of the earth... And then on top of all the pains your Latin department takes to make Latin painful, comes your French department to exclaim against a child for so far forgetting herself as to write a poem in French before she has studied French prosody. "Let the spirit wait," says your Whitechapel French-

1 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 289.

2 Lesley (1899), Carol (1902), Irma (1903), and Marjorie (1905). Elliott (1896) died at the age of three and Elinor Bettina (1907) at three days.

3 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 247.

4 Gould, op. cit., p. 226.

5 She did make quite a name for herself, subsequently, as a career woman with the State Department.

man: and the spirit can wait or go—it is all one to him. I remember four lines to the tune of Tararaboomdeay I once addressed to Sheffy at Harvard:

Perhaps you think I am going to wait
Till I can write like a graduate
Before I write to my friends any more
You prig stick, what do you take me for.¹

Lesley says you had a talk with the Whitechapel Frenchman. I wonder if you found him implacable in his magisterial self-importance... Prosody! I was hoping the mere word might be kept from Lesley as long as possible. I've been telling Lesley how little embarrassed Wilfrid Gibson was when he had to confess before all the assembled professors at Chicago last winter that he didn't know one form of verse from another...I don't know a single poet who knows any prosody, except...Robert Bridges. I once asked De la Mare if he had noticed anything queer about the verse in his own "The Listeners" and he answered that he hadn't noticed anything at all about the verse in it queer or unqueer.²

EDUCATION THEORY

On May 5, 1960, Robert Frost appeared before a United States Senate subcommittee in Washington to favor legislation for the establishment of a National Academy of Culture. Senator Ralph W. Yarborough of Texas conducted the questioning session with Frost, who explained,

I've always said it would be sad if a great nation like this got so great and prosperous and famous without the help of the arts at all—like Carthage. My respect is always for nations that have had art and literature, language of their own—Japan, you know.

You think of some nations—China—that have had their own literature, and then you think of those that have had none—nothing. I heard someone say sadly the other day, "You know, I'm of a nation that has no literature at all, no art—no particular art." Africa has had nothing—no written language.³

Frost often remarked that schooling should be some sort of preparation for the life before us.⁴ His test of education was: Did it develop and equip the ability to go it on your own?⁵

The good teacher, he once said, "knows how to get more out of a student by surrounding him with an atmosphere of expectation than by putting the screws on him. The sort of teacher who will reverse the whole relationship between student and teacher as it has been, who will encourage

1 See p. 17.

2 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, pp. 117-8.

3 Lathem, op. cit., pp. 222-3.

4 See pp. 34-5.

5 Cox, op. cit., p. 56.

the student to make his own trouble without waiting for his teacher to make it for him, who will turn the teacher's claim on the student into the student's claim on the teacher.¹

Frost also stated that education should be a take-it-or-leave-it business instead of a day-after-day quizzing of boys with questions to which he already knew the answers. His belief was in "education by presence"—a self-made term indicating that students should be stimulated to enterprise by the mere presence in their midst of great men of accomplishment and wide intellectual horizons. "My objective," he stated, "is to help colleges become factories for turning out human self-starters."²

TONS OF DISCIPLINE

During an interview with Mark Harris for *Life*, December 1, 1961, Frost said that education is discipline:

Never give a child a choice. Don't give him a choice of believing in God or not. He can start having choices when he goes to college: they have the elective system there, you know. There's so many courses now where everything you say is right enough—sociology, psychology, contemporary civilization...but school is for *discipline*. A student is an orange pip between my fingers: if I pinch him he'll go far. I'm not violent, but I'm going for the whole...system. Discipline. Tightness. Firmness. Crispness. Sternness. And sternness in our lives. *Life is tons of discipline.*³

In Washington as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, Frost quipped:

I have long thought that our high schools should be improved. Nobody should come into our high schools without examinations—not aptitude tests, but on reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. And that goes for black or white.... A lot of people are being scared by the Russian Sputnik into wanting to harden up our education or speed it up. I am interested in toning it up, at the high-school level.... If they want to Spartanize the country, let them. I would rather perish as Athens than prevail as Sparta. The tone is Athens. The tone is freedom to the point of destruction. Democracy means all the risks taken—conflict of opinion, conflict of personality, eccentricity. We are Athens, daring to be all sorts of people."⁴

An article appearing in the August 19, 1936 Burlington (VT) *Free Press* quoted Frost as saying, "I'd like to see more young folks continue with their general education up to the age of eighteen or twenty and not begin to concentrate on specific fields too early in life. We ought to give a boy or girl at least eighteen or twenty years to learn all he can about the world he is living in and to find himself out. Sometimes a person's real character is slow in blossoming. Until I was fourteen I had

1 Cox, op. cit., p. 56.

2 Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., p. 52.

3 Lathem, op. cit., p. 270.

4 Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., pp. 263-4.

never read a book...¹ But after I had read my first book a new world opened up for me, and after that I devoured as many of them as I could lay my hands on.”²

To his Amherst students he once said, “College [is for the purpose of giving you] a second chance to learn to read. I want you putting two and two together, and I don’t give a hoorah for anything else. That’s my interest. The test of education should be: Does it develop and equip the ability to go it on your own?... [Learn to] feel and show enthusiasm for something...I like people who can’t help thinking and talking about things to the highest reaches.”³

WHAT IS TEACHING?

Janet Mahie, in an article entitled “Robert Frost Interprets His Teaching Method” for *The Christian Science Monitor* of December 24, 1925, quotes Frost as saying:

No, I am an indifferent teacher as teachers go, and it is hard to understand why I am wanted around colleges unless there is some force it is thought I can exert by merely belonging to them. It must be that what I stand for does my work... If teaching is, as I say, asking rather than answering questions, my books do most of mine with very little help from me...

What I am saying is that there are and always have been three ways of teaching, namely, by formal contact in the classroom, by informal contact...and by virtually no contact at all. And I am putting the last first in importance—the teaching by no contact at all.⁴

The whole objective of Frost’s teaching was to succeed in getting his students to see a little farther than they “just normally do.” Even in his Emerson seminar at Harvard he emphasized enlightenment rather than the acquisition of knowledge:

Learning should come in an off-hand, cavalier fashion. An artist, especially, should be able to go right through college with one brain tied behind him...⁵

THREE DUTIES

At Bread Loaf in the summer of 1924,⁶ he told a little theater full of English teachers that a teacher has three prime duties or responsibilities, and named them in order of importance. The first duty is to self, the second to books, and the third to students. The teachers’ response was revealing. The shallow ones forced a cackle and dismissed his paradox as nothing but humor. But others thought deeply—and freshly.

1 See pp. 11, 30, 33.

2 Lathem, op. cit., p. 90.

3 Gould, op. cit., p. 188.

4 Lathem, op. cit., p. 69.

5 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 377.

6 Gould, op. cit., p. 85.

Good teaching, they saw he meant, requires first of all good teachers—persons who can establish contact and make for meaningful relevance between subject matter and students receptive. They must not be “fagged or cowed or flustered,” and they mustn’t show up in class with “a conscientious headache.” The bright ones got the drift.

ON TRIGGERING COMMUNICATION

Teaching made immense demands upon Frost’s time and energy. Yet he had a definite, even if somewhat unorthodox, gift for triggering communication. George F. Whicher, one of his colleagues at Amherst, made the remark that Frost was “a born teacher with a knack of charging dry subjects with intellectual excitement and a large patience for struggling learners.” To Frost, Whicher added, teaching was “a natural extension of his unfeigned interest in people.”¹

Typical Frostian originality and informality quickly won the hearts of his students. Never knowing what to expect, they eagerly looked forward to every class. He once had them write compositions, but never bothered to look at them—let alone plod through each one correcting and penciling in minute detail. Gould² reports the incident:

He confronted the class with characteristic straightforwardness. [And then...]

“Anything here anyone wants to keep?”

They shook their heads “no.” So he asked them again and they said “no” again.

“All right. If you don’t value them enough to keep them, I don’t value them enough to want to read them.”

And he threw them all into the wastepaper basket.

When Frost began his teaching responsibilities at Pinkerton, the new principal, Ernest Leroy Silver, was so impressed with his original classroom methods that he asked Frost to speak at a state teacher’s convention. There he caught the attention of Henry Clinton Morrison (Dartmouth ’95) who was then serving as Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of New Hampshire. Morrison was so captivated by all the unique innovations of classroom method used by Frost that he also asked Robert to lecture on teaching methods to a convention of New Hampshire educators at Exeter in the spring of 1909. Thompson gives us a report on that convention:

With some trepidation Frost accepted the request. On his way to Exeter from Derry by train—a roundabout route between places separated by only a few townships—he made notes of what he wanted to say. He would build his talk around his notion of teaching students to *absorb* and *impress* ideas. This seemed to be the gist of his educational theory. He

1 Gerber, op. cit., p. 35.

2 Gould, op. cit., p. 84.

wanted to tell them that books should be used in English classes so that students would be lonely forever afterward without books of their own, that students should be made so interested that they could never again leave books alone.¹

But when Frost switched to the State Normal School at Plymouth and began teaching there in 1911, his first move was to refuse Monroe's *History of Education* as the required text. As soon as the girls were seated, he said he would begin by giving his first assignment. The janitor had already dutifully placed on his desk a great stack of these ponderous volumes for distribution. He asked for a few volunteers. Then, "Take these books to the basement," he said. "We won't use them. Instead, we'll get a few books that have lighted teachers down through the ages—Plato, Rousseau, and others."² At Pinkerton also Frost had dumped the authorized textbooks and grammars, and read to them from Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. Later, he had the students themselves read aloud stories such as Mark Twain's "Jumping Frog," Hawthorne's "Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe," and Stevenson's "Bottle Imp." Neither before nor since has there ever been heard such hilarity in the dismal halls at Pinkerton's.³

To his English class at Amherst in 1925, Frost suggested that they accumulate a library,⁴ tell him about anything they found to be worthwhile, and not to settle for less than \$150 worth of books. Later (and presumably unannounced) he visited the boys' rooms and gave them credit for the number and quality of the books they had bought.⁵

Mrs. Sue Bonner Wolcott, commenting on Frost's teaching methods at the University of Michigan, said: "I have been asked a number of times by various people writing on Mr. Frost, to describe his teaching methods. They were, of course, non-existent. He merely talked..."⁶

Gardner Jackson, a Colorado boy and one of Frost's best students at Amherst, in his own manuscript entitled "The Reminiscences of Gardner Jackson" published by the Oral History Research Office of Columbia University in 1959, gives this account:

...he required no papers. He hardly gave any test or examinations. His class was the most loosely run and undisciplined class of any of the classes I attended in college. I used to talk with him about that because the boys in the back row would actually be playing cards together while he was holding forth. It wouldn't disturb him at all. He said, "If they want what I have to give, they can take. If they don't, that's all right."

1 Thompson, ...*Early Years*, p. 349. (See also pp. 11, 30, 31, this thesis.)

2 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 84.

3 Gould, op. cit., p. 85.

4 See pp. 11, 30, 31.

5 Gould, op. cit., p. 239.

6 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 620.

It was a "gut" course. I don't believe he flunked [anyone] in that course.¹

FROST ON MARKS

On the matter of evaluation, Frost always found the task somewhat less than pleasant. He said, "I see the boys as comparatively good and bad but taken as a job lot in the absolute so really good for nothing that I can bring myself to mark them with nothing but mercy and I give them all A or at worst B."² This confession was recorded in a letter to Wilbert Snow, January 1938, at which time Frost had been teaching at Amherst. Presumably, therefore, Amherst boys were meant, but there is no valid reason for believing that Frost might not have felt the same about all his students throughout the span of that long, varied, and illustrious teaching career.

Sergeant tells us that Frost said "I believe in marks. But it is *really* hard [he said with his clear, honest look] to know A from B and C. I know double A. The whole thing is a ruck. These assigned subjects... Ask a child to compare Emily Dickinson with William Faulkner..."³

To a group of budding authors at Amherst in the fall of 1924, he said: "I'm not interested in marks as marks. I'll give you A's or B's, whichever you please! Now that you know what you are going to get, let me see what you can do."⁴

Evidently very early in his career, Frost decided never to "flunk" anybody; yet he rarely gave high marks. It was his idea that "students ought to be marked on the *closeness* to a poet, to which they come in reading him. Sometimes a chance remark will tell that."⁵ Of course the exceptional and diligent student learned most from Robert Frost and came closest to him. But he was fair to the average and rarely reproved or exhorted—save by silence or evasion—the reprobate or inattentive. A student was "on his own" with Frost, and those who really cared for treasure and were willing to dig for it, he helped in every way he possibly could.

EDUCATION IS FOR LIFE

In extracurricular activity at Pinkerton,⁶ Frost seems to have set the stage and pattern for guiding students in education as a preparation for life. He refused to confine himself merely to academics or theatricals, but organized botanical (and philosophical!) hikes for any boys who were interested, thus befriending them and sharing their innermost thoughts on life. By such means did Frost fraternize with his stu-

1 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 100.

2 Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., p. 404.

3 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 323.

4 Thompson, ...*Triumph*, p. 268.

5 Gould, op. cit., p. 191.

6 Ibid., p. 86.

dents, thereby gaining tremendous personal insight into their minds and abilities for the purpose of assisting them blueprint their lives and prepare for the future.

INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY

Because Frost's approach to life has always been essentially empirical and non-conformist and his poems based on observation and experience, Job proved to be the perfect character for *A Masque of Reason*. Job also was an empiricist and the outstanding nonconformist of the Old Testament. On the basis of individual human intelligence, observation, and experience, Job vigorously challenged long established and widely accepted Jewish custom and theology, which set forth the belief that not only individuals but nations as well must *always* expect God's curse for any violation of the Law and His blessing for obedience. This is a general spiritual principle, of course, but in actual practice it does not always work out that way, and Job saw through the veneer of his three friends' (?) arguments like crystal. He had enough courage and independence in the face of violent (verbal) opposition to declare that the simple facts of truth—to wit, that much of the evil, injustice, and suffering in our world simply cannot be explained in terms of human conduct; therefore, there is no *absolute* relation between that conduct and the fate accorded man—that this truth, I say, must take precedence over the principles and practices established by ages of ancestors. Even in the presence of God, Job retained his human intellectual and moral integrity, and it is thus clear that God does sanction man's *reasonable* questioning in order to arrive at *Truth*. *God has given man a mind, and He has decreed that man use it.* Even Job's gropings in utter darkness were accepted, but God reproved and rejected the mere materialistic reasonings of Job's three friends who followed blindly the patterns of their predecessors.

FINAL EXAMINATION

Few occasions in the life of Frost have allowed themselves to manifest his unique personality as did one final examination for a group of "Neglected Writers" at Amherst. On examination day he walked into the classroom and nonchalantly wrote on the blackboard: "Do something." Then he went back to his office upstairs. Most of the students were absolutely baffled. Some of the boys got up and left as soon as he had returned to his office. Others stumbled up the stairs and knocked on his office door to mumble something about how much "the course experience" had meant to them. A few crammed two notebooks full of all they could remember that had been said, or what they thought he had said. But only one or two managed to pull themselves together enough to compose a thoughtful paragraph, or "to recall vividly an incident that embodied the most memorable philosophical discovery they had made during the previous months." With the last, Frost felt that he had succeeded. The others remained as unchanged and unaffected as they had been on entering the class, but even

they had had an unusual exposure. He felt that even years later, one of them might recall—and see.¹

THOSE WHO KNEW HIM BEST

The title poem of *New Hampshire* (1923) is based on the idea of independence and separateness from the milling crowd, a position not always easy either to assume or to maintain, inasmuch as it runs contrary to generally accepted thought patterns and action. Much of it is autobiographical, as, for example:

I refuse to adapt myself a mite
To any change from hot to cold, from wet
To dry, from poor to rich, or back again.

In context, these lines insist that Frost consistently refused to be turned aside by every fad, swayed by each new philosophy, or influenced unduly by the climate and opinion of his day. Always he has maintained the courage of his independence and originality.

Sidney Cox stated: "I think [Frost] the wisest man, and one of the two deepest thinkers I know. Robert Frost never let his head get caught in a halo. He never stood still long enough for admirers to pull a laurel wreath down over his eyes. He kept free to exchange a taunt...with rogues and the repressed rascal in nearly all of us. He has let nothing come between him and the funny world... No philosopher or artist is better worth listening to, no writer so well worth reading."² His slight "offishness," however, his refusal "to adapt [himself] a mite," accounts for his being out of fashion. But the fact of the matter is that Robert Frost has never been *in* fashion.

For those who knew him best, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant provides a fitting reflection:

We [knew] him so well in old age, as a very peripatetic man, almost a folk hero in his wide renown. He [stood] there on the platform, say at Columbia University, white-headed and stalwart at more than four score six years, with fame clasping his slightly bent shoulders; a "sayer" who competes with "sarcastic science" herself in our Atomic Age America. One must look back to the Golden Age of New England, to Longfellow, to Emerson, to find any similar loved and potent figure in American letters.³

(To be concluded)

1 Cox, op. cit., p. 55.

2 Ibid., p. 9.

3 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 195.

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