

peaceful, and with every day just like the next one, always alone now with his three good, gentle children.

1909

## ROBERT FROST

(1874–1963)

Among the great American poets since Whitman, Robert Frost is the most universal in his appeal. His art is an act of clarification, an act which, without simplifying the truth, renders it in some degree accessible to everyone. Frost found his poetry in the familiar objects and character of New England, but people who have never seen New Hampshire or Vermont, reading his poems in California or Virginia, experience their revelation.

It is therefore not surprising that this poet of New England was first recognized in old England and that his boyhood was passed in California. His father, a journalist of southern extraction, left New Hampshire during the Civil War, and his professional engagements led him to California. There the poet was born on March 26, 1874, and was named Robert Lee in memory of the Old Dominion. He was eleven when his father died and his mother returned to her people in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and Amherst, New Hampshire.

Life with relatives proved difficult, so his mother went to teach school in Salem, New Hampshire. Frost later attended Lawrence High School. On graduation in 1892 he was one of two valedictorians; the other was Elinor White, whom he married three years later. Reluctant to accept his grandfather's support at Dartmouth College, Frost did not finish the first semester. Instead he tried himself out on a country paper, then turned to teaching school. He sent out his verses in quantity after 1890, but only a negligible few were accepted before 1913. Like Robinson he was much ahead of his time.

Faced with disappointment as a poet, his family growing, the young Frost accepted his grandfather's assistance, and studied at Harvard for two years (1897–1899), but he concluded that formal study was not the way for him. His good foundation in the classics is apparent in his extraordinary word sense, in the disciplined forms of his poetry, and in his pagan delight in nature. His reading of science and philosophy has been influential throughout his poetry. But he had a deep-rooted fear: "They would have made me into a professor, or into a professional," he once said.

In 1900, with his grandfather's help, he procured a farm at Derry, New Hampshire, supporting his family, including four children, by a combination of farming and teaching. From 1900 to 1911 he taught English at Pinkerton Academy, Derry. In 1911–1912 he conducted a course in psychology at the State Normal School in Plymouth. Still he received from American editors the same heartbreaking refusals.

Elinor Frost, a steady source of inspiration, encouraged his instinct for a desperate remedy. They sold the farm in 1912 and on the small proceeds went to England, where the first stirrings of a new poetry movement had been noted. Wishing, as he says, to live "beneath a thatched roof" they moved to a small farmstead in the country. There Wilfred W. Gibson and Lascelles Abercrombie were neighbors, and others of the so-called "Georgians," Edward Thomas and Rupert Brooke, came as guests. Soon *A Boy's Will* (1913) was hailed in England as a work of

genuine merit. It was followed in 1914 by *North of Boston*, one of the great volumes of this century. Both books were republished in the United States within the year. At this point, according to a friend, Frost said to his wife, "My book has gone home; we must go too." In 1915 they were settled again on a New Hampshire farm, near Franconia, which suggested the title of *Mountain Interval* (1916).

In 1916 he read "The Ax-Helve" as the Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard University. Frost had magnificent qualities as a public reader; his reading tours during many years made him and his poetry household property and stimulated a popular interest in poetry. Also in 1916, Frost became "poet in residence" at Amherst College, where he returned for a time each winter for four years. At various times he served as lecturer or fellow at Wesleyan, Michigan, Dartmouth, Yale, and Harvard. In 1920 he participated in the founding of the Bread Loaf School of English (Middlebury College, Vermont), and he lectured there many summers. He lived nearby on his own land at Ripton.

Frost's later publications appeared at rather long intervals, yet almost every poem, large or small, is unforgettable. His *Selected Poems* (1923, revised 1928) was followed by *New Hampshire* (1923), which won the Pulitzer Prize. This is one of his longest poems, but one of his most witty and wise, an anecdotal discussion of the values of life and character, flavored with New England examples. In 1928 he published *West-Running Brook*, its title poem a complex masterpiece. *Collected Poems* first appeared in 1930, and won him his second Pulitzer Prize. *A Further Range* (1936) also was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. His later volumes of lyrics are *A Witness Tree* (1942) and *Steeple Bush* (1947). *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947) are dramatic dialogues—discussions of religious insights and contemporary society.

Few major poets have shown such remarkable consistency as Robert Frost—

and he captures the reader as much by the grandeur of his poetic persona (despite the sometimes difficult personal relations of the actual poet) as by impeccable rightness of form and phrase. "Art strips life to form," he said, and the substance and the words of his poems coexist in one identity. In language, he sought to catch what he called the "tones of speech," but even more successfully than Wordsworth he pruned the "language really used by men" to achieve a propriety that spontaneous speech cannot attain.

For all his descriptive realism, Frost was temperamentally a poet of meditative sobriety. The truths he sought were innate in the heart of humanity and in common objects. But people forget, and poetry, he said, "makes you remember what you didn't know you knew." A poem is not didactic, but provides an immediate experience which "begins in delight, and ends in wisdom"; and it provides at least "a momentary stay against confusion." Of man alone or man in society Frost demands a responsible individualism controlled by an inner mandate, and thus his views remind us of the transcendentalism of earlier New Englanders. Like Thoreau and Emerson, Frost was willing to become a rebel in this cause, and like them, but so unlike the skeptical poets of his age, he had, he said, only "a lover's quarrel with the world."

The standard edition of Robert Frost is *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem, 1969. *Selected Prose of Robert Frost* was edited by Hyde Cox and E. C. Lathem, 1966.

Early biographical and critical studies are G. B. Munson, *Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense*, 1927; Sidney Cox, *Robert Frost: Original "Ordinary Man,"* 1929; Caroline Ford, *The Less Traveled Road: A Study of Robert Frost*, 1935; Lawrance R. Thompson, *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost*, 1942; Sidney Cox, *Swinger of Birches*, 1957; Reginald L. Cook, *The Dimensions of Robert Frost*, 1958; and a complete biography by Elizabeth S. Sergeant, *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence*, 1960.

Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915*, 1966; *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938*, 1970; and *Robert Frost: The Later Years, 1938-1963, 1977* (this last volume with R. H. Winnick) comprise a definitive life by Frost's designated biographer. Much kinder to Frost, how-

Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him,  
But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.

The butterfly and I had lit upon,  
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,

That made me hear the wakening birds around,  
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,

And feel a spirit kindred to my own;  
So that henceforth I worked no more alone;

But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,  
And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;

And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech  
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

"Men work together," I told him from the heart,  
"Whether they work together or apart."

1906, 1913

### Mending Wall

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.  
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:

"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there,  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

1914

### The Death of the Hired Man

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table  
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,  
She ran on tiptoe down the darkened passage  
To meet him in the doorway with the news  
And put him on his guard. "Silas is back."  
She pushed him outward with her through the door  
And shut it after her. "Be kind," she said.  
She took the market things from Warren's arms  
And set them on the porch, then drew him down  
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.

"When was I ever anything but kind to him?  
But I'll not have the fellow back," he said.  
'I told him so last haying, didn't I?  
If he left then, I said, that ended it.  
What good is he? Who else will harbour him  
At his age for the little he can do?  
What help he is there's no depending on.  
Off he goes always when I need him most.  
He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,  
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,  
So he won't have to beg and be beholden.  
'All right,' I say, 'I can't afford to pay  
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could.'  
'Someone else can.' Then someone else will have to.  
I shouldn't mind his bettering himself  
If that was what it was. You can be certain,  
When he begins like that, there's someone at him  
Trying to coax him off with pocket money,—  
In haying time, when any help is scarce.  
In winter he comes back to us. I'm done."

"Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you," Mary said.

One flight out sideways would have undeceived him.  
And then there was a pile of wood for which  
I forgot him and let his little fear  
Carry him off the way I might have gone, 20  
Without so much as wishing him good-night.  
He went behind it to make his last stand.  
It was a cord of maple, cut and split  
And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.  
And not another like it could I see. 25  
No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.  
And it was older sure than this year's cutting,  
Or even last year's or the year's before.  
The wood was gray and the bark warping off it  
And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis 30  
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.  
What held it though on one side was a tree  
Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,  
These latter about to fall. I thought that only  
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks 35  
Could so forget his handiwork on which  
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,  
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace  
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could  
With the slow smokeless burning of decay. 40

1914

### The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood;  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth; 5

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that, the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same, 10

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back. 15

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference. 20

1915, 1916