

## “Kitty Hawk” and the Question of American Destiny · *Laurence Goldstein*

IN HIS SHORT STORY, “Billenium,” J.G. Ballard imagines a future world of hive-like cities so densely overpopulated that each person is allowed only four square meters of living space. The protagonist and his roommate discover behind one wall of their cubicle a concealed room of some fifteen square meters. “For an hour they exchanged places, wandering silently around the dusty room, stretching their arms out to feel its unconfined emptiness, grasping at the sensation of absolute spatial freedom.” They move into the room, then out of pity they sublet to two homeless young women, and then agree to a chaperone, and then to one woman’s sick mother, and perforce to her father as well. The room is now more crowded than others of equivalent size in the building, having degenerated from “a private universe” to a warren crammed full of squabbling humanity.

Ballard’s tale is an allegory of the future as history, and one with special pertinence to the American experience. Like the large room, the American continent once offered an exhilarating spatial freedom, impressing Western settlers first with its sublime beauty, and afterwards with its opportunities for exploitation. “The land was ours before we were the land’s,” Robert Frost wrote in his poem, “The Gift Outright.” By penetration into the virgin land the settlers lost their disinterested mastery and became part of the historical process from which the first discovery had briefly liberated them. Human nature abhors a vacuum—that is the point of Ballard’s tale and of the American events which it in part reflects back to us from a future eminence. Ballard, an Englishman, thus takes the prophetic stance once assumed by the Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, as he regretfully watched the pioneers move westward in the 1830’s toward open spaces. “What urges them to take possession of it so soon?” he asked. “Riches, power, and renown cannot fail to be theirs at some future time, but they rush upon this immense fortune as if but a moment remained for them to make it their own.”<sup>1</sup>

Tocqueville’s question is subtle, for he asks not *should* the land be developed or left wild—its familiar modern form—but why the choice must be made immediately and with such frenzied desperation. Ballard poses the same question by having his male roommates yield to the very first request for co-habitation, as if eager to be overwhelmed by the manifest destiny of the race. These roommates are possibly the last two people in history who will face the question, and by the Billenium their response has been predetermined by their ancestors, by us. The end of the story, then, leaves the question still dangling in the present, where Tocqueville left it one hundred and fifty years ago. Why? Why rush to occupy open space?

If there is such a thing as a representative American answer to that question, Frost's lines in "Kitty Hawk" (1953) qualify better than most:

Pulpiteers will censure  
Our instinctive venture  
Into what they call  
The material  
When we took that fall  
From the apple tree.  
But God's own descent  
Into flesh was meant  
As a demonstration  
That the supreme merit  
Lay in risking spirit  
In substantiation.  
Westerners inherit  
A design for living  
Deeper into matter—  
Not without due patter  
Of a great misgiving.  
All the science zest  
To materialize  
By on-penetration  
Into earth and skies  
(Don't forget the latter  
Is but further matter)  
Has been West Northwest.

Frost considered "Kitty Hawk" the most important of his later poems, and on speaking engagements around the country often cited this passage as a culminating statement of his natural philosophy. It is a buoyant endorsement of the *via affirmativa*, reminiscent in principle of Whitman's progressive ideal, though Frost's clipped verse line discourages comparison with the bard of the pioneers.

The passage seems to proceed from Frost's enduring fascination with desert places. In "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," he comments on people who gaze at the sea and crave the Truth residing in and under that element. The watchers "turn their back on the land" because land is known, domesticated. In other poems, outer space casts the same spell on the earth-bound. Frost credits a book called *Our Place Among the Infinities* as an early influence on his love of astronomy.<sup>2</sup> He uses the book's title in his poem, "The Star-Splitter," which tells how a neighbor of the speaker burned down his own house for the fire insurance, "And spent the proceeds on a telescope/To satisfy a life-long curiosity/About our place among the infinities." Like that compelled neighbor, Frost turns the reader's eye in poem

after poem toward the mysteries of the skies. He believes that so long as any place exists which has not been completed by the human spirit, the spirit itself remains incomplete. "The great enterprise of life, of the world, the great enterprise of our race," Frost emphasized in a talk, "is our penetration into matter, deeper and deeper; carrying the spirit deeper into matter. . . . And that is our destiny—that is why science is our greatness."<sup>3</sup>

The expansion of the human spirit, in Frost's view, can be charted geographically, West Northwest, from the cradle of civilization in the Middle East, through Greece and Italy to Western Europe and then to North America. (Hamlet's remark, "I am but mad north-northwest" hovers behind the lines, a check on vanity.) Christ's descent into matter, "risking spirit/In substantiation," necessarily became the central myth of a restless, wandering people who looked upon external nature as essentially dead until infused with human presence and purpose. In lines immediately following those quoted above, Frost contrasts the Western movement with the "long stagnation/In mere meditation" of the East. Frost's chief metaphor throughout "Kitty Hawk" is the footrace; here the East hurries "to catch up with us" in the enjoyment of material advantages which Western science, "our greatness," has fashioned in its acceleration.

There are many complaints one might lodge against this cracker-barrel history, not least the moral lapse in obliquely congratulating the East upon its reawakened desire to "Trespass and encroach/On successive spheres" in imitation of the West. When Japan invaded China and Southeast Asia in the 1930's it justified its act by reference to the higher destiny of the technologically advanced. Both World War II and the Cold War should have made Frost more careful in his praise of expansionist impulses, from whatever hemisphere. Instead, Frost overleaps some fifty years of modern history embarrassing to his confident views and selects the Wright brothers' success at Kitty Hawk as a moral demonstration of his West Northwest thesis. The progress of spirit cannot go further West—it would then sink into the East—so it must advance vertically, toward the open sky and empty planets. Even before President Kennedy proclaimed the moon landing a high priority of his New Frontier administration, Frost had pleaded, in "Kitty Hawk," for no waste of time. "Matter musn't curd,/Separate and settle," he warned. "Action is the word."

Though Frost, true to type, recommends that his public hasten in "getting thought expressed," he waited till the end of his career before writing the poem of Kitty Hawk. He tried once, in the 1930's, but after much whittling and revision, "The Wrights' Biplane" emerged as an undistinguished four line epigram. His contemporaries meanwhile paid ambiguous tributes to the celebrated flight. In the "Cape Hatteras" section of *The Bridge* (1930), Hart Crane emphasized the perversion of the Wright brothers' achievement in World War I:

Warping the gale, the Wright windwrestlers veered  
Capeward, then blading the wind's flank, banked and spun  
What ciphers risen from prophetic script,  
What marathons new-set between the stars!  
The soul, by naphtha fledged into new reaches  
Already knows the closer clasp of Mars,—  
New latitudes, unknottling, soon give place  
To what fierce schedules, rife of doom apace!

Muriel Rukeyser telescoped the same events for the same rhetorical purpose in *Theory of Flight* (1935):

Kitty Hawk is a Caesar among monuments:  
the stiff bland soldiers predestined to their death  
the bombs piled neatly like children's marbles

Frost would not have admired these sightings of Kitty Hawk through the blood-colored filter of the Great War. The poet, he often said, must hold stubbornly to the ideal possibilities of any new thing. But neither would he have enjoyed John William Andrews's leaden appreciation of the Wright brothers in *Prelude to "Icaros"* (1936), a book-length panegyric to the bird-men of history. Andrews made the mistake of taking seriously the manifestos of his decade which directed American poets to reproduce the prosaic details of historical events. Not even John Dos Passos's objective profile of "The Campers at Kitty Hawk" in *The Big Money* (1936) sinks to the literalness of this account:

. . . And when they seemed ready at last,  
The welded heads of the screw-shafts turned in the hubs,  
And were patched with cement, and held; but then the shafts broke;  
And new shafts were sent from Dayton, which also twisted;  
And Orville packed up his bag and went back to Dayton,  
Five-hundred long weary miles to the metal-lathe,  
And new shafts were turned, of solid blue steel this time;  
And Orville came back to the Banks and the shafts were installed.

And so on, for 160 pages. The language and point of view were oppressively reportorial, the narrative tedious, and the book soon joined in oblivion the many other optimistic sagas and epics of the American experience which emerged during and just after the Depression. Frost must have realized that Kitty Hawk could only be made recognizable as an emblem of the uplifted American spirit if it were approached teleologically, from the nineteenth century's vantage. He himself (b. 1875) incarnated the previous century's pride in the new birth, and felt the goadings of parental responsibility for its defense. Still, he abstained from the subject during the second World War, until the poem could be put off no longer.

In the opening of the poem Frost tells us that the name Kitty Hawk in-

trigued him before the great flight was even thought of. On his first visit to Kitty Hawk in 1894 he had considered an "Emblematic ditty" in which the baffling personality of his eventual wife, Elinor White, would have been the subject of his song. At that time Frost supposed that a rival had stolen Elinor from him, and he travelled south to brood on his misfortune. Looking back after sixty years, Frost must have perceived a fruitful contrast between his adolescent journey to Cape Hatteras and the carefully calculated experiments of the Wright brothers in the same place. The structure of "Kitty Hawk" deliberately preserves this contrast. The first part of the poem is egocentric, determinedly autobiographical, and then, in a typical Frostian turn, the poet is overcome by an intense awareness of some truth beyond his limited point of view. At the line "Then I saw it all" the poem opens upon the philosophical discourse already quoted, elevating and widening the subject so that the emblematic name achieves the broadest possible reference.

The first literary allusion in the text suggests the paradigm of this spiritual broadening. Frost describes his adolescent self "Wandering to and fro/In the earth alone." His source is *The Book of Job*: "From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it." (Frost had treated the Job story previously in *A Masque of Reason*.) Job too had a self-centered view of human existence before God revealed a greater power and wisdom to him. And God's sublimity, like the airplane's, derives from destructive acts in history which man must suffer but cannot judge. Hart Crane chose the same passage as an epigraph to *The Bridge*, in which the poet tries to look beyond his own sorrow toward the "Deity's glittering Pledge."

Frost guides the reader of "Kitty Hawk" toward the awareness that he had reached by the time of composition. The authorial voice has the colloquial playfulness of Frost's lyrics, but it has also an insistent force of elevated diction unique even in the late work. A poem containing references to "Alastor," "Raleigh," "Götterdämmerung," "Lilliputians," "Catullus," and the "*mens animi*" and which uses words like aliquid, nomenclature, apropos, and epithet seeks an audience accustomed to abstract thought and wide reading about matters of cultural significance. Frost's theme lies beyond the reach of untutored simplicity. Faced with the complexity of an historical imperative, Frost reaches deliberately for a higher order of word and thought, as Crane did in his long historical poem. Or perhaps, since Frost's strategy is the undercutting of his own claim to our respect, the proper comparison is to the mock afflatus of Wallace Stevens's "Comedian as the Letter C."

"Kitty Hawk" certainly opens on the comic level, as the young Frost traverses North Carolina but sees nothing. In Part One, "Portents, Presentiments, and Premonitions," he recalls how sixty years before he had wandered, "a young Alastor," over the same field which the Wright brothers would use a decade later as a runway. In this walk of 1894 the love-

lorn Frost was disabled from launching “a flight of words” from a location he recognized as latent with unachieved greatness:

It was on my tongue  
To have up and sung  
The initial flight  
I can see now might—  
Should have been my own—  
Into the unknown,  
Into the sublime  
Off these sands of Time.

That is a poet’s responsibility to society, to outrace the practical inventor and set rules for him. But Frost did not and could not sing the initial flight. Instead he mutely gravitated to a band of hunters and then to other night-wanderers on the Cape. When he hears that Theodosia Burr was drowned offshore at this place, he is strongly affected; the reader surmises that she is a figure of his own Muse, sunk in the troubled waters of Frost’s inchoate self-interest. Frost returns again and again to his failure, his “might have sung.” “Little I imagined,” he confesses in the opening of Part Two, “Men would treat this sky/Some day to a pageant/Like a thousand birds.”

In 1958 Frost remarked to Louis Mertins, “Anybody who knows even a kindergarten course in my poetry knows that I’ve been interested in flying ever since Kitty Hawk gave us success under the Wright brothers.” He was proud of recognizing the importance of aerial flight, but throughout his life he worried that he had not foreseen, not been a prophet. His anger with himself he projected at others, blaming newspaper editors for not sending reporters to cover the flight at Kitty Hawk and encyclopedias which withheld credit from the Wright brothers for flying the first heavier-than-air machine. “When all this thing is written,” he told Mertins in 1932, “that about Lindbergh and all, there will still remain only the Wright boys, the Columbuses of the air.”<sup>4</sup> It had been a race which Frost had fairly lost, though he reports in “Kitty Hawk” that he playfully claimed one day to the “Master,” his close friend Orville Wright, “Just supposing I—/I had beat him to it.” Wright, secure in his glory, laughed at Frost’s presumptuous jest.

When we ask an obvious question—Who then had beaten the Wright brothers to it?—we confront the Romantic poets, English and American, of the nineteenth century. Frost’s subtitle for his commemorative poem, “A Skylark in Three-Beat Phrases,” directs our attention particularly to Shelley, as does the allusion to “Alastor” in Part One. Frost’s presumption that he was actually first at Kitty Hawk represents his lingering devotion to the Romantic tradition, just as his rueful admission that he was second attests to his—and his century’s—diminished vision. “Poets know a lot,” he writes in the poem but he can’t say that they know everything, and that

they alone, in Shelley's phrase, have the power to imagine what they know. Nor can Frost say, as Shelley does in the *Defense of Poetry*, that "the promoters of utility . . . follow the footsteps of poets, and copy the sketches of their creations into the book of common life." The Wright brothers trod the same ground as Frost at Kitty Hawk—so far so good—but these mechanics penetrated deep into matter before Frost or any living poet could imagine the event.

Another Romantic forerunner, Emerson, wrote of the poetic power in "Fate" that

the prevision is allied  
Unto the thing so signified;  
Or say, the foresight that awaits  
Is the same Genius that creates.

In "Kitty Hawk" Frost embodies that claim in his own adolescent presence, and by so doing he defers to the entirely technological realization of the Romantic poet's dream. To adopt a popular nineteenth-century distinction, Frost awards the palm to the Understanding rather than to the Imagination. "The province of the imagination is principally visionary, the unknown and undefined," William Hazlitt wrote, "the understanding restores things to their natural boundaries, and strips them of their fanciful pretensions."<sup>5</sup> In "Kitty Hawk" Frost exchanges the spatial metaphors. The poet is depicted as inescapably egocentric. The range of his concern cannot easily extend beyond the immediate circumference of his beloved objects, whose compelling reality contains his vision and cinches it close. "The universe may or may not be very immense," Frost writes in "Skeptic,"

As a matter of fact there are times when I am apt  
To feel it close in tight against my sense  
Like a caul in which I was born and still am wrapped.

The poet is the real skeptic, more often setting boundaries than transcending them. Metrical and rhyming patterns are examples of formal limitations he gladly imposes on himself, and though these are, in a sense, risks of spirit in substantiation, they contrast to the risks of the Understanding as it constructs mechanical wings for longer journeys deeper into the undefined.

"Kitty Hawk" is a kind of belated penance which Frost offers to share with his reading public. Poet and audience alike lack the true or prophetic understanding of historical events because both have been insufficiently trained in the quotidian coping ("Action is the word") of a frontier people. In Frederick Jackson Turner's classic definition the "composite nationality" is a "practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients. . . . a masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends." Meditative it is not (Frost delights in the rhyme of meditation and stagnation); Americans more often seek to know the spiritual

meaning of an event long after it has passed into history. History is an unending process, however, and even the poetic reconsideration remains of practical use. "Kitty Hawk" is also a warning to the nation which stands in 1953 upon the brink of penetration into the infinities. Frost of course endorses the aims of the space program:

Ours was to reclaim  
What had long been faced  
As a fact of waste  
And was waste in name.

And that continues to be the American destiny, even if the first steps seem only an unrewarding "pass/At the infinite." Frost is too familiar with modern astronomy to make occupation of planetary bodies an explicit motive for action. But his notion of reclamation, linking all voyages into the unknown, assumes the necessity of outposts and stations for new Columbuses of the air. By our pass at the infinite, we have "Made it. . . Rationally ours,/ To the most remote/Swirl of neon-lit/Particle afloat." To say that we possess infinity implies that we *will* become contracted to it, as we became the land's in due time. Each leap to a new resting-place refreshes the spirit with inspiration. New frontiers must constantly be located and quickly settled.

As if John F. Kennedy had read "Kitty Hawk," and perhaps he did, one theme of his election campaign became the necessity of penetrating and occupying outer space. The conjunction of Frost and Kennedy on Inauguration Day, 1961, seemed to endorse the notion of American destiny as Frost had defined it in that poem. Frost's panegyric to the nation's new leader, "For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration" cannily brings further pressure upon his patron to realize his promises. Frost once again cites the Wright Brothers in the poem as models of excellence, and looks to Kennedy for a kindred spirit of high endeavor:

It makes the prophet in us all presage  
The glory of a next Augustan age  
Of a power leading from its strength and pride,  
Of young ambition eager to be tried,  
Firm in our free beliefs without dismay,  
In any game the nations want to play.

It should have come as no surprise, then, that on May 25, 1961, Kennedy, departing from the custom of addressing Congress only once a year, convened an extraordinary session to present a proposal for, his phrase "mastery of space." The President reminded Congress that the Russians had taken the lead in space technology. He asked that the American program be accelerated, and made this specific recommendation:

I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind or more important for the long-range exploration of space. And none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish.

Since NASA had not yet put a man in space (Alan Shepard would take a sub-orbital hop the next month), the notion of a moon landing seemed even to poets a vainglorious effort doomed to failure. And yet it happened, though neither Frost nor Kennedy would live to see it. On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin unfurled the Stars and Stripes on the lunar surface.

Writing "Kitty Hawk" at the end of his career, Frost, his nation's unofficial Poet Laureate, aligned his vision with the orthodox American view of social evolution. Poets remain earthbound, yearning to penetrate out far and in deep. But in fact science, our greatness, can best play the heroic role which Fate has given the superior in spirit. "Some people worry because science doesn't know where it's going," Frost said in an interview of 1961. "It doesn't need to know. It's none of its business. I like anything that penetrates the mysteries. And if it penetrates straight to hell, then that's all right, too."<sup>6</sup> In "Kitty Hawk" Frost bows to the machine, his vanquisher, making even his rhetorical figures complement the practical rather than the "poetic" imagination. The procession of Jupiter and Mars are "just like Pullman cars," the divine voice goading the Moabites West Northwest is a radio announcer, and so forth. "God of the machine," Frost prays at the conclusion of "Kitty Hawk," "Thanks to you and thanks/To the brothers Wright." Those aptly named mechanics on Kill Devil Hill did win a race against the poet, and, in a larger sense, against poetry itself, but by saying so in 1953 Frost at least outran the astronauts, planting the Imagination's soiled flag in advance.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Democracy in America*, ed. Philips Bradley (New York: Knopf, 1963), I, 403.

<sup>2</sup>*Interviews with Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Latham (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1974), p. 231.

<sup>3</sup>Reginald Cook, *Robert Frost: A Living Voice* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 131.

<sup>4</sup>Louis Mertins, *Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1965), pp. 373 and 195.

<sup>5</sup>In his essay, "On Poetry in General" in *Lives of the English Poets*.

<sup>6</sup>*Interviews*, p. 266.