

ROBERT FROST'S LIBERAL IMAGINATION

Poetry and politics were very much on Robert Frost's mind when he appeared at the National Poetry Festival, held in Washington in the fall of 1962. That summer he had been to the USSR on a State Department sponsored visit and, in a lucky turn of events, had been accorded a private visit with Premier Nikita Khrushchev at his dacha away from Moscow. What he had said about that visit to newsmen on his arrival in New York had got him in trouble with the State Department and with his friend, President Kennedy. It had something to do with whether, in a showdown, a liberal nation would fight, and Frost's words had been interpreted so as to indicate that such a nation would not. The President, who had invited him to participate in his inauguration, now spurned him. Frost was not given the opportunity to explain what had happened, not to the State Department, to the President. He was cut out of the conversation. He was deeply hurt. "There's nothing so punishing," he once said, "as being left out of the conversation just after you've spoken." Surely he had a grievance, but he would not indulge it. For "poetry is about grief and politics is about grievance," he would insist. Frost then recited a group of poems, culminating in "Provide, Provide," which led him to ruminations about liberals.

I shall return to Frost's considered views of liberals and liberalism, as he offered them to his Washington audience that day in 1962. Those views are critical, playful, apologetic, and sympathetic. They were the fruit of his life-long conversation with Matthew Arnold and the twentieth-century American liberal critics who were his followers, such as Lionel Trilling, Randall Jarrell, and Carl and Mark Van Doren. The Matthew Arnold of "Dover Beach" became the touchstone for their key concept of American liberalism at mid-century, the replacement of dogma and ideology by human feeling and relations as the guiding principles for moral behavior. For Frost, the world-view expressed in "Dover Beach" was soft and sentimental, and he dismissed the articulators of this Arnoldian version of liberal values as "Dover Beachcombers." But the skeptical Frost was neither ideological nor coldly intellectual, and both his poetry and his remarks on the subject show that he experienced

a deep response to Arnold's poetry, particularly "Dover Beach," at some level, enough so that he found it necessary to respond several times within his own poetic terms to Arnold's vision of human significance. "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" is, in many ways, Frost's response to Arnold and the liberal critics Frost considered his disciples, the "Dover Beachcombers."

I

Two of Lionel Trilling's poetic touchstones for the modern world and its great problems were Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" and—much later—Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep." In a more ironic way, Frost also saw "Dover Beach" as a touchstone for the modern world. For while Trilling saw Arnold's poem to be an expression of earned "grief"—"the diminution of religious faith is a reason for melancholy," he explained—Frost saw it as merely a "grievance," deplorably a liberal's lament or complaint. (In this, Frost approaches T. S. Eliot, whose "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" ironizes Arnold's recourse, in "Dover Beach," to whatever personal refuge there might be in the love and truth of a human relationship. But that is a different story, for another time.) As for Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," suffice it to say for now that Trilling, describing its "actual subject" as being "the response of mankind to the empty immensity of the universe," argues that "the poem does not affirm that what is watched for will appear. It says no more than that it is the nature of 'the people' to keep watch, whether or not there is anything to appear." But that comes later in the story.

My narrative begins *in medias res* with Frost's presence at the Columbia University commencement of 1932 when he was awarded an honorary doctorate and was the Phi Beta Kappa poet. Before the local chapter he read "Build Soil," describing it as a "political pastoral." That much *The New York Times* reported (1 June 1932), but nothing more about Frost or his part in Columbia's academic festival. Preceding its paragraph on the Phi Beta Kappa poet and his poem the *Times* offered a detailed account of Walter Lippmann's address to the same group of Phi Beta Kappa members and honorees. He spoke on "The Scholar in a Troubled World," insisting that scholars would do best for their world by staying at their scholars' desks and not trying to go out to resolve the crises of the day. Lippmann concludes with ringing remarks about the fate of democracy:

For what is most wrong with the world is that the democracy, which at last is actually in power, is a creature of the immediate moment. Democracy of this kind cannot last long; it must, and inevitably it will, give way to some more settled social order. But in the meanwhile the scholar will defend himself against it. He will build himself a wall against chaos, and behind that wall, as in other bleak ages of the history of man, he will give his true allegiance not to the immediate world but to the invisible empire of reason.

There was much in Lippmann's speech that Frost could agree with, particularly if he was warning against socialism as a solution to the world's social and economic problems. But he would never have argued that the scholar was precluded from taking action in the "immediate" world. "Build Soil" addressed that very matter. It took a position that was both political and moral. It implied a strong if unpopular ethic. Against all those who would rush to implant a socialist system by which the government might bring about the greatest good for the greatest number, Frost's spokesman in "Build Soil" says:

Build soil. Turn the farm in upon itself
Until it can contain itself no more,
But sweating-full, drips wine and oil a little.
I will go to my run-out social mind
And be as unsocial with it as I can.
The thought I have, and my first impulse is
To take to market—I will turn it under.
The thought from that thought—I will turn it under.
And so on to the limit of my nature.
We are too much out, and if we won't draw in
We shall be driven in.

(To anticipate a theme that I shall later take up in greater detail—linking Frost to Matthew Arnold—it might be noted here that in his discussion of "Build Soil" in 1974, Laurence Perrine quotes Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time":

Let us try a more disinterested mode of seeing [things]; let us be-take ourselves more to the serener life of the mind and spirit. This

life, too, may have its excesses and dangers; but they are not for us at present. Let us think of quietly enlarging our stock of true and fresh ideas, and not, as soon as we get an idea or half an idea, be running out with it into the street, and trying to make it rule there. Our ideas will, in the end, shape the world all the better for maturing a little.)

But to return to Lippmann and Frost at Columbia in 1932. Like Everett's featured address at Gettysburg, Lippmann's address soon disappeared into relative obscurity. Frost's poem, however, was fated to take on, eventually, a good deal of notoriety. To be sure, the notoriety was not immediate nor locally based, for it would not be until the poem "Build Soil" was collected in *A Further Range* in 1936—that is, after it too had built soil—that it, along with the rest of the volume, became the subject of widespread public criticism.

Reading "Build Soil" at Columbia seems to have been closely calculated. The reading would come a decade or so after Carl Van Doren, teaching at Columbia, had published his influential essay, "The Soil of the Puritans," extolling the qualities of Frost's poetry attributable to his emerging out of rich "subsoil" (of the "Puritans"). Understandably, Frost took Columbia to be a not entirely hostile place to air his objections to those leftist, socialistic views of mankind that were being adopted left and right by the writers and intellectuals of the depression that emerged out of the stock market crash of 1929. Van Doren had begun his piece on Frost with an impressionistic account of English Puritan migrations first to Europe and then to the New World, resulting ultimately in a New England populated by those descendants of the Puritans who did not move out into the American continent. "Those who remained," observed Van Doren, "tended to be either the most successful or the least successful, the gentry for whom Boston set the mode or the gnarled farmers who tugged at the stones of inland hillsides." "The gentry," he continued, "found its poetical voice first: the sharp-tongued satirists of the Revolution; Holmes, the little wit of the Puritan capital; Longfellow, the sweet-syllabled story-teller and translator; Lowell, learned and urbane, who stooped to the vernacular; Emerson, whose glowing verses had to preach." It was a different story with the "gnarled farmers"—in their case "the Yankee subsoil long resisted the plow." They were joined by Thoreau, "hired man of genius," who "read Greek in his hermitage," and Whittier, who "born to be the ballad-maker of his folk," turned "half politician." And when, "after the Civil

War, rural New England was rediscovered by poetry and romance, it was valued largely because it seemed quaint, because it was full of picturesque remnants of a civilization." "No wonder the elder Yankees had no voice," writes Van Doren. "Inarticulate themselves, both by principle and by habit, they invited obscurity. Overwhelmed by the rush of the new world which had poured over them, they took to the safer hills." For a century or more the Yankee awaited his spokesman or poet.

But there were flesh and blood beneath their [the farmers'] weather-beaten garments, as there was granite beneath the goldenrod and hardhack about which the visitors babbled; and in time the flesh and blood and granite were reached. If it seems strange that Robert Frost, born in California, should have become the voice of those left behind, it actually is natural enough. New England was in his blood, bred there by many generations of ancestors who had been faithful to its soil. Some racial nostalgia helped draw him back; some deep loyalty to his stock intensified his affection. That affection made him thrill to the colors and sounds and perfumes of New England as no poet had done since Thoreau. He felt, indeed, the pathos of deserted farms, the tragedy of dwindling townships, the horrors of loneliness pressing in upon silent lives, the weight of inertia in minds from which an earlier energy has departed; but there was in him a tough sense of fact which would not let him brood. He drew life from the sight of the sturdy processes which still went on. Unable to see these upland parishes as mere museums of singular customs and idioms, he saw them, instead, as the stages on which, as on any human stage however small or large, there are transacted the universal tragedies and comedies of birth, love, work, hope, despair, death.

Among many other canny observations, Van Doren pointed to what might be taken as one of the Yankee poet's limitations. "As a Yankee," wrote Van Doren, "he may have too little general humanitarianism to be a patriot of the planet, but he is so much a neighbor that he can strike hands of friendship with the persons whom he encounters in his customary work." After the publication of "Build Soil" in *A Further Range*, several critics objected to the conservative narrowness of Frost's dedication to New England individualism.

In fact, Carl Van Doren himself seems to have turned against Frost, no longer finding him relevant enough to include him among the literary revolutionists of the true American subsoil, as he put it in prepared remarks to the faithful at the opening of a leftist bookstore in New York.

More so than Carl, Mark Van Doren would become one of Frost's staunchest supporters. "One of my faithful," Frost singled him out in 1962. For decades Mark Van Doren reviewed Frost's books as they appeared. He, too, like Carl Van Doren, had first praised Frost in 1923, in his case, with a review of *New Hampshire*. Although he did not review *A Further Range*, in the year of its publication he published a global piece in the *American Scholar* entitled "The Permanence of Robert Frost." Without naming him, Mark took issue with his brother Carl's view that Frost was perhaps too much of a Yankee—that he lacked the "general humanitarianism"—to be "a patriot of the planet." Frost was a poet of "dualities," argued Mark Van Doren,

[And] the last of his dualities is by no means the least important. . . . He is a New England poet, perhaps the New England poet, and reaps all the advantage there is in being true to a particular piece of earth—true to its landscape, its climate, its history, its morality, its tongue. But he is in the same breath a poet of and for the world. One need not have lived in New England to understand him. He has induced, it happens, nostalgia for New England in persons who never saw the place. But what is of greater consequence, his voice is immediately recognizable anywhere as a human voice, and recognizable for the much that it has to say. He has his roots, as literature must always have them; but he grows at the top into the wide air that flows around the world where men and women listen.

Later, in a review of *A Masque of Reason*, Van Doren expanded on the notion of Frost's recognizable human voice—that is to say, as the voice of a recognizably human being, differentiating it from that of a poetizing poet, and warning that Frost had not "escaped the danger there is for a poet in having a voice":

The advantages of a voice are famous—no poet can hope to succeed without one. But there is also the danger that a man who *has* a voice will decline into a man who *is* one. Then he becomes a

sage. To be a Voice is not to be enviable, for it means taking whatever you say as valuable merely because you hear yourself saying it. Mr. Frost has been charged with such a decline, and too harshly. But there is this much in it. It has become a bit too easy for him to apply his principle of cussedness in the world. He takes short cuts and applies it in wrong places, defeating thus the principle itself.

One might think from this that Van Doren is complaining about the Frost who wrote the poems of *A Further Range*, notably "Build Soil." But not so, for he concludes this review of *A Masque of Reason* with ten brief quotations from Frost's poetry that are Arnoldian touchstones proving that "the poems he has written have the best chance of any I know these days to live." This list begins with "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows" from "Mowing" and "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" from "Mending Wall" and ends with "I bid you to a one-man revolution" from "Build Soil." But he apologizes for taking these lines "out of the poems where they belong" for "Robert Frost's unit is the poem, not the line." "'The Oven Bird,' or 'Once by the Pacific,'" he informs us, "is as perfect as any poem can afford to be."

In later reviews and pieces Van Doren worked away at his understanding of the sources of Frost's poetic power. Reviewing the *Complete Poems 1949*, for the *New York Herald Tribune*, he provided another list, this time of the fifty "titles that anthologize themselves as one reader turns the pages of this book." Lists of Frost poems—each of them constituting an attempt at identifying a lasting canon—seem to have been in vogue, the lead having been taken by Randall Jarrell in "The Other Robert Frost," a piece in the *Nation* in late 1947 that provided a generation of academic readers with "another," an unpopularized Frost canon. On his list were "The Witch of Coös," "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," "Directive," "Design," "A Servant to Servants," "Provide, Provide," "Home-Burial," "Acquainted with the Night," "The Pauper Witch of Grafton," "An Old Man's Winter Night," "The Gift Out-right," "After Apple-Picking," "Desert Places," and "The Fear." Van Doren had undoubtedly read Jarrell. Yet he did not include in his own second list, then or later, the poems "The Witch of Coös," "The Pauper Witch of Grafton," "Design," "Provide, Provide" or "The Fear." In the 1960s, after Frost's death, Van Doren made still another attempt to fix the canon, setting his limit at

forty this time, and offering as replacements “The Pasture,” “Revelation,” “The Telephone,” “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” “Good-by and Keep Cold,” “A Masque of Reason,” “A Masque of Mercy,” “Away!” “A Cabin in the Clearing,” “One More Brevity,” “In Winter in the Woods Alone,” and (a Jarrell favorite) “Directive.” But the selections make it clear that it was the Frost whose best politics were the politics of the self—but an ungrrieving self—that appealed to him. He would later quote with approval (and from memory) Frost’s remark on poetry and politics made in Washington in 1962: “‘Poetry and politics? They’re not quite the same. Poetry is about the grief, politics about the grievances.’ I suppose he never said anything better than that,” concluded Van Doren.

II

The difference between “grief” and “grievance” that Frost insists upon has a necessary relevance to his relationship to Matthew Arnold. It is not commonly noticed that in 1962 at the National Poetry Festival in Washington, just three months before his death, Frost spoke affectionately about Arnold. “I feel a certain affinity for him. His sad old face always haunts me,” he said. “And the word about his being a liberal comes to me when he says that we intellectuals ‘Dejectedly take our seat on the intellectual throne.’ That’s a very liberal attitude.” “Grievance” and “grief.”

What has held sway in criticism of Frost, however, has been his early expressions of dissatisfaction with Arnold’s liberalism. Frost’s seemingly deprecating lines about Matthew Arnold in “New Hampshire” (1923) have long colored our way of looking at Frost’s relationship to one of his most important precursors. For example, Richard Poirier, certainly an able interpreter of Frost, notes that while the Arnold of “Frost’s impressionable years” was “the poet of ‘Sohrab and Rustum,’ which he later read to his own children, or ‘Cadmus and Harmonia,’ ‘my favorite poem long before I knew what it was going to mean to us,’” he later evoked Arnold “as an illustration of liberal intellectual querulousness about the perils of the age and the terrors of nature. ‘Adlai Stevenson’s Democrats,’ I once heard him say, were ‘Dover Beach boys.’” He then cinches his case by quoting nearly fifty lines of “New Hampshire.” Asked to choose between being a “prude” or a “puke,” “mewling and puking in the public arms,” the poet, forced to choose, insists:

I wouldn't be a prude afraid of nature.
I know a man who took a double ax
And went alone against a grove of trees;
But his heart failing him, he dropped the ax
And ran for shelter quoting Matthew Arnold:
"Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood";
There's been enough shed without shedding mine.
Remember Birnam Wood! The wood's in flux!"
He had a special terror of the flux
That showed itself in dendrophobia.
The only decent tree had been to mill
And educated into boards, he said.
He knew too well for any earthly use
The line where man leaves off and nature starts,
And never overstepped it save in dreams.
He stood on the safe side of the line talking—
Which is sheer Matthew Arnoldism . . .
I'd hate to be a runaway from nature.

But neither would he choose to be "a puke," one

Who cares not what he does in company,
And when he can't do anything, falls back
On words, and tries his worst to make words speak
Louder than actions, and sometimes achieves it.

That Frost chose Arnold to be his whipping boy might be construed as a way of covering his poetic tracks (or tracts) or, more likely, as another instance in which Frost picks a lover's quarrel with a precursor. His wife, Elinor, testifies in a 1935 letter that Frost knew more of Arnold's poetry by heart than of any other poet, with the exception of Edgar Allan Poe and John Keats. His later quarrels with Arnold seem to have centered on "Dover Beach" (1867), his essential poetic complaint. As Frost wrote to the *Amherst Student* (the campus newspaper) in 1935 from Key West (where he was almost literally surrounded by the sea):

[S]peaking of ages, you will often hear it said that the age of the world we live in is particularly bad. I am impatient of such talk. We have no way of knowing that this age is one of the worst in the world's history. Arnold claimed the honor for the age before this. Wordsworth claimed it for the last but one. And so on back through literature. I say they claimed the honor for their ages. They claimed it rather for themselves. It is immodest of a man to think of himself as going down before the worst forces ever mobilized by God.

In 1934 Frost would publish his "answer" to "Dover Beach": "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," written in 1932 by the shores of the Pacific Ocean in Los Angeles when he was attending the Olympic Games. Interestingly enough, when Wilbur L. Cross praised the poem, having seen it in the March 1934 issue of the *Yale Review*, Frost followed his acknowledgement of Cross's praise with a reference to Walter Lippmann:

I'm glad if I still can please you. I need all the encouragement you can give me in that kind of poetry to hold me to it. The temptation of the times is to write politics. But I mustn't yield to it, must I? Or if I do, I must burn the results as from me likely to be bad. Leave politics and affairs to Walter Lippmann. Get sent to Congress if I will and can (I have always wanted to), but stick to the kind of writing I am known for.

Now, to turn to Arnold's "Dover Beach":

The sea is calm to-night,
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the Straits;—on the French coast, the light
Gleams, and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the ebb meets the moon-blanch'd sand,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves suck back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Here is “Neither Out Far Nor In Deep,” a poem by one who thought “all ages of the world are bad—a great deal worse anyway than Heaven,” but always a place where it is “about equally hard to save your soul”:

The people along the sand
All turn and look one way.
They turn their back on the land.
They look at the sea all day.

As long as it takes to pass
A ship keeps raising its hull;
The wetter ground like glass
Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;
But wherever the truth may be—
The water comes ashore,
And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

To Randall Jarrell, writing in *The Kenyon Review* in 1952, must go the credit for “discovering” this poem. In his influential essay, in the form of an epistle “To the Laodiceans,” he singled out several—five—of Frost’s poems neglected by readers but worth close attention. Acknowledging that “there is the deepest tact and restraint in the symbolism,” making it comparable “to A.E. Housman’s,” he nevertheless finds it to be “flatter, greyer, and at once tenderer and more terrible” than a comparable poem by Housman, “without even the consolations of rhetoric and exaggeration—there is no ‘primal fault’ in Frost’s poem, but only the faint Biblical memories of ‘any watch they keep.’” Jarrell has been taken to task, deftly and lightly, by William Pritchard, for working too hard to prove that “Frost’s surface simplicity in ‘Neither Out Far Nor In Deep’ is really a deep complexity,” even as his reading is otherwise confirmed: “[Jarrell] finds the watchers in the poem to be foolish and yet heroic as well; we must feel them as both because of the tone of the last lines, ‘or rather, their careful suspension between several tones.’ So the poem as a whole is a ‘recognition of the essential limitations of man, without denial or protest or rhetoric or palliation’—and that recognition is the usual thing, he says, we encounter in Frost’s poetry.” Richard Poirier, too, writing in 1977, had assumed much of Jarrell’s reading, but without criticizing him for violating what Pritchard would later see as the “light tone” of the poem. Poirier writes:

The landscape of these poems [the poems in *A Further Range*] is in every sense impoverished. It gives no sustenance to life; it promises little in the future, and none at all to the imagination. . . . [T]he only hint of metaphoric activity in “Neither Out Far Nor In Deep,” aside from the mockery in the title, is the observation that “The wetter ground like glass/ Reflects a standing gull.” These lines, and others in the poem, emphasize the total *unreflectiveness* of “the people” who merely sit all day and look at the sea. And what is further emphasized is the fact that no detail of the poem mirrors or reflects anything except inertia and conformity.

What Pritchard and Poirier might have acknowledged is Jarrell’s recognition that the lightness of tone conveys the poet’s tenderness, a fact that strangely enhances what is “terrible” in the poem. But what Jarrell finds “terrible” in the poem is not very much at odds with the readings of Poirier and Pritchard:

What we do know we don’t care about; what we do care about we don’t know: we can’t look out very far, or in very deep; and when did that ever bother *us*? It would be hard to find anything more unpleasant to say about people than that last stanza; but Frost doesn’t say it unpleasantly—he says it with flat ease, takes everything with something harder than contempt, more passive than acceptance. And isn’t there something heroic about the whole business, too—something touching about our absurdity? If the fool persisted in his folly he would become a wise man, Blake said, and we have persisted. The tone of the last lines—or, rather, their careful suspension between several tones, as a piece of iron can be held in the air between powerful enough magnets—allows for this too. This recognition of the essential limitations of man, without denial or protest or rhetoric or palliation, is very rare and very valuable, and rather usual in Frost’s best poetry.

It is important to take up Frost’s reference in the first line to “the people.” We can dispense with the possibility that the reference is honorifically “democratic” in the sense of the 1930s view (to borrow from Sandburg) of “The People, Yes” or, conversely, that “the people” refers to anything like the

“mob” that Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot feared and mocked. What Frost thought of “the people” may be suggested by something else he said in his 1935 letter to the *Amherst Student*:

There is something we can always be doing without reference to how good or how bad the age is. There is at least so much good in the world that it admits of form and the making of form. And not only admits of it, but calls for it. We *people* [my emphasis] are thrust forward out of the suggestions of form in the rolling clouds of nature. In us nature reaches its height of form and through us exceeds itself. When in doubt there is always form for us to go on with. Anyone who has achieved the least form to be sure of it, is lost to the larger excruciations. I think it must stroke faith the right way. The artist, the poet, might be expected to be the most aware of such assurance, but it is really everybody’s sanity to feel it and live by it. Fortunately, too, no forms are more engrossing, gratifying, comforting, staying than those lesser ones we throw off like vortex rings of smoke, all our individual enterprise and needing nobody’s cooperation: a basket, a letter, a garden, a room, an idea, a picture, a poem. For these we haven’t to get a team together before we can play. . . . To me any little form I assert upon it is velvet, as the saying is, and to be considered for how much more it is than nothing.

Devoid of the plangent imagery and pervading lyricism that characterize Wallace Stevens’s mid-1930s poem “The Idea of Order at Key West,” Frost’s poem deals only with the flattest, most essential act of “looking” for—order, meaning, form, for once, then, something. The people do not look out far or in deep, not because they lack interest, but perhaps because they cannot do so, for no one can look out far or in deep—not Stevens’s solitary singer, not Ramon Fernandez, not even the poet Stevens himself. Again to the *Amherst Student*: “The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration. What pleasanter than that this should be so?”

III

Lionel Trilling's doctoral dissertation became his first book. *Matthew Arnold*, published by Norton in 1939, was described by its author as "a biography of Arnold's mind." In this reinterpretation of the exemplary if beset Victorian poet and critic, he had neither used nor searched out primary materials, satisfying himself with the use of available secondary materials and Arnold's own published writings. He had taken to heart, it would seem, the essence of Arnold's teachings and would apply those teachings to the study of his mind: "to see the object as it really is." The details of the poet's outward, public life, as well as his more private, emotional life, he took as established by the best sources. Having filed disclaimers and stated his preemptive explanations, he felt free to present his understanding of Arnold. Couched in the "objective" terms of disinterested, if engaged, scholarship, his argument nevertheless can now be seen clearly for its usefulness to Trilling himself. For its lasting and valid claims as a freestanding piece of critical scholarship notwithstanding, *Matthew Arnold* is perhaps even more valuable when viewed as a personally useful self-heuristic study. In certainly important ways, moreover, it is Trilling's most personal book, though its rhetoric and discourse are, at least one removal from himself, those of the scholar-teacher he had already become. But like Arnold, Trilling had also started out as a "poet." And although he had had to satisfy himself with a handful of stories published in the *Menorah Journal* in the late '20s, by 1930, if not sooner, Trilling had seen that his poetic gleam had already faded. Like Arnold, who as a poet had seen for what they were the problems of his time and those of the future and would then turn to trying to solve them, Trilling had also turned to his world's cultural, political, and social problems. He could still envy Ernest Hemingway's literary successes, as he confessed to his journals, but by the early 1930s he knew that such successes in "poetry" were not to be his. Of course, he would later achieve a modicum of literary recognition for his stories, "Of This Time, of That Place" and "The Other Margaret," as well as his cold-war novel *The Middle of the Journey*, but by 1930 the die was cast in favor of the critic of Arnoldian high seriousness. Perhaps he, too—like Frost—was always haunted by Arnold's "sad old face."

Trilling reviewed none of Frost's books and indeed had published nothing on the New England pastoral poet when he was asked to speak at Frost's eighty-fifth birthday dinner. Obviously, he had been reading his colleague Mark Van Doren as well as Randall Jarrell. But before going on to his unset-

ting speech in 1959, let us backtrack. It is not known if Trilling (or either of the Van Dorens, for that matter) heard Frost read “Build Soil” at Columbia in 1932. We do know that Trilling heard Frost talk at a conference held at Kenyon College in 1946. He did not much like the performance, as he confided to his notebooks. “Frost’s strange speech,” he wrote,

apparently of a kind that he often gives—he makes himself the buffoon—goes into a trance of aged childishness—he is the child who is rebelling against all the serious people who are trying to *organize* him—take away his will and individuality. It was, however, full of brilliantly shrewd things—impossible to remember them except referring to the pointless discussion of skepticism the evening before, he said: “Skepticism, is that anything more than we used to mean when we said, Well, what have we here?”—But also the horror of the old man—fine looking old man—having to dance and clown to escape (also for his supper)—American, American in that deadly intimacy, that throwing away of dignity—“Drop that dignity! Hands up” we say—in order to come into anything like contact and to make anything like a point.

It is hard to say just how much of Frost Trilling had read to this point—not much, one would guess, given his admissions at the birthday dinner in 1959. But there is one other entry in the notebooks, for 1951, that while not mentioning Frost, nevertheless evokes the poet who wrote “The Wood-Pile.” Trilling writes:

A catbird on the woodpile, grey on grey wood, its breast distended, the feathers ruffled and sick, a wing out of joint, the head thrown back and the eyes rolled back, white. Looked so sick I thought of killing it, when another bird appeared, looked at it, took a position behind it, and assumed virtually the same attitude, although not so extremely. To distract me? This it did once more, although with rather less conviction the second time, then flew away. Suddenly the first bird pulled itself together, flew to a tree above, sat there for a moment seeming to adjust its wing, or exercise it, then flew away.

Certainly Frost had no monopoly on the observation of the way birds behave, as Trilling's entry shows. But that entry also shows that Trilling could see no humor in the event. There would have been rather little humor for the first bird had Trilling followed through on his first impulse to kill it—what an un-Frostian thing to consider doing, let alone doing it. More seriously, however, Trilling's response to the pathos he thought he was seeing reveals his own failure, in Frost's terms, to be sufficiently "versed in country things." Trilling put the matter this way in 1959:

It is a fact which I had best confess as simply as possible that for a long time I was alienated from Mr. Frost's great canon of work by what I saw in it, that either itself seemed to denigrate the work of the critical intellect or that gave to its admirers the ground for making the denigration. It was but recently that my resistance, at the behest of better understanding, yielded to admiration—it is probable that there is no one here tonight who has not admired Mr. Frost's poetry for a longer time than I have.

I shall not go much into the full details of Trilling's speech or rehearse the hullabaloo about it caused largely by J. Donald Adams's account in *The New York Times Book Review* a few days later. Suffice it to say that admitting that only recently had he found in Frost the kind of poetry that mattered to him, Trilling defined a terrifying poet of loneliness, isolation, and cosmic terror.

I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him, if it makes things any easier, a tragic poet, but it might be useful every now and then to come out from under the shelter of that literary word. The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. Read the poem called "Design" and see if you sleep the better for it. Read "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," which often seems to me the most perfect poem of our time, and see if you are warmed by anything in it except the energy with which emptiness is perceived.

Trilling had begun his remarks by greeting Frost "on his massive, his Sophoclean birthday," but he withheld explanation of the eponymous adjective until his conclusion:

And I hope that you will not think it graceless of me that on your birthday I have made you out to be a poet who terrifies. When I began to speak I called your birthday Sophoclean and that word has, I think, controlled everything I have said about you. Like you, Sophocles lived to a great age, writing well; and like you, Sophocles was the poet his people loved most. Surely they loved him in some part because he praised their common country. But I think that they loved him chiefly because he made plain to them the terrible things of human life: they felt, perhaps, that only a poet who could make plain the terrible things could possibly give them comfort.

Trilling has offered Frost Sophocles as an honored and valued predecessor for his terrifying universal vision.

Trilling might also have mentioned Matthew Arnold, about whom, in his introduction to the 1949 Viking *Portable* he had written: "It was no academic theory, as people even of his own time were pleased to think, that dictated Arnold's devotion to the Greek tragic poets; rather was it their brilliant sense of the terror of loneliness." Small wonder, then, that Trilling found "Dover Beach" to be "pre-eminent" among Arnold's "wholly successful poems" and "for many readers," "the single most memorable poem of the Victorian age." A poem about "the eternal note of sadness" sensed by the poet as he looks out from Dover, across the channel, and in his mind's eye as far as the Aegean, "Dover Beach" recalls that "Sophocles long ago/ Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought/ Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery." In his introduction to the Viking *Portable Arnold*, published a decade before Frost's eighty-fifth birthday dinner, Trilling had written of Arnold's "devotion to the Greek tragic poets" and "their brilliant sense of the terror of loneliness":

They were fascinated by the man who is set apart from other men by his fate or his own misguided will: Ajax or Oedipus or Philoctetes; or Achilles and Priam, each solitary under his doom, yet able for a moment to meet—the most terrible and most beautiful instant of community that literature has recorded—in the equal and courteous society of grief. And Arnold lived in an age when—it is one of the clichés of cultural history—man was becoming increasingly aware of loneliness. For the Romantic poets, who are the poets Arnold

read in his boyhood and youth, the characteristic situation is that of the isolated individual who seeks to enter some communion. The isolation was felt to be not only social but also cosmic. The universe had undergone disruptive changes which the poets from Schiller through Leopardi to D.H. Lawrence have deplored, and in terms which do not much vary; science, they all tell us, has emptied the haunted air and demonstrated a universe in which man is a stranger. It is this double loneliness that makes Arnold's humanism, which was his response to isolation, so complete and so personally stamped.

Arnold's poetic link of himself as the poet of "Dover Beach" with the Sophocles of old (both hear the "eternal note of human sadness") stands behind Trilling's discovery of a Sophoclean (and Arnoldian, it must be said) Robert Frost. Although the link to Arnold might not have been immediately apparent to Frost, whose own remarks following Trilling's speech were somewhat confused and unsettled, the connection to Arnold soon came to him, for on 11 July 1959, he wrote to Lawrance Thompson:

Did Trilling have something the other night? I was a little bothered by him but chiefly because I didn't hear very well. We are to have another chance at his speech; it is appearing presently in *The Partisan Review*. At least he seemed to see that I am as strong on badness as I am on goodness. Emerson's defect was that he was of the great tradition of Monists. He could see the "good of evil born" but he couldn't bring himself to say the evil of good born. He was an Abominable Snowman of the top-lofty peaks. But what a poet he was in prose and verse. Such phrases. Arnold thought him a voice oracular. ("A voice oracular has pealed today.") I couldn't go so far as that because I am a Dualist and I don't see how Matthew Arnold could because he was a Dualist too. He was probably carried away by the great poetry. Wisdom doesn't matter too much.

It is interesting that Arnold was still on Frost's mind at this date. For although it is not the poet of "Dover Beach" that he invokes in this letter to his biographer, the reference to Arnold may have been meant to serve as a clue to Trilling's own sources in his birthday speech. Whether Thompson took the

clue or even wished to follow the hint remains doubtful, for when he published Frost's reply to Trilling's letter conveying a copy of his remarks as printed in *Partisan Review* for June 1959, he prefaced the letter:

RF's publisher held an eighty-fifth birthday banquet for the poet in New York City on 26 March 1959. The major speaker of the evening was Lionel Trilling, whose carefully considered remarks in praise of certain "terrifying" elements in the poetry of RF unintentionally created a teapot tempest, primarily stirred up by J. Donald Adams in the *The New York Times Book Review*. Trilling responded in the *Partisan Review* for June 1959 and sent a copy to RF expressing the hope that the after-dinner speech and the subsequent hubbub had not distressed him.

While it is curious that Thompson dismisses as a "teapot tempest" the event that Trilling had called a "cultural episode," Frost's letter to Trilling, dated 18 June 1959, offers us a different take on the matter. "Not distressed at all," he assures Trilling.

Just a little taken aback or thrown back on myself by being so closely examined so close by. It took me more than a few minutes to change from thoughts of myself to thoughts of the difficulty you had had with me. You made my birthday party a surprise party. I should like nothing better than to do a thing like that myself—to depart from the Rotarian norm in a Rotarian situation. You weren't there to sing "Happy Birthday, dear Robert," and I don't mind being made controversial. No sweeter music can come to my ears than the clash of arms over my dead body when I am down.

There are perhaps private sources for the images and language of this letter, but it is sufficient here to call attention to Frost's evocation of a "clash of arms," a veiled reference, as I see it, to those ignorant armies that "clash by night" on "a darkling plain" in Arnold's poem—a knowing wink in Trilling's direction, one that twits him, perhaps, for having been so long ignorant of the true worth of Frost's poetry.

This letter notwithstanding, Trilling's view of Frost, which owed much to

Randall Jarrell's usefully "corrective" view aimed at Frost's less demanding readers, remained dangerously one-sided. When Trilling chose poems for his textbook *The Experience of Literature* in 1967 (limiting his choice to twenty-two poems), he included Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," as well as Arnold's "Dover Beach." And his section of plays—eight of them—started out with Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

Before putting the matter of the Trilling speech to rest, however, it might be useful to acknowledge Mark Van Doren's view of it. On 16 July 1959, just a few days after Frost had written to Thompson, Van Doren wrote:

You survived Trilling as you have survived all of your commentators. I assume you know he was praising you; Donald Adams made some think it had been an attack. The only trouble was the tone, and the highfalutin business about [D. H.] Lawrence. His praise was for your strength in the face of reality, a good thing to find in anybody, but he leaned too heavily on the word "terrifying," which I fear is a cant word nowadays. It was an article, not a speech, and a *Partisan Review* article at that; between you and me, I can't abide such articles. This one depressed me so much that when I got home that night Dorothy [his wife] looked at me and asked at once what the matter was. I found it hard to say, and I still do. For Trilling did do his best to prove that you are a poet of great depth, importance, and truth. And so you are, yet there are more beautiful and simple reasons than he found.

Prudently, Van Doren makes no reference to Trilling's comparison of Frost to Sophocles. Both had lived to a great age, Trilling pointed out, and each was "the poet his people loved most." "Surely they loved him in some part because he praised their common country," Trilling allowed. But "they loved him chiefly because he made plain to them the terrible things of human life: they felt, perhaps, that only a poet who could make plain the terrible things, could possibly give them comfort."

Interestingly, Trilling avoids mentioning Matthew Arnold in his tribute to Frost, though Arnold is undoubtedly a gray eminence in everything Trilling said on the occasion, as Frost slyly indicates in the letter quoted above. Rather than the "highfalutin" evocation of D. H. Lawrence, Trilling might have quoted Arnold's "Destiny," a poem Trilling had featured in the *Portable Arnold*:

Why each is striving, from of old,
To love more deeply than he can?
Still would be true, yet still grows cold?
—Ask of the Powers that sport with man!

They yok'd in him, for endless strife,
A heart of ice, a soul of fire;
And hurl'd him on the Field of Life,
An aimless unallay'd Desire.

Compare Arnold's poem with "Fire and Ice," with which it shares its imagery and a famous rime.

IV

I should like to conclude with a coda in Frost's own words. I quote from his final observations about Matthew Arnold made at the National Poetry Festival in 1962. In these remarks he defines a liberal Arnold that he admires and would emulate.

Now, speaking of liberal, my gibes and my jokes—one of them is to call all my liberal friends Dover Beachcombers. . . . But now, Matthew Arnold, with all my joking and gibing about him, is one of my "greats." I can tell he is, because I quote him so often—more than Tennyson and more than Browning, more than any of that time. The old schoolteacher, you know, the old school man—not a teacher, maybe—but a school man, and a good deal like me that way, I suppose. I feel a certain affinity for him. His sad old face always haunts me. And the word about his being a liberal comes to me when he says that we intellectuals "Dejectedly take our seat on the intellectual throne." That's a very liberal attitude.

Nearly every liberal that I know of has a tendency when his enemy works up against him, stirs up against him, to try to remember if he isn't more in the wrong than the enemy. I said in two lines of poetry a long time ago that a liberal is a person who can't take his own side in a quarrel. That's all, but I can say better things of a liberal than that. I can say, for this night, part of a poem of Mat-

thew Arnold's of the mighty, sturdy kind . . . It's on the difficult subject of immortality . . .

Foil'd by our fellow-men, depress'd, outworn,
We leave the brutal world to take its way,
And, *Patience! In another life*, we say,
The world shall be thrust down, and we up-borne.

Too much of that around in poetry at all, this
Foil'd by our fellow-men, depress'd, outworn,
We leave the brutal world to take its way . . .

“The brutal world”; the vulgar world, if it isn't the brutal; and then—I'm not going to read the whole sonnet—

And will not, then, the immortal armies scorn
The world's poor, routed leavings?

you know—the ones that have talked that way, won't they—won't the great, immortal armies up there want that kind of a skulker from this world? “No,” he says:

. . . the energy of life may be
Kept on after the grave . . .
And he who flagg'd not in the earthly strife . . .

Didn't flag, didn't talk stuff about the hard world, blame the world—
From strength to strength advancing—only he,
His soul well-knit, and all his battles won . . .

See, that means little and big challenges—
. . . all his battles won,
Mounts, and that hardly, to eternal life.

That'd be the Greek of it—to the place where the great people live on and nobody else. See how stern that is. He says that “only he . . .”

From strength to strength advancing—only he,
His soul well-knit, and all his battles won,
Mounts, and that hardly, to eternal life.

It's not a Christian doctrine at all—everybody's saved that believes. But that's this—“Mounts, and that hardly . . .”—it's a fight. I just bring that in to show you where I would be.

Later in the evening he settled on “The Gift Outright,” the poem he “used,” as he put it, at President Kennedy's inauguration. “It has in it something that

I want to linger over for the liberals, see,” he promised. And then added, with a twinkle, one imagines, “I’m not saying I’m not one myself. That was what the war of our Revolution was.”