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ROBERT FROST AND THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

Toward the end of the millennium, our attachment to the land returns, if not exactly according to earlier modes. In literary and philosophic circles, nature writing undergoes a renaissance while explorations of environmental ethics and aesthetics confront both the virus of development and the possibility that nature calendars, featuring say a gorgeous red barn, are examples of “eco-porn.” In the broader population, “ecotourism” brings intense visitation to national parks, which in turn stirs debates about how to keep nature lovers from loving fragile sites to death.

As iconic as the landscape itself, Robert Frost looks bemused in the late photographs, his hair white, his face lined, posed in baggy clothes before a pasture or barn. The poet in his inevitable setting evokes ruggedness, authenticity, and a trace of our origins. However, in a century dominated by avant-garde experimentation, we have also become suspicious of the rural, and Frost has suffered from identification with old fashioned pastoral conventions. “Landscape,” “Nature,” and “Pastoral” have become signifiers with little left to signify, quaint references to past ideals in a world strung on the virtual spaces of the internet.

Consequently, we may rethink our image of Frost as a farmer poet and poet farmer, for which reason I wish to look again at notions attached to the poet and to his privileged neighborhood, the dilapidated farm, before returning to passages from *North of Boston*, the 1914 volume that tied him so closely to rural New England. Paradoxical antitheses exist in past and present responses to Frost, a poet “simple” in his presentation and unfathomable in his indirections. These antitheses not only direct our reading of Frost but delimit our understanding of landscape and of the rural.

To write of nature alone may have seemed *retardaire* enough to the elite circles of early modernism. To present oneself as a farmer was to invite mockery. Even friendly readings of Frost often convey an unacknowledged suspicion toward earlier English and American programs (Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman) binding poetic diction to the common experience of “ordinary” men and women. Within and outside the academy, deep cultural

ambivalence toward the farmer hampered Frost and fed his sense of exclusion, yet it still enabled him in curious ways. As rustic sage and modern skeptic, he could tap our nostalgia for a simple, virtuous country life just as criticism of that life tended to verify his darker readings of its isolation and dreariness.

By his own account, Frost was and was not a farmer. He worked at farming, played at farming, was lazy about farming, but he aimed foremost to be a poet—albeit a poet who had many farms. Sometimes he speaks as a laborer at one with his work, as in “After Apple-Picking.” Elsewhere, as in “Mending Wall,” he seems a relative newcomer unclear on local habits. Occasionally, in “New Hampshire” for example, he announces himself a poet. “Ain’t working the land,” he wrote to John Bartlett in 1913. “Easier to write about it. Think I don’t understand?” But the next year, and to Bartlett again, he reversed his direction: “I won’t make much from poetry—I suppose you know that. . . . It seems to me as I look at it now I had much rather farm than write for money.” As late as 1960, Frost maintained this ambivalence, telling Richard Poirier, “I’m not a farmer,” but adding, “I haven’t led a literary life.”

The “poetical farmer,” according to Thoreau, “does nothing with haste and drudgery, but as if he loved it.” Not only should this figure transcend mere work, he should transcend class issues. As much as Frost participates in this ideal, he also experienced the grueling, low-paying routines of turn-of-the-century farming. His work discloses a rift between the poetical and the unpoetical farmer, between the agrarian ideal and the drudgery, isolation, and lower class status linked to rural life. His reception became caught up in these issues—and in their sentimentalization and debunking.

“Rustic” and “clown” have long been synonymous, and Frost drew on their pairing. “All men were created free and equally funny,” he said in a 1937 talk (“What Became of New England?”). “Before you laugh too much at that, take another look at it. Four hundred years ago the only people who were funny were yokels. . . . Now, today, even kings are funny. We’ve come a long way.” That equality has not quite seeped into Frost criticism, which always seems to condescend to the rural Frost or to wish to discover something else in him. In a *New Yorker* essay, Joseph Brodsky called Frost “the poet of the countryside . . . a folksy, crusty, wisecracking old gentleman farmer. . . . as American as apple pie.” For Derek Walcott, similarly, Frost means an “icon of Yankee values, the smell of wood smoke . . . the reality of farmhouse dung” (*New Republic*, November 27, 1995). William Logan, in “The

other other Frost" (*The New Criterion*, June 1995), provides the something else, calling him "a farmer schizophrenic, half Vermont maple-syrup and half raw granite." Only Seamus Heaney, in that group and in a *Salmagundi* essay of 1990-1991, provides a notable exception. Drawing on his own rural background, Heaney affirms "the inner evidence of Frost's credentials as a farmer poet," and he praises Frost's "grim accuracy" in presenting rural life. Perhaps we can best allow an Irish poet to speak without apology for the countryside and folk traditions. (The essays of Brodsky, Walcott, and Heaney are reprinted with slight revision in *Homage to Robert Frost*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996).

While Brodsky, Walcott, Logan and others intend in part to puncture a "false" image and redeem Frost, they partake of the prejudice they mean to dismiss. While sensing Frost could not be Frost without a provincial New England, their casual stereotypes reflect their absorption of cultural biases that make Frost's participation in rural life suspect. Those stereotypes became especially prominent in the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth—when Frost was working farms, teaching, seeking to be published, and receiving his first reviews—and they mark a shift from support and idealization of farm life as central to the nation to condescension toward a rusticity that increasingly seemed a marginal aberration. This shift in attitude, including an association of the rural with the inevitably backward and degenerate, has been chronicled by Hal Barron (*Those who stayed behind: Rural society in nineteenth-century New England*, Cambridge, 1984), and David Danbom (*The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930*, Iowa State, 1979 and *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, Johns Hopkins, 1995).

Caricatures of rural types had long been present, but they had been overridden by faith in the morality and civic purpose of a life attuned to nature and to the potential of the American land. Of course, the country mouse could mock the city mouse, too, and rural attitudes toward the increasingly dominant urban culture voiced animosity and anxiety. In an 1854 editorial, "Stick to the Farm," which Barron found typical of such attitudes, a defender of rural life hammered on the demeaning corruption of the city:

You, who by birth and education, intended . . . to call no man master, and to be no man's servant, would become at first, the errand boy of the shop, to fetch and carry like a spaniel, then the

salesman . . . to bow and smile and cringe and flatter—to attend upon the wish of every painted and padded form of humanity . . . and finally, to become a trader, a worshipper of mammon . . . and in the end, to fail, and compromise with your creditors and your conscience, and sigh for your native hills.

But most readers did not heed this turn-of-the-century advice, thus the well-known depopulation of New England. Soon the “upright” yeoman became the rube requiring the salvation of urban expertise. According to rural historians, country families were increasingly viewed as sources of “illegitimacy, criminality, insanity, and retardation.” To save the farm population and the country as a whole, urban “experts,” supported by President Theodore Roosevelt, sponsored the “Country Life Movement.” Not much came of the movement, except as it influenced the farmer’s social status: before the twentieth century, as Danbom writes, the “typical person was a farmer. . . . Now farmers had become peculiar. They were objects of concern.”

Wholesome images of farm life still surround us in promotions of regional tourism—red barns, apple orchards, fall leaves, clear ponds and the like. On television, a healthy-looking farm woman/actress in a Grant Wood landscape advocates the synthetic fat, Olean. Reacting against such sentimental commercializations, which go back at least to Currier and Ives, “serious” literature occasionally thrives on the reverse, on rural and backwoods decadence, as in James Dickey’s *Deliverance*, Carolyn Chute’s *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, or Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*.

The related “realism” of Andrew Wyeth’s incredibly popular painting, *Christina’s World*, has a broad appeal precisely because it plays on this mix of latent responses to the rural. The gaunt figure, the browned landscape, and the dilapidated house evoke admiration for Spartan simplicity and perseverance. Such a life in decay, however, is no longer healthy nor part of mainstream aspirations. That crawling, perhaps crippled woman could not sell Olean to aging yuppies. It’s as if looking at thin, dignified Christina, we can indulge in nostalgic admiration while taking comfort in the fact that this road not taken by most of us has come down to images confirming that it does, and in many ways should, belong to an irretrievable past.

Thus Frost can write “Mowing,” “The Code,” or “Two Tramps in Mudtime” and play on our nostalgia for the Yankee yeoman whose avocation and vocation are one. But he can also dramatize “illegitimacy, criminality,

insanity” in “A Servant to Servants,” “The Housekeeper,” “The Witch of Coos,” and others. Respected literary traditions lie behind Frost’s vernacular experiments—the classical eclogue, the philosophic searching of British romanticism, the idealism, practicality, and whimsy of Emerson and Thoreau. There were also precedents for his bleak portrayals of rural life, including Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, which punctures a rural utopia with schemings of romance and power. Its focus though remains on city-bred sophisticates, while the farm folk are stock characters with no insight into the pain of a sensitive and imaginative Zenobia.

On the whole, the mid-nineteenth century set a comforting pastoralism against wariness of the same. John Greenleaf Whittier’s “Snow-Bound, a Winter Idyll” fills up with sympathetic fireside portraits of rustics and guests. Its reception also demonstrates how early such a life seemed a well lost past. Already in 1866, James Russell Lowell lamented that “Snow-Bound” is of historical interest, describing “scenes and manners which the rapid changes of our national habits will soon have made as remote from us as if they were foreign or ancient. Already, alas! even in farm-houses, backlog and forestick are obsolescent words”; but he adds what by now we should expect, that “close mouthed stoves chill the spirit while they bake the flesh with their grim and undemonstrative hospitality.” And he does not volunteer to return.

This heritage of the idealized simple life set against increasing urban condescension toward and even fear of the rustic created a peculiar opportunity for Frost, who found himself a New Englander despite his California childhood. If he wrote endearingly of fetching a calf, an audience was ready to be assured of country goodness. If he wrote bleakly of lonely old men, skittish wives, and dying farm hands, an audience would accept them as confirming the worst of rural isolation.

The backdrop for Frost’s pastoralism—the extent of New England’s “failure” as a farm region—is a matter of debate. There have been and continue to be prosperous farms. It is also easy to see, particularly in the less visited sections of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine, derelict places with ramshackle buildings and pasture reclaimed by forest. While Hal Barron disproves the notion of “extraordinary decline and decay” at the end of the nineteenth century, he acknowledges the extensive out-migration, especially of young men and women, and posits that New England communities became more stable, homogeneous—and stagnant. Poverty and degeneracy may not have been certitudes in the hill country, yet farming there seemed increas-

ingly distant from the professionalism, efficiency, variety, flux, and “progress” that came to define the urban. Remote in literal and figurative ways, the farm became prone to suspicion. As Barron explains, “American culture then, as now, had little tolerance for a situation that did not give at least the illusion of rapid growth and progressive advance.”

A surface reading of *North of Boston*, Frost’s “book of people,” could confirm that decline. The poems include deaths of old and young, abandoned cottages, cellar holes, poor children, bad farmers, all set in what “The Generations of Men” describes as a “rock-strewn town where farming has fallen off.” Frost—again in “What Became of New England?”—resisted that dominant impression, saying *North of Boston* “got praise in a way that cost me some pain. It was described as a book about a decadent and lost society.” He rejected a “distinguished” critic’s contrast of Europe’s “Catholic peasantry,” which “renews itself through the ages,” to New England’s “Puritan peasantry,” which “has dried up and blown away.” But Frost limited his rebuttal to saying, “The first mistake, of course, was the word peasantry.”

In the romantic tradition the poet—insofar as he claims to speak for other men—often allows himself, or is granted by others, a superior sensitivity to landscape. Inspired by solitary reapers and leech-gatherers, “yeomen and peasants,” the poet is distinguished by his articulate genius. As David Bromwich writes of Wordsworth (*A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost*, Harvard, 1989), the “pleasures of landscape will belong to the poet alone, and be felt at the intervals of his self-questioning; to the figure who confronts the poet, on the other hand, landscape hardly exists.” A number of Frost’s poems, however, present rural figures who meet the poet naturally on his own introspective grounds.

In *North of Boston*, Frost drew on several acquaintances, “colorful” characters but also individuals with conflicted responses to their circumstances. These included Carl Burell, who returned to high school (where he met Frost) in his twenties, worked on one of Frost’s farms, and was an amateur botanist whose references included Linnaeus and Darwin; John Hall, whom Lawrance Thompson describes as having “little schooling” but a “picturesque vocabulary,” “ready wit,” and a way with animals; and the French-Canadian farmer, Napoleon Guay. These individuals are known to us largely through Thompson’s biography of Frost. Thompson readily calls them “back-country” people and depends heavily on the poems as evidence of their character.

It is the similar, slow moving local of “The Mountain” who presents the enticing images of a mountain spring and provides a poetics of sort—more on him later. A local minister, alluding to the Civil War and perhaps to Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” contemplates the nature of faith and idealism in “The Black Cottage.” In “The Generations of Men,” two “stranger cousins” flirt and contemplate the mystery of “an old cellar hole” that contains the “origin of all the family.” Their discussion alludes to Homer’s Nausicaä and Shakespeare’s Viola, as well as to the “madness” resulting from inbreeding.

“A Hundred Collars” develops around the uneasiness between the native who left to be transformed into a “great” scholar—a “democrat,/ If not at heart, at least on principle”—and man who stayed, the intimidating half-naked “brute” Lafe. This poem is an extended joke loosely based on the formula that the bumpkin gets the better of the sophisticate, though it moves beyond simplistic reversal. Lafe, who can easily out-talk “Professor Square-the-circle-till-you’re-tired,” realizes that his job as collector for a newspaper appeals to him not because he forces people to pay (he doesn’t), but because he enjoys the scenes of rural life:

What I like best’s the lay of different farms,
Coming out on them from a stretch of woods,
Or over a hill or round a sudden corner.
I like to find folks getting out in spring,
Raking the dooryard, working near the house.

Lafe conveys a conscious appreciation of the rural scene. Other responses are less benign. The bereaved mother of “Home Burial” is haunted by the view of the graveyard, and the overworked wife of “A Servant to Servants” finds dramatic, though insufficient, respite in the view of the lake: “It took my mind off doughnuts and soda biscuit/ To step outdoors and take the water dazzle.”

“The Self-Seeker,” based on a mill accident that happened to Burell, both employs and challenges city-country stereotypes. The speaker, whose injury may leave him crippled, cannot or does not wish to fight the meager settlement offered by the condescending lawyer representing “stockholders in Boston.” His real loss is less his ability to work than to continue his botanical studies and to hunt wild orchids. His sensibility is more refined and complex than that of the lawyer who is a mere factotum of commerce. Frost’s rustics

are more than clichés, as an encounter on a hillside further discloses.

The “Mountain” is a relatively neglected poem. Although Frost’s work may not seem extremely class-conscious, this poem calls those tensions to the surface: the uneasiness between stranger and native, between the well-off and not-so-well-off, between cultivation and wilderness, between imaginative seeing and practical work. At several different levels, it hints at the difficulties of becoming a poet of New England. The poet seems unsure of his alliances as the speaker wavers between allying himself with the quester who would climb the mountain or with the worker who would keep his place at its foot. In this, “The Mountain” touches on a New England that can figure the sublime and lively talk while repressing romantic impulses in the name of practicality and dour habit.

Here Frost does not play the poetical farmer, but an outsider. His position, however, differs from what we find in a Wordsworthian poem. Along with the superiority of imagination that enables him to partake of the landscape’s pleasures, the Wordsworthian observer-poet presumably has a speech, manner, and dress that would distinguish him from the rustics. It is difficult to say whether Frost’s speaker would present a very different appearance from the man he stops: the circumstantial evidence of photographs from the poet’s Derry years suggests not. “The Mountain” illustrates the blurred boundary between native and stranger, and between the ordinary man and the poetic “visionary.”

In “The Mountain” Frost both relies upon and rewrites “highbrow” landscape conventions shared by nineteenth-century poetry and painting: the sublime mountain, the middle ground of human cultivation, the human figures that provide scale and access for the viewer/reader, the concept of the prospect that suggests divine vision, an understanding of nature, and political control. Frost rarely extols the breath-taking vista. Like Robert Burns, who was seldom grand enough for Wordsworth, Frost approaches nature in the small, immediate, present, which under scrutiny leads outward, as in “Design.” “The Mountain” may echo Wordsworth and Shelley distantly, but it disavows grandeur:

The mountain held the town as in a shadow.
I saw so much before I slept there once:
I noticed that I missed stars in the west,
Where its black body cut into the sky.
Near me it seemed: I felt it like a wall

Behind which I was sheltered from a wind.

The scene inspires neither the sublimity of inexplicable forces nor expanded human vision and control. The mountain's power is mostly negative: it "held the town as in a shadow." Though perhaps a protective wall, it is oppressive nevertheless. However, this black mass, whose size and inaccessibility hint at the sublime, reassuringly gives way to a "middle ground" of fertility: "And yet between the town and it I found,/ When I walked forth at dawn to see new things,/ Were fields, a river, and beyond, more fields."

These lines evoke a fertile vista, like that of Thomas Cole's painting, *The Oxbow*, in which one sees "new things" at "dawn," as if happening upon Eden. However, the river, "fallen away" since spring and making "a widespread brawl on cobblestones," had left "Good grassland gullied out, and in the grass/ Ridges of sand, and driftwood stripped of bark." These images could be read as picturesque, depicting the landscape irregular and wild. But they also present a diminished scene, making this middle ground suggestive of New England's agricultural decline and so thwarting Arcadian conventions.

The poet meets a local, a seemingly Wordsworthian figure, "who moved so slow/ With white-faced oxen in a heavy cart," that a tension develops between the traveling/tourist poet and the local farmer, as between the mountain and a cultivated, prosperous land. The farmer, responding to a question, claims

There is no village—only scattered farms.
We were but sixty voters last election.
We can't in nature grow to many more:
That thing takes all the room!

He strikes an independent figure as small town democracy struggles against an older romantic tradition. The limits on human population seem the inevitable result of nature's force. Meanwhile Nature, though the source of power, is hardly aggrandized by the vernacular complaint, "That thing takes all the room!" The following line exposes the act of seeing a place as a landscape. The mountain seems created "to be pointed at," yet that "fact" raises questions about why we look at such a scene and what we look for. More specific to this situation, what do a native and a traveler, who are not Romantic tourists or bards, make of a mountain which seems to invite response and

attention even as its inhuman mass frustrates them?

The unknown invites exploration, even from such “ordinary” folk as these two. The traveler inquires about climbing the mountain and imagines a god-like prospect of possession and knowledge, followed quickly by practical doubts:

There ought to be a view around the world
From such a mountain—if it isn’t wooded
Clear to the top.

Such a hope may recall transcendentalist statements that the poet’s eye, more than the deeded farmer’s, possesses the landscape. As Thoreau writes in *Walden*, “I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only.” Frost denies this attitude in several ways. No one here becomes “monarch” of all he surveys. And yet, while neither figure “owns” the mountain, this “crusty” farmer seems quite able to imagine the view:

I’ve been on the sides,
Deer-hunting and trout-fishing. There’s a brook
That starts up on it somewhere—I’ve heard say
Right on the top, tip-top—a curious thing.
But what would interest you about the brook,
It’s always cold in summer, warm in winter.
One of the great sights going is to see
It steam in winter like an ox’s breath,
Until the bushes all along its banks
Are inch-deep with the frosty spines and bristles—
You know the kind. Then let the sun shine on it!

Early responses found the farmer’s admission that he has never climbed the mountain to be convincing evidence of his limitations. But in a 1971 essay, Laurence Perrine denies that the “clod” farmer represents “the whole terrible inertia which has settled upon these people dwelling among the unyielding hills.” Perrine emphasizes instead the “poetry” of the farmer’s expressions. The tendency to simplify the farmer, though, reflects long-standing attitudes about rural doltishness and assumes that those tensions define the relationship of the two men.

The poet's questions lead to the local man's admission that he does not know the view from the top, but he knows the "fact" of the spring: "Right on the summit, almost like a fountain/ That ought to be worth seeing." And why would it be worth seeing? Why would we seek out "one of the great sights going"—for fun, for a challenge, for enlightenment? How do social roles affect that seeking? This spring suggests a myth of origins, and the brook it engenders "transcends" the natural order to become a wonder and aesthetic pleasure, as the guide's colloquial manner crosses over into the marvelous with lines that anticipate the ice-storm in "Birches."

The farmer also shows himself capable of a simile: the mountain sends a "dry ravine" into the pasture and makes the few houses near it appear "Like boulders broken off the upper cliff,/ Rolled out a little farther than the rest." His image reinforces the superior strength of the mountain, but it also blurs the distinction between the two men by making evident his own companionably poetic powers.

The farmer remains secure in his faith that the spring, which he has never seen, is "Right on the summit, almost like a fountain," but less secure of his right to climb the mountain. He tells of a hiker who "never got up high enough to see" and in a self-mocking or regretful tone explains the oddity of attempting the ascent himself:

It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain
You've worked around the foot of all your life.
What would I do? Go in my overalls,
With a big stick, the same as when the cows
Haven't come down to the bars at milking time?
Or with a shotgun for a stray black bear?
'Twouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it.

Nature as a mystic emblem of poetic or imperial power seems contrary to the rural work of the character who, despite his vivid descriptions, cannot imagine himself climbing without a purposeful tool or weapon. Though the rustic seems privileged with a "natural" appreciation and knowledge, the passage suggests class differences more easily accepted in British art. The moral and aesthetic landscape is for upper classes, who have the leisure, money, and acquired sensibility for proper appreciation. The farmer cannot forget his chores to repossess the land as the Poet. He cannot change the meaning of the

landscape that he will continue to work on; he cannot cross the middle-ground to reach the wilderness. Like the neighbor in “Mending Wall,” this farmer will take his freedom and self-awareness only so far—he will tease but not upset the accustomed ways.

The traveler, however, is reluctant to assert himself either as superior in class or inferior in practicality, and so becomes caught between his quest for experience and his wish to blur the difference between himself and the local. “I shouldn’t climb it if I didn’t want to—/ Not for the sake of climbing,” he says. Though he may have thought to possess the mountain in a Thoreauvian sense, he discovers he cannot get any closer.

The tone lightens as the poem ends, teasing us with just how we should take the mountain and its stream. “Warm in December, cold in June?” the traveler asks. And the local replies,

I don’t suppose the water’s changed at all.
You and I know enough to know it’s warm
Compared with cold, and cold compared with warm.
But all the fun’s in how you say a thing.

That last line is frequently quoted out of context as characterizing Frost’s poetics. But the words belong to the farmer, a rustic too limited to climb the mountain, yet capable of imagining its sights and to find in them both similes and chiasmas (“warm/ Compared with cold, and cold compared with warm”). Unlike Wordsworth’s rustics, he talks humorously, familiarly, and “equally” with the visitor, another hill dweller who finds time for a long walk. The farmer’s “You and I know” anticipates Frost’s invitations to his audience, supposedly on his level, in poems such as “The Pasture” and “Birches.” Drawn from John Hall, this character implies that Frost learned to be a poet from “below,” picking up dialect and its suggestions of play from the tongues of neighbors.

This line from Frost’s second book poses several questions. What kind of poet has he learned to be? Will he be a postcard poet clever at the dialect of an increasingly sentimentalized region, or will the sounds he catches convey some abiding “sense”? Does Frost leave his readers as frustrated as this guide leaves the traveler? Have the speaker and audience learned to see and hear of the sublime (and its absence), or only to dismiss it in wordplay that gets nowhere? How we view the farmer and Frost’s poetic endeavor depends in

part on our attitudes toward the rural. “The Mountain” illustrates, as does most of *North of Boston*, how working out a new poetic language includes testing relationships among the poet, the people who provide his subject matter, and his readers.

Frost surely realized as much. In a 1915 letter to William Braithwaite, he somewhat ashamedly traces his evolution from a “fugitive” from the world to a member of a rural community:

It would seem absurd to say it (and you musn’t* quote me as saying it) but I suppose the fact is that my conscious interest in people was at first no more than an almost technical interest in their speech—in what I used to call their sentence sounds—the sound of sense. . . .

There came a day about ten years ago when I made the discovery that though sequestered I wasn’t living without reference to other people. Right on top of that I made the discovery in doing *The Death of the Hired Man* that I was interested in neighbors for more than merely their tones of speech—and always had been.

By now “the sound of sense” has a long history as a key to Frost’s poetics. His own “voice,” especially for those who remember it in performance, has at times overwhelmed awareness of its dependence on others. As he wrote in 1915, “All I care a cent for is to catch sentence tones that havent been brought to book. I dont say to make them, mind you, but to catch them.” His inscription three years later in a copy of *North of Boston* reasserted the value of “catching”: “I am as sure that the colloquial is the root of every good poem as I am that the national is the root of all thought and art. . . . One half of individuality is locality: and I was about venturing to say the other half was colloquiality.”

Frost’s portrayal of New Englanders often tests the boundaries between caricature, sentimentality, deviant obsession, and authenticity. “The Mountain” integrates these matters with ideas of landscape. The poem refigures the

* Frost’s spelling and punctuation can be most casual.

unprofitable New England landscape as a moralized scene of limits, which “transcends”—but not completely—social arrangements written upon it. The poet works to “catch” the sounds of others in a way that credits the rural with indications of the sublime without ever denying its compelling social strictures.

Representations of the land can throw us back into “country stores” reeking of potpourri and wax candles, or they can return us to a history that speaks in a range of voices, high and low, meditative and comic, revealing that the natural and social worlds are more intertwined than we tend to admit. Frost embodies this range. Though his weaker poems offer smug rejections of innovation and urban life, a reactionary stance that would shame Thoreau, his better ones speak from a conservatism that renews a bond with place and challenges what we have become.

Among other things, we’ve become a bit envious of the rustic. Now we have “agritainment” (*The New York Times*, November 2, 1997): people visiting farms to go through corn mazes, pick fruit, and eat homemade pie, in search, I suppose, of authenticity. (I doubt this will extend to hog confinement sites, a current Midwest concern, where owners live at a distance, leaving the “aura” and waste of thousands of hogs for the locals to enjoy.) Agritainment farmers miss their privacy, but as one admitted, “It’s more profitable than growing crops for wholesale.”

Frost might understand, but, I hope, resist such surrender. “I never gave up willingly any love I’ve had,” Frost claimed; “I don’t give up New England too easily. I don’t give up these words that I’ve cared for, these phrases; I long to renew them.” “The thing New England gave most to America was the thing I am talking about: a stubborn clinging to meaning.” Our postmodern sensibility often leaves us jaded, mistrustful of, if not indifferent to, meaning. Amidst rising pollution and our knowing rural-life-as-theme-park, we must reimagine our many sided relation to nature. But it has become harder to hear all sides of the conversation when only two to three percent of Americans farm. A sympathetic reading of Frost, though, won’t permit us to quite give up on that either. More than ever we need Frost’s history, his ironic imagination, and complex sympathy for rural people and places. Given that, now and then at least, “pastoral,” “landscape,” and “nature” may resonate once more.