

Lecture 2 Robert Frost

You mustn't take me too seriously if I now proceed to brag a bit about my exploits as a poet. There is one qualifying fact always to bear in mind: there is a kind of success called "of esteem" and it butters no parsnips. It means a success with the critical few who are supposed to know. But really to arrive where I can stand on my legs as a poet and nothing else I must get outside that circle to the general reader who buys books in their thousands. I may not be able to do that. I believe in doing it—don't you doubt me there. I want to be a poet for all sorts and kinds. I could never make a merit of being caviare to the crowd the way my quasi-friend Pound does. I want to reach out, and would if it were a thing I could do by taking thought.--Frost to John Bartlett, November 1913

Robert Frost has, let us admit, done a book of New England eclogues. . . . Still, a set of provincial studies, local, a bit dull, is a very different thing from poetry which accepts the tone and difficulties of contemporary civilization.--Ezra Pound to John Gould Fletcher (American poet), June 1920

I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense. Now it is possible to have sense without the sound of sense (as in much prose that is supposed to pass muster but makes very dull reading) and the sound of sense without sense (as in *Alice in Wonderland* which makes anything but dull reading). The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words. . . .

. . . The sound of sense, then. You get that. It is the abstract vitality of our speech. It is pure sound--pure form. One who concerns himself with it more than the subject is an artist. But remember we are still talking merely of the raw material of poetry. An ear and an appetite for these sounds of sense is the first qualification of a writer, be it of prose or verse. But if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre. Verse in which there is nothing but the beat of the metre furnished by the accents of the polysyllabic words we call doggerel. Verse is not that. Neither is it the sound of sense alone. It is the resultant from those two. There are only two or three metres that are worth anything. We depend for variety on the infinite play of accents in the sound of sense.--Frost to John Bartlett, July 1913

My versification seems to bother people more than I should have expected--I suppose because I have been so long accustomed to thinking of it in my own private way. It is as simple as this: there are the very regular pre-established accent and measure of blank verse; and there are the very irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation. I am never more pleased than when I can get these into strained relation. I like to drag and break the intonation across the meter as waves first comb and then break stumbling on

the shingle. That's all but it's no mere figure of speech though one can make figures enough about it.--Frost to John Cournos, July 1914

Modern Poetry, Image List, Lecture 2

To review the images discussed in lecture today, go to English 310a, Modern Poetry, on the classes server, and look under "materials" for a Power Point file named "FrostImages." The list that follows describes the images and their sources in the sequence presented in lecture.

---"Robert Frost: American Bard," John Ciardi, *Saturday Review* (March 24, 1962) [In Glenway Wescott's notebook, "Robert Frost, Culture Hero," Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke]

---Copy of oil portrait of Robert Frost by Gardner Cox [Wescott Papers, YCAL, Beinecke]

---"President Hails Bond with Frost: On TV He Extols Poet, Who Calls New Frontier 'Age of Poetry and Power," McCandlish Phillips, *New York Times*, February 27, 1961 [Wescott Papers, YCAL, Beinecke]

---Photos of Frost with children and with cows; "Robert Frost: American Bard," John Ciardi, *Saturday Review* (March 24, 1962) [Wescott Papers, YCAL, Beinecke]

---Photo of Frost with a stick, c. 1960 [Wescott Papers, YCAL, Beinecke]

---"Summer Farm Scene," oil painting by George Durrie c. 1860; Shelburne Museum, Shelburne MA

---"The City of Ambition," photo by Alfred Stieglitz, 1910 [YCAL, Beinecke]

---"Summer Showers," oil painting by Martin Johnson Heade c. 1870 [Brooklyn Museum]

---Brooklyn Bridge by Walker Evans, 1929 [source: Evans, *The Hungry Eye*]

---Robert Frost at 18, 1892 [source: Parini, *Robert Frost*]

---Robert Frost, *A Boy's Will* (London: D. Nutt, 1913); front cover [YCAL, Beinecke]

---Robert Frost, *A Boy's Will* (London: D. Nutt, 1913); table of contents [YCAL, Beinecke]

---Robert Frost at 39 in London, 1913 [source: Parini, *Robert Frost*]

---Robert Frost, *North of Boston* (London: D. Nutt, 1915); front cover and title page [YCAL, Beinecke]

---T. S. Eliot, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (London: The Egoist, 1917); title page and table of contents [YCAL, Beinecke]

---Robert Frost, *North of Boston* (London: D. Nutt, 1915); table of contents [YCAL]