

The Cambridge Introduction to
**Twentieth-Century
American Poetry**

CHRISTOPHER BEACH



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Christopher Beach, 2003

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typefaces Bembo 11/12.5 pt., Plantin, Univers *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Beach, Christopher.

The Cambridge introduction to twentieth-century American poetry / by Christopher Beach.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 81469 3 (hardback) – ISBN 0 521 89149 3 (paperback)

I. Title.

PS323.5.B387 2003

811'.509 – dc21 2003043580

ISBN 0 521 81469 3 hardback

ISBN 0 521 89149 3 paperback

Contents

Introduction	<i>page</i> 1	
1	A new century: from the genteel poets to Robinson and Frost	7
2	Modernist expatriates: Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot	23
3	Lyric modernism: Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane	49
4	Gendered modernism	72
5	William Carlos Williams and the modernist American scene	93
6	From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts movement	114
7	The New Criticism and poetic formalism	137
8	The confessional moment	154
9	Lyric as meditation	173
10	The New American Poetry and the postmodern avant-garde	189
	Notes	210
	Glossary	215
	Index	217

Chapter 1

A new century: from the genteel poets to Robinson and Frost

With the deaths of both Walt Whitman and John Greenleaf Whittier in 1892, an era in American poetry came to a close. Practically the entire generation which had defined American poetry in the latter half of the nineteenth century was now gone, such grey eminences as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James Russell Lowell having passed away in the preceding decade. Yet if the major American poets of the nineteenth century had departed, the first important generation of twentieth-century poets was still far from its maturity. Edwin Arlington Robinson was an undergraduate student at Harvard, four years away from publishing his first book of verse; Robert Frost was two years away from his first published poem and over two decades from his first volume; and Wallace Stevens was a thirteen-year-old schoolboy, three decades from the publication of his first book.

The years from 1880 to 1910 were something of a dark age for American poetry. During a time when the novels of Mark Twain, Henry James, William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, and Edith Wharton established the undeniable importance of American fiction, poetry was pushed to the margins of the literary world. Not able to compete with novelists in terms of popularity, and not willing to risk moving beyond the familiar models of nineteenth-century verse, poets settled for an uncontroversial mediocrity of idea, form, and rhetoric. As Ezra Pound later put it in his harshly critical appraisal of the era, it was a time of “pseudo-artists” working under a stultifying system of control by the major publishers. Indeed, under the editorial reign of the large-circulation magazines that published poetry – such as *Harper's*, *The Century*, and *The Atlantic* – the prevailing poetic style progressed little between the 1870s and the early 1910s. There was no room in America for a poet who sought to become, in Pound's terms, a “serious artist.”

In order to embark on a modern poetic career, poets like Frost, Pound and T. S. Eliot would be obliged to go abroad. To a great extent, as David Perkins has suggested, it was still London and not New York or Boston that served as the cultural capital of the United States: it was the poems of the London avant-garde and not those of the American magazines that “commanded

the attention of American literary undergraduates.”¹ Still more provocative for young Americans was the literature of France, including the fiction of Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola, the essays of Théophile Gautier, and the poems of Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé.

However, the number of American poets of the period who looked to the contemporary literature of London or Paris for inspiration was still relatively small. On the whole, younger poets embraced the dominant poetic mode of the American “genteel tradition.” The genteel poets – whom E. A. Robinson called the “little sonnet men” and Whitman derided as the “tea-pot poets” – wrote sonnets, odes, and dramatic monologues in imitation of English Victorian poetry, expressing what Pound would characterize as “nice domestic sentiments inoffensively versified.” According to Henry Adams – one of the more astute cultural commentators of his day – poetry had become so artificial and removed from social reality that it no longer served as a “natural expression of society itself.”² Instead, poetry now functioned both as a refuge from contemporary society – with its growing cities, massive immigration, capitalist greed, and political corruption – and as a reaction against the realist and naturalist fiction that attempted to depict that society.

The most prominent of the genteel poets were those of the so-called “Harvard School,” which included George Santayana, William Vaughan Moody, Trumbull Stickney, and George Cabot Lodge. The Harvard poets were an extremely cultivated and erudite group: Santayana was a Harvard professor and one of the most prominent American philosophers of his day; Moody taught literature at both Harvard and the University of Chicago; Stickney was the first American ever to earn a doctorate in letters from the Sorbonne in Paris; Lodge, the son of the prominent United States senator Henry Cabot Lodge, studied Schopenhauer in Berlin as well as classics and Romance languages in Paris. Cultivated as they were, however, these poets displayed little true originality; they were, as Larzer Ziff suggests, a school of poets “held in suspension,” still tied to past models and unable to articulate a viable American poetics for the next century.³ Though they were skilled versifiers, the Harvard poets had nothing new to say: as a result, their poems quickly fell into a relative obscurity.

The Harvard poets were dedicated to what they considered a “balanced” attitude in art and literature and to an avoidance of all extremes. While they respected Whitman, they did not attempt to imitate the power of his style. Instead, they emulated the dominant style of Victorian poetry: earnest, traditional, elegiac, formally crafted, and often highly sentimental. Santayana’s most famous poem, the sonnet “O World, thou chooseth not the better part” (1894) concludes with the following lines:

Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine
 That lights the pathway but one step ahead
 Across a void of mystery and dread.
 Bid, then, the tender light of faith to shine
 By which alone the mortal heart is led
 Unto the thinking of the thought divine.

The metaphor of human or worldly knowledge as a smoky torch unable to light the way through life is quite effective, but the overall power of the image is weakened by the sentimental language and the artificial syntax of the subsequent lines. Constructions such as “void of mystery and dread,” “the tender light of faith,” and “the thinking of the thought divine” express what were relatively hackneyed ideas by the end of the nineteenth century.

Edwin Arlington Robinson

Robinson was born in 1869, making him the oldest of the American poets who successfully made the transition into the twentieth century. Robinson’s poetry was, as the poet Louise Bogan later observed in an essay entitled “Tilbury Town and Beyond” (1931), “one of the hinges upon which American poetry was able to turn from the sentimentality of the nineties toward modern veracity and psychological truth.” Robinson’s poetic output was considerable, and not all of it was of the highest quality, but his best poems are masterpieces of concision and rhetoric. Though he is often ignored in discussions of modern American poetry, Robinson was certainly America’s most important poet during the period from the 1890s until the mid-1910s.

Robinson grew up in Gardiner, Maine, which became the model for “Tilbury Town,” the fictional setting of many of his poems. Though he spent two years at Harvard University in the early 1890s, Robinson never became part of the Harvard School of poets. Instead, he returned to Gardiner after the death of his father and began to write the poems that would eventually be published in *The Torrent and the Night Before* (1896) and *The Children of the Night* (1897). Robinson had a difficult, lonely, and depressing life, which surely contributed to the underlying pessimism of his poetry. A keenly sensitive individual (born “with my skin inside out,” as he liked to say), Robinson experienced neither love nor marriage. He suffered from chronic mastoiditis, a painful malady that ultimately left him deaf in one ear. Further, his family was highly dysfunctional: his father died bankrupt, leaving him in desperate financial straits and obliging him to take a series of demeaning jobs; one of his brothers was addicted to morphine and another

to alcohol. Robinson's own road to poetic success was a long and hard one, and it was not until his poems were discovered by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905 that he began to be recognized as an important poet. The townspeople of Gardiner on whom his poems are based appear to have suffered from many of the same problems as Robinson himself: suicide, alcoholism, tragic loneliness, and a general sense of failure and unfulfilled promise.

While he was an admirer of Wordsworth, Robinson was by no means a nature poet. Commenting on the hackneyed natural imagery of most contemporary verse, he wrote to a friend in 1896 that his first volume contained "very little tinkling water, and . . . not a red-bellied robin in the whole collection." Instead, Robinson was interested in the personal histories of the people he encountered, and in using these portraits to reflect the hypocrisy and spiritual void of his times. In Robinson's most famous poem, "Richard Cory" (1897), we find one of his characteristically ironic portrayals. A paragon of material success, admired and envied by the townspeople, Cory went home one "one calm summer night" and "put a bullet through his head." The ironies here are verbal as well as dramatic: the language used to describe the town's adulation of its first citizen ("imperial slim" and "admirably schooled in every grace") is undercut by the sudden and unadorned description of Cory's suicide.

Robinson established his career with his next three volumes: *Captain Craig* (1902), *The Town Down the River* (1910), and *The Man Against the Sky* (1916). While he was also skilled at longer narrative poems in blank verse, such as "Isaac and Archibald" (1902), Robinson's fame rests on his shorter, metrically formal lyrics. A poem like "Miniver Cheevy" (1910) uses both its metrical form and allusions to classical, medieval, and renaissance life for highly ironic effect, anticipating the ironic use of stanzaic form by modernists like Pound and Eliot. The poem's first stanza introduces the subject of the portrait in brilliantly understated fashion:

Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,
 Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;
 He wept that he was ever born,
 And he had reasons.

The final line of the stanza, with its anticlimactic five beat rhythm and its deflatingly colloquial turn of phrase, presents an ironic contrast to the exaggeratedly dramatic presentation of Cheevy in the first three lines. After the somewhat enigmatic first line (what exactly is a "child of scorn"?) and the hyperbolic diction of the second ("assailed the seasons") we find the melodramatic cliché of "He wept that he was ever born" (a line that may also

reflect the reality of Robinson's own worldview). Robinson also uses sound very effectively here, repeating certain vowels as a means of further diminishing the self-importance of Cheevy. The "ee" sound, repeated through "Cheevy," "lean," "he," "seasons," "he," "he," and "reasons," emphasizes the narrow and somewhat pitiful circumstances of Cheevy's life.

The poem's ending, however, catches the reader by surprise with a final note of grim authenticity:

Miniver Cheevy, born too late,
Scratched his head and kept on thinking,
Miniver coughed, and called it fate,
And kept on drinking.

Here the final line is used with devastating skill to complete the portrait of Cheevy, who is not only a dreamer but an alcoholic. The rhyme of "thinking" and "drinking" – again playing with the thin vowel sounds of Miniver's name – encapsulates the difference between what Cheevy is and what he would like to be.

"Eros Turannos" (1913) is another quintessential Robinson poem. Its title, meaning "The Tyrant Love," refers to the situation of a woman in an unhappy marriage from which she cannot escape.

She fears him, and will always ask
What fated her to choose him;
She meets in his engaging mask
All reasons to refuse him;
But what she meets and what she fears
Are less than are the downward years,
Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs
Of age, were she to lose him.

"Eros Turannos" is Robinson's most important poem, and one of the greatest American lyrics of the first two decades of the century. Like "Miniver Cheevy," the poem presents a protagonist who is a failure and who lives in isolation from the community as a whole; but here the portrait is sympathetic rather than ironic. While the poem's speaker is still distanced from his subject, the woman is memorialized and universalized (she is never given a name in the poem) rather than ironized or satirized.

In the first stanza we find the basic portrait of the wife, a genteel and sensitive woman now advancing in years, who may have been based on the wife of Robinson's brother. The wife is torn in a tragic dilemma between two fears: that of her husband and that of her old age "were she to lose him." The last two lines of the stanza introduce the image of "foamless weirs of age"; with this metaphor comparing the inevitable entry into a lonely old

age to a slow drifting into a weir (a kind of fence placed across a river to catch fish), Robinson widens his scope to include the symbolic aspect of the situation. The figurative language, rhymes, and stanzaic structure all work to memorialize the figure of the woman. The initial rhyme of “ask” and “mask” presents the theme of communication denied, and the heavy rhyme of “fears,” “years,” and “weirs” emphasizes the sadness and isolation of the protagonist.

Each stanza functions somewhat like a chapter in a short novel or a scene in a tragic drama. In the second stanza we learn two further reasons for the woman’s acceptance of the situation: her pride (she refuses to discuss her situation with the townspeople) and the fact that love blurs the perception of her husband’s weaknesses. The third stanza moves to the perspective of the complacent husband, who is so enveloped by “a sense of ocean and old trees” and by “tradition” (perhaps the New England tradition of a cold and passionless marriage) that he fails to take note of his wife’s suffering. In the powerful fourth stanza, Robinson again uses natural images to capture the psychological state of the woman:

The falling leaf inaugurates
 The reign of her confusion.
 The pounding wave reverberates
 The dirge of her illusion;
 And home, where passion lived and died,
 Becomes a place where she can hide,
 While all the town and harbor side
 Vibrate with her seclusion.

While the husband is reassured by the trees and ocean that encircle their private lives, the wife sees the “falling leaves” as indicating the inexorable passage of time and hears the ocean waves only as a “dirge.” The elevated language of the stanza – relying heavily on latinized diction – sets off the moving simplicity of the fifth and sixth lines, “And home, where passion lived and died / Becomes a place where she can hide.”

In the final two stanzas, the poem moves outside the home to include the townspeople, who act as a kind of Greek chorus to comment on the situation. The “we” of stanza V suggests the pressure of the public world on the private self, as the town tries to understand the woman’s predicament:

We tell you, tapping on our brows,
 The story as it should be, –
 As if the story of a house
 Were told, or ever could be;

Neither the townspeople nor the poet can tell the “real” story of a house and its inhabitants; they can only tell a fictional version of it, “the story as

it should be.” The poem ends with a series of similes comparing the state of marriage to various natural images. Only in the final comparison does Robinson express his pessimistic vision of marital love:

Though like waves breaking it may be
Or like a changed familiar tree,
Or like a stairway to the sea
Where down the blind are driven.

Robinson’s language remains old-fashioned in comparison with that of Frost or Stevens, and the syntax of his lines lacks the natural fluidity of Frost’s best writing, yet there is a rare power in these lines. In the first line, a spondee in the second foot interrupts the iambic beat of the meter, imitating a wave breaking on the coast; in the final line, the inverted syntax works to enhance the image of being driven blindly down a stairway to the rough sea.

Robert Frost

If Robinson brought American poetry into the twentieth century, it was his fellow New Englander Robert Frost who would make the decisive break from the inflated style of Victorian and genteel poetry. Where Robinson’s poems remain highly “literary” in their diction and syntax, Frost adopts the idiosyncratic, colloquial, and locally inflected voice of the New England farmer. Where Robinson made brilliant use of sound and meter to emphasize the meanings of his poems, Frost articulated a more theoretical formulation of the connection between sound and meaning.

In his most famous critical formulation, Frost advocated what he called the “sound of sense,” by which he meant that poetry should communicate through its sound even before we grasp its semantic meaning. He wrote to his friend John Bartlett in 1913 that the best way to hear the sound of sense is to listen to “voices behind a door that cut off the words.” If a poet can succeed in capturing this “abstract vitality of speech,” the specific denotation of the words is less important than the way the language moves to the “mind’s ear.”

Frost also applied the “sound of sense” to the use of poetic meter. For Frost, the poetry in a line comes not from fitting words into the preexisting metrical structure, but from “skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the meter.” In this way, the poem can be made to sound natural (or at least as natural as any transcription of actual speech) at the same time that it achieves the heightened musical quality of lyric. Frost’s theory allowed him to introduce a rural New England dialect that had never been used in poetry before,

and it made possible the use of flexible rhythms within a regular metrical structure.

Like Robinson, Frost had a difficult early life. He was born in San Francisco in 1874, but his impulsive and alcoholic father died in 1885 at the age of thirty-four and the family moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts. Frost entered Dartmouth College in 1892 but dropped out after one semester; five years later he was able to enter Harvard as a special student, but once again withdrew before completing his education. On the advice of his doctor, Frost bought a farm in Derry, New Hampshire, hoping the country air would benefit his health. But providing for himself and his growing family as a chicken farmer (supplemented by a small bequest from his grandfather) was a constant struggle. As a result of the constant shortage of money and the isolation of rural life, Frost at times contemplated suicide. Frost spent eleven years in Derry, engaging in many of the activities described in his poems: mowing fields, mending walls, hiking, blueberrying, and cutting wood. The authenticity of this outdoor experience was itself to make him a very different poet from his more “genteel” contemporaries. He rejected the insipid romanticism of most American verse of the time, and he set out to write a poetry more grounded in the reality of rural life and the immediacy of its spoken language. As a result of Frost’s unconventional approach, his poetry was not easily accepted in his own country. By the age of thirty-eight, he had yet to publish a book of his verse and had succeeded in placing only a few of his poems in magazines. Frost decided to move to England, where he felt his poetry might find greater acceptance.

With the help of Ezra Pound, already part of the English literary scene, Frost was able to gain access to London literary circles and place *A Boy’s Will* with an English press: it was published in London in 1913. *North of Boston* appeared the following year, and when Frost returned to America in 1915 he arranged for the book’s American publication. Frost’s third volume, *Mountain Interval*, came out in 1916, firmly establishing him as one of the foremost American poets of his generation.

Though Frost went on to publish many more books of poetry and remained one of America’s most widely read and admired poets until his death in 1963, this chapter will focus on the poems of the first three volumes. It was during the brief moment from 1913 to 1916 – before the emergence of a full-blown modernist movement – that Frost’s most significant impact on American poetry was to be felt.

Frost’s relationship to the modernist movement in American poetry was a rather distant one: his friendship with Pound lasted only a few weeks and he hardly knew Eliot or Williams. Frost ridiculed the route of modernist experimentation followed by Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Cummings, preferring to adhere to more traditional forms of poetry. During his stay in England,

Frost explicitly rejected the tenets of Imagism, the movement often seen as the inaugural phase of Anglo-American literary modernism. Though both Pound and F. S. Flint, another of the leaders of the Imagist movement, responded enthusiastically to *A Boy's Will* when it appeared in April 1913, and Pound encouraged Frost to write his next book in free verse, Frost decided by the summer of 1914 that he was most interested in cultivating “the hearing imagination” rather than “the kind that merely sees things.” Frost’s characterization of Imagism as concerned exclusively with the visual was clearly an oversimplification – given the fact that Pound’s Imagist tenets included prescriptions for the use of sound and rhythm as well as the treatment of the visual object – but it allowed Frost to distance himself from what was happening in the poetic avant-garde and thus to formulate his own poetic theories.

Frost’s poetry differed from that of the modernists in several respects: in its adherence to a traditional formalism (as opposed to the formal dislocations and direct challenges to conventional forms found in much modernist writing); in the ordinariness and rustic simplicity of its subject matter; in its resolutely narrative quality; and in its lack of what modernists like Eliot, Stevens, or Crane might consider the transformative power of the poetic imagination. Stevens, for example, denigrated Frost for writing poems about “things,” suggesting that Frost’s poems remained too closely attached to a description of the real world as we perceive it rather than attempting to transform or transcend our everyday experience of that world.

The chief hallmark of Frost’s style, particularly in the early volumes, is its simplicity. Frost tends to use a plain and idiomatic language marked by a lack of multisyllable words, a relative avoidance of formal or literary diction, and a generally straightforward syntax. Words of Latinate or Romance origin, which generally indicate a formality, abstractness or ornateness of diction, are relatively uncommon in Frost’s poems. Frost also uses a highly colloquial style, avoiding words that would seem unusual or unnatural in actual speech and attempting instead to duplicate the rhythm and syntax of speech. Frost claimed the simplicity of his language as one of the great virtues of his poetry, boasting that he had “dropped to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above.” If we look at the word choice in a poem like “Mending Wall” (1914), one of Frost’s most famous lyrics, we see what he means by an “everyday level of diction.”

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hungers is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair

Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
 But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
 To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
 No one has seen them made or heard them made,
 But at spring mending-time we find them there.
 I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
 And on a day we meet to walk the line
 And set the wall between us once again.
 We keep the wall between us as we go.
 To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
 And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
 We have to use a spell to make them balance:
 "Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
 We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
 Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
 One on a side. It comes to little more:
 There where it is we do not need the wall:
 He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
 My apple trees will never get across
 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him,
 He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
 If I could put a notion into his head:
 "Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
 Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,
 And to whom I was like to give offense.
 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
 But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
 He said it for himself. I see him there
 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
 He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
 Not of woods only and the shade or trees.
 He will not go behind his father's saying,
 And he likes having thought of it so well
 He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

The poem is filled with concrete descriptive words that provide a simple and easily comprehensible picture of the scene being presented: wall, ground, boulders, gaps, hunters, stone, dogs, spring, neighbor, hill, line, cones, pines, loaves, balls, fingers, game, fences, apple, orchard, trees, cows, elves, woods, shade. None of these nouns presents any difficulty for the reader; none requires the use of a dictionary or presents a challenging

ambiguity of meaning. On the level of word length, we find a striking preponderance of monosyllabic words and a total absence of words of more than two syllables. A line composed entirely of monosyllables such as line 7 – “Where they have left not one stone on a stone” – would have been considered ungraceful, perhaps even unpoetic, by the accepted literary standards of the day, but it sounds fresher to our ears today than many of the overburdened lines of Tennyson or Swinburne.

Furthermore, there is an unusual amount of repetition of the words and phrases Frost uses: “wall” occurs no less than six times (not including the participle “walling”); “stone” occurs four times; “neighbor(s)” is used three times; and “gaps,” “spring,” “boulders,” “fences,” “trees,” “apple,” “pine,” “cows,” and “elves” twice each. The opening line, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” is repeated, as is the phrase “Good fences make good neighbors.” Clearly, the effect of repetition is important to the theme of the poem (the idea of doubling, dividing, or opposition symbolized by the wall) but the repetition also serves to emphasize the simplicity and clarity of Frost’s vocabulary, a vocabulary that seems extremely limited in comparison with that of poets like Stevens, Pound, Eliot, or Crane. The simple language of the poem is established from the very first line: as Marie Borroff suggests, rewriting the line as “There exists an antipathy toward barriers” would create an entirely different expectation for the language and tone of the poem.⁴

Frost’s use of syntax also contributes to this feeling of simplicity and colloquialism. In the opening line, the use of the contraction “doesn’t” introduces a colloquial style that is in marked contrast to the self-consciously poetic style of most post-Victorian poetry; Frost’s use of contractions continues in phrases such as “Isn’t it where there are cows?” “I’d ask to know,” and “it’s not elves exactly.” This colloquial, conversational style is typified by the fifth line, “The work of hunters is another thing.” Here we have a feeling of a speaker addressing the reader directly and sharing his thoughts, rather than a poet trying to elevate his language to the most refined level. The reader is pulled into the poem and made to feel comfortable in a way not possible with the poems of Santayana and the other “genteel” poets. This impression is heightened at moments when Frost appears to interrupt the flow of his own thoughts and clarify something he has previously said, much as one might do in actual speech. “The gaps I mean,” at the end of line 9, pulls us gently back from the digression about hunters and returns us to the main thread of the poem, at the same time reminding us that someone is speaking. The predominance of sentences constructed around simple connectives (“and” and “but”) also suggests the presence of an actual speaker rather than a more distanced and controlling authorial voice. Eight of the

poem's lines begin with "And" and another three begin with "But," giving the impression of a speaker spontaneously working through his thoughts and establishing connections even as he speaks the poem. The alternation of simple declarative sentences that fit cleanly within the line and sentences that are made to spill over several lines not only keeps the poem's syntax relatively simple, but it also makes the poem more rhythmically interesting. On a thematic level, this alternation also reenacts the fate of the wall itself, which is built and rebuilt only to be toppled over by hunters or the forces of nature.

Despite all of these examples of colloquialism and apparent simplicity in Frost's poetry, we should not be deceived into thinking of Frost as a rustic or a primitive. On the contrary, Frost was a sophisticated writer who was well versed in Latin poetry and who knew as well as any poet of his time how to make effective use of formal and rhetorical strategies. From his early career on, Frost prided himself on being "one of the most notable craftsmen of my time," as he wrote in his 1913 letter to John Bartlett. Frost's style is dualistic rather than simplistic: he uses the poetic form to hold thematic dualities in ironic tension, while at the same time using formal devices to create tensions or ironies within the language of the poem. Frost is a master at embedding rhetorical devices within apparently simple poems, making effective use of punning and word play, repetition, prosody (the use of rhythm and meter), and metaphor.

In "Mending Wall" for example, Frost skillfully highlights the relation between form and content. We have already seen this relation established through his use of repetition and syntax, but it is also apparent in his prosody. Throughout the poem, lines in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) play both within and against the metrical and structural impositions of the form. In the opening lines, the speaker's energies disturb formal walls and boundaries: here, we find enjambment (run-on lines) and caesura (breaks within the line), as well as metrical variations which contribute to the theme of the lines. The poem begins with a trochaic substitution ("Something") and contains spondees in lines 2, 4, and 7, emphasizing the powerful destructive forces at work on the wall. Frost uses his versification to create subtle tensions between form and idea, as for example when he uses the enjambment between lines 6 and 7 to break his description of repairing the wall destroyed by hunters: "and made repair / Where they have left not one stone on a stone." But in the lines where Frost describes the annual ritual of rebuilding the wall with his neighbor, the rhythms become more consistently iambic and the lines more often end-stopped. Just as the speaker of the poem describes the act of wall-mending as "another kind of outdoor game," Frost plays a little game with the reader, replicating the changing state of the wall within the form of the poem itself.

Frost also embeds a substantial amount of figurative language in the poem, though he does so in such a way as to make the figures of speech seem rustic and natural rather than abstruse and literary. He refers metaphorically to the wall's stones as "loaves" and "balls"; he uses metonymy to compare the respective orchards with their owners – "He is all pine and I am apple orchard"; he jokingly personifies the apple trees – "My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines"; and he uses a simile to compare his somewhat primitive neighbor to "an old-stone savage armed." Only in the final figure of the poem does Frost move to a level of symbolic ambiguity: "He moves in darkness as it seems to me, / Not of woods only and the shade of trees." Frost remains deliberately vague about exactly what this "darkness" is, though we can gather that it is the darkness of a confining tradition ("his father's saying") and the resultant lack of the neighbor's capacity for play or imagination.

The difference between the two men in the poem lies in the fact that while the neighbor participates in the wall's construction only as a necessary and repetitive chore, the speaker (a version of Frost himself) uses it as an occasion for imaginative play. The narrator does not mind building the wall, but it is clear that his sympathies lie more with the "something" that wants it down (whether elves, nature, or his own sense of "mischief") than with the neighbor's unthinking need to repair it. The neighbor is an "old-stone savage" not because he wants to maintain the wall between them, but because he can think of no reason for doing so other than his father's proverb. The poem is in part an allegory for the poetic process itself: as a poet, Frost needs to keep himself open to all forms of experience, and he must be constantly vigilant about what he is "walling in or walling out." The physical wall in the poem is a wall of the psyche, a barrier to human understanding, connection, and communication.

Frost was a nature poet, but not in the naively romantic sense of a poet who celebrates the beauty or pastoral simplicity of nature. Instead, he uses the rural world as a source of emblems and symbols, creating *paysages moralisés* through the use of complex images and extended metaphors. Frost, who in later life described himself as "a confirmed symbolist," could find in almost any natural or man-made object an apt symbol, or emblem, for a more general idea. Such emblems include the scythe in "Mowing," the wall in "Mending Wall," the apple tree in "After Apple-Picking," the woodpile in "The Wood-Pile," the burnt-down farmhouse in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," the trees in "Birches," the pitchfork in "Putting in the Seed," the well in "For Once, Then, Something," and the isolated woods in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

As an illustration of the way in which Frost used such symbols from the pastoral landscape to comment on more universal human concerns, let us

look at “Birches” (1916), another of Frost’s most deservedly famous poems. The poem opens with a series of strong visual images suggesting that Frost was as deeply engaged with the visual imagination as with the auditory “sound of sense”:

When I see birches bend to left and right
 Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
 I like to think some boy’s been swinging them.
 But swinging doesn’t bend them down to stay
 As ice-storms do. Often you must have seen them
 Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
 After a rain. They click upon themselves
 As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
 As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.

“Birches” is more elegiac and less playful in tone than “Mending Wall,” and while it retains the conversational voice of a first-person speaker its language is somewhat more elevated and less colloquial. According to Frank Lentricchia, it was in “Birches” that Frost began “to probe the power of his redemptive imagination,” moving from playfulness toward transcendence.⁵ The birch trees, with their brilliant white bark and pliable trunks that “bend to left and right,” are contrasted in the first two lines with the “straighter darker trees” that form a kind of mysterious background behind them. Unlike birches, which can be manipulated by men (and boys) as well as the forces of nature, these straight and dark trees are a somewhat ominous presence which resists human interpretation. In lines 3–5, Frost introduces a second opposition: between the actions of boys swinging on birches (bending them temporarily but not putting them “down to stay”) and the power of a natural force, the ice-storm. Frost appeals to the reader to imagine with him the sight of the trees “loaded with ice” and the sound of them “click[ing] upon themselves.” So great is his appreciation of the scene that he aestheticizes the ice-covered trees by comparing them to a work of human creation: the cracking and crazing of the enamel on a piece of pottery. This comparison in turn takes the speaker to an even more dramatic image, as his imagination transforms the pieces of ice shed by the trees into “crystal shells,” shards of “broken glass,” and finally fragments of “the inner dome of heaven.”

Even in these opening lines, we have already come far from an ordinary pastoral or natural landscape. The images and metaphors Frost chooses enact a fusion of the natural world and the realm of human artifice (pottery, glass, crystal, a cathedral dome), suggesting a possible transcendence of brute nature into an imaginative realm. But Frost cannot settle on a single symbolic

register for the trees. The next three lines focus not on the transcendent beauty of the scene but on the oppressive weight of the ice:

They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break, though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:

Here again, Frost makes skilled use of versification to enhance his description: the lines are lengthened (eleven and twelve syllables instead of ten) and they depart radically from the iambic meter of the opening lines. Frost uses sound to make us feel the heaviness of the ice-covered trees in the drawn-out vowels of words like “dragged,” “bracken,” “load,” “bowed,” and “low.” The downward movement of these lines concludes with an evocative simile comparing the trailing branches of the trees to “girls on hands and knees that throw their hair / Before them over their heads.”

As brilliant as these descriptions are, however, they are not the main point of Frost’s poem, as the speaker goes on to explain:

But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows –
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer and winter, and could play alone.

As in “Mending Wall,” where Frost used the stone walls of rural New England to explore the more general idea of boundaries and borders in human life, here he uses the birches to create a complex symbolic landscape. Frost prefers the birches to the other trees because they are flexible enough to move in different directions: either “toward heaven,” as he says near the end of the poem, or down to the earth. Frost also uses the pliable nature of the birch to suggest the form of his poem: he “swings” from one subject to another, moving from a description of ice-storms to a narrative of a boy bending the trees on his father’s farm. The image of the farm-boy playing on the trees is clearly a vision of the poet as well. Like the boy, he works (“plays”) in solitude, far from human society; just as the boy attempts to “subdue” and “conquer” his father’s trees, the poet tries to bend and shape nature within an artistic form; just as the boy keeps his “poise” while climbing the tree, the poet focuses all his attention on his task; just as the boy swings out, “feet first, with a swish, / Kicking his way down through the air to the ground,” the poet swings on an imaginative arc into a state of absolute freedom from earthly concerns.

But the speaker realizes that his “dream” of being a “swinger of birches” cannot always be realized:

It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.

Those transcendent moments of swinging on birches and creating poetry are unfortunately not the whole of life: there is also the mundane reality of “considerations,” those details of everyday existence that seem to thwart our imaginative freedom. The simile comparing life to a “pathless wood” is hardly original, but Frost uses it very effectively to make us sympathize with his desire to “get away from earth awhile.” The speaker’s concerns are universal: we can all relate to the kind of setbacks and irritations represented by the cobwebs on the face and the twigs unexpectedly lashing the eye.

But despite these “considerations,” the speaker does not choose to leave earth entirely; instead, he recognizes that “Earth’s the right place for love.” In the final lines of the poem, he returns to the birch once again in order to establish a balance between the groundedness of daily life and the dream of absolute freedom:

I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back,
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

Frost ends the poem with typical understatement. After all, as he put it in “The Oven Bird,” the question raised by poetry in the modern age is “what to make of a diminished thing.” By “diminished thing,” Frost means human life as we live it on a daily level, diminished from the romantic dreams of transcendence we all entertain at certain privileged moments. Frost never attempted to make of poetry the kind of epic quest for meaning sought by many other modern poets; as he stated in an essay “The Figure a Poem Makes” (1939), he preferred to set himself the more modest goal of finding in poetry a “momentary stay against confusion.” If poetry “plays perilously between truth and make-believe,” as Frost once wrote, he preferred to stay slightly to the side of “truth,” allowing into his poems only as much “make-believe” as the creative act required.