

indirect, unconscious, and indolent. Today, a direct, deliberate, strenuous attention to the nuances and hazards of legitimation seems to me a prerequisite for that “socially responsive criticism” which Williams and I both would like to see more of.

Phyllis Lassner, Karen Alkalay-Gut, and Chanita Goodblatt would not, it seems, like to see more of it. That I speak of the political topic of Zionism “in a special section devoted to literary history” is “extremely disturbing” to them. I cannot see why—especially given their interest in “feminist” scholarship, which is surely as political as anything else. What I can see is the astoundingly cruel irony of their complaint against what they call “an aside.” When pro-Zionist ideology has been the very air Americans have breathed since 1947, when no Palestinian viewpoint has been invited or permitted, when every report, observation, or joke for decades has implied volumes of pro-Zionist assumptions (the empty desert made green by Jewish settlers and so on), it *does* seem audacious not merely to speak critically of Zionism but to do so with an unapologetic casualness indicating some confidence that ordinary readers without special indoctrination might be likely to agree. The very *idea* that anyone might assume such a remark could pass as common sense!

The letter from Israel chides me for concealing “the shaping power of [my] own ideology” and my “own construction.” It is a pleasure to say a few more words about each. I am a Jew, and like many other Jews I know, I feel the daily horrors of Zionist treatment of the Palestinians, perpetrated in my name and with the financial support of my community, as a personal as well as a political tragedy. My ideology is of the old-fashioned Enlightenment sort that demands freedom and justice for everyone, not just for Jews. This ideology has shaped or constructed or interpellated me to feel revulsion at the tortures and assassinations, the arbitrary arrests and detentions, the houses destroyed and schools closed and fines levied, the thousand daily harassments and humiliations that make up Israeli occupation. I wonder what ideology it can be that can ignore all this, declaring that “Zionism was and remains a liberating, not to say lifesaving, discourse.” I doubt very much that such an ideology can be meaningfully described as a refusal of “essentialism.” But if the authors of this letter are anxious to avoid essentialism, one way they could do so is by trying to exemplify a dissent and diversity within Israel that has mainly seemed to be lacking: a will to rectify many, many decades of injustice and suffering.

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Robert Frost’s “Sound of Sense”

To the Editor:

I applaud your publication of Marie Borroff’s “Sound Symbolism as Drama in the Poetry of Robert Frost” (107 [1992]: 131–44), which extends the growing understanding of Frost’s and other poets’ uses of sound symbolism. This subtle discussion clearly acknowledges through its sane and necessary general remark “sound symbolism is not one thing but many” (133) that Frost used multiple aural tactics but shows also that particular poetic sound effects were at the forefront of Frost’s attention both in practice and in his theoretical reflections.

I agree with Borroff that Frost’s theories about “sound of sense” or “sentence sound” relate to certain characteristic Frostian practices. But the true basis of some of these practices remains unidentified in Borroff’s discussion and also elsewhere as far as I know. Borroff cites Frost’s crucial comment, subordinating it in a note: “the best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words” (n8). This declares Frost’s “sound of sense” to be abstract from—and I believe this means decoupled from—the semantic burdens of utterance. If so, Frost’s comment indicates that his “sound of sense” concept does not really correspond with the expressive linguistic features that Borroff considers its manifestations: features such as local modifications of vocal intonation transmitting inflected meaning, irregular prosodic stress patterns (“provided, of course, that the words are read with natural expressiveness” [134]) again conveying tensions of meaning, or irregularities of pace of speech similarly driven by close linkage between what is said and how language sounds.

I would suggest that Frost’s poetic imitation of his *abstract* “sound of sense” involves rather the poet’s (and not the expressive reader’s) production of certain progressive aural harmonies. These harmonies are created largely through the deliberate use of vowel progressions and are vital in impressing on mind or ear the suprasegmental sound effects that invoke, as Borroff puts it, “‘meanings’ above and beyond the meanings of the individual words themselves.” Borroff holds that such nonlexical “meanings” are produced by imitation of the “cadences of accent, tone, and pace” of speech (134). But all these are elective aspects of speech derived from interpreted semantic content and are thus distinct from Frost’s “sentence sound” as I understand it.

On the contrary, the continuous trajectories of vocal formants, which are a physical necessity of the mechanism of human voice production, are invulnerable to

interpretation and are entirely under a poet's control. For in connected speech the sequence of the vowels in syllables is exactly the sequence of the formant targets determined by those vowels and smoothed by the constraints of coarticulation, since within segments the formants of the vocal tract uniquely determine and differentiate vowel identities. Entirely determined by a poet's choice of successive syllables, formant trajectories cannot be varied or chosen in performance, unlike pitch, volume, or speed of articulation.

Frost's cunning manipulation of nonelective, indeed physically necessitated, sound trajectories contributed greatly to the poetic tactics that vindicated his boasts that his dramatic poetry could unambiguously change speakers without requiring any playscriptlike speaker-identification tags. By means such as formant sequencing Frost forced patterns of sound appropriate to his speakers' characters and emotional states, giving prompt cues to speaker identity. Frost was justly proud of his ability to imitate aural absolutes, thus counterfeiting speech that is unmistakably and untranslatably particular.

It is also thanks to his artful uses of the freedom in vowel sequencing (freedom for the writer—or control of the reader) that Frost's plain-speech-imitating lines are not flat or prosaic, even where Borroff finds in them "meager pickings" in the way of incantatory "sound systems" (136).

Borroff makes an extremely valuable contribution by showing the difference between Frost's "chanting" and "speaking" modes of expression and by suggesting the literary-historical resonances of the dynamic between them. But I would demur where her analysis suggests Frost had a problem of valuation and choice between two competing voices, one involving regular stress patterns and repetitive vowel or consonant sounds and another relatively bereft of "sound systems" and "diminished" yet more suitable to twentieth-century poetry. For in both his more regular and his more irregular verse Frost still had the resource of his unique uses of "sentence sounds." Although prosodic features such as pitch profiles, patterns of relative stress, and repetitions of vowel or consonant are very significant indeed in all English poets' work, like many other poets Frost also exploited quite different "real linguistic" features. His individual use of as yet largely unexplored aspects of sound symbolism gave him grounds for the bid for poetic immortality so interestingly hypothesized in Borroff's article.

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Reply:

B. J. Sokol maintains that I am wrong in thinking that the "sentence sound" or "sound of sense" in Robert Frost's poetry is always shaped by the meaning of the sentence in question; he takes issue, more generally, with my insistence on linking sound effects in language with what language says. Quoting Frost's statement that "the best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words," he argues that Frost's "sound of sense" is "decoupled from . . . the semantic burdens of utterance."

Sokol and I evidently differ in that he identifies "sense" as Frost understood it with the "semantic" aspect of meaning (what Sokol elsewhere calls "interpreted semantic content"), that is, with its "lexical" or "cognitive" aspect. But despite Frost's use of the term "abstract," his statement does not show that he disregarded the equally important "attitudinal" or "emotive" aspect of meaning and its effect on the way language sounds. One may overhear two people talking and not be able to tell what they are talking about and yet understand, from the intonations, stress patterns, and pace of their words—that is, from perceived "sentence sounds"—that they are excited and angry. These states of feeling are part of the total meaning or sense that their words convey.

One of the expressions that Frost used as an example in explaining his concept of the sentence sound, and also incorporated into his poetry, appears at the end of a four-line poem entitled "Beyond Words":

That row of icicles along the gutter
Feels like my armory of hate;
And you, you . . . you, you utter . . .
You wait!

The two words making up the last line will, in a properly expressive performance, be read slowly, and each will receive the highest phonemic grade of stress, further heightened by rhetorical emphasis. It is their idiomatic emotive meaning and not their semantic content that calls for such a reading. The same two words, in the same grammatical relation, would have a completely different sound if they were spoken by someone who was not angry ("You wait, and I'll go get the car").

Sokol also says that "Frost's poetic imitation of his *abstract* 'sound of sense' involves rather the poet's (and not the expressive reader's) production of certain progressive aural harmonies" and that it does not involve "elective aspects of speech derived from interpreted semantic content." But in using the expression "You wait" as the punch line in a dramatized outburst of vindictiveness, Frost drew on the shared resources of