

*The Fate of the Frost Speaker**Margery Sabin*

The turn away from post-structuralism dates from the mid- to late 1980s. But much of what was done, from the 1970s through the early 1990s, to “demystify” speech was not so much thoughtfully undone as simply left behind. We may still ask what has become of the Frost “speaker,” given how intellectually fashionable it was, for nearly two decades, to denigrate speech as a sign of a doomed longing for “presence,” or for connection to some “origin” or “source.”¹ Readers’ habits of identifying a speaker in Frost’s poems are partly supported by Frost’s own stated ideas about sentence sounds, tones of meaning, the speaking tone of voice, the auditory imagination – so that to think about the fate of the speaker in Frost’s poems is also to reconsider the principles that accompanied his great period of poetic composition, the period from 1913 to 1916, when his first three books were being published, and when he wrote out his principles in letters from England to his American friends Sidney Cox and John Bartlett, and in still more letters, once he returned to America, to William Stanley Braithwaite, George Browne, Katharine Lee Bates, E. A. Robinson, Walter Prichard Eaton, Régis Michaud, and others.

Richard Poirier’s *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* – published first in 1977 and reissued, with a new Afterword, in 1990 – remains the best unsettling and resettling of attitudes toward speakers and speech in Frost’s poetry. As a way of agreeing with and also of providing corroborating contexts for Poirier’s readings of Frost in that book – and in *The Renewal of Literature* (1987) and *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992) – I emphasize three points. First, there is the complex historical point that the new attention to speakers and tones of meaning, which American professors of literature learned in England, mainly from I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis, gave new status at home to Frost’s earlier ideas, but also obscured their originality and sophistication. In certain American classrooms of the 1950s, Frost’s speculations about the “sounds of sense” were simplified into signposts toward the new “practical criticism,” while his poems were pressed into

service as practice instruments (and so they still serve, in undergraduate classrooms across the United States and elsewhere).² My second, related point is that the common and useful pedagogical adaptations of Frost's ideas about speaking tones in poetry are also reductions and distortions that work curiously less well in relation to Frost's own poetry than to some other poetry, and that the very skill of reading with an ear for tone has all along compelled the best readers of Frost to run up against this problem. The bolder speculative probing into what exactly we hear in Frost's poetry is one great merit of Poirier's work, and it is no discredit to his individual strength of mind to say that this probing owes some of its energy to critical pressure on the concepts of speakers and speech that were in ascendancy when he published *The Work of Knowing* in 1977, even if they had, to a degree, declined when he issued the second edition in 1990. One answer to the question of the fate of the Frost speaker is that this concept of speaker received, in the 1970s and 1980s, more daring speculative attention than it had before or has had since. That, I think, is a good result of the legacy of post-structuralism, and it persists to this day. My third and final point, however, is the simultaneously damaging effect that post-structuralist categories for thinking about speech had on our understanding of Frost.

To go back to the first, historical point: the fate of the Frost speaker and of Frost's ideas about speech as they were absorbed into the pedagogical procedures of "close reading" in the 1950s and 1960s. Lest I seem out to rescue Frost the poet from the pedagogues, I hasten to recall that Frost himself wanted to influence education. Already in letters and talks dating from 1913 to 1920, he was envisioning reforms in the teaching of reading and writing that might follow from his ideas about dramatic tones of speech.³ I need also to make clear that I am talking out of my own direct experience of a version of that educational endeavor – in my case, a version finely guided by Reuben Brower, a superb teacher of poetry as well as one of our best Frost critics, and the teacher of the best in a later generation of Frost critics: Poirier, William Pritchard, David Kalstone, and David Ferry.⁴ Perhaps other beneficiaries of this education were not as slow as I have been to recognize the Frosteian origin of what Brower taught as natural and normal, albeit often neglected, skills of auditory attentiveness to language. But others, I think, may be even slower than I was to realize the difference, too, between what Brower proposed to make of speakers in poetry for pedagogical purposes and what had been the center of Frost's own passion.

I can most rapidly evoke this difference by noticing the first chapter of Brower's pedagogical book, *Fields of Light* (1951). Chapter one is titled "The Speaking Voice," and is preceded by an epigraph taken from Frost's introduction to the 1929 Harbor Press edition of his one act play, *A Way Out*:

Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. . . . A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination. (CPPP 713)

Brower's chapter begins by citing Frost again, but with a significant shift of emphasis. Brower says: "Every poem is dramatic in Frost's sense: someone is speaking to someone else." The Frost quotation in the epigraph was about the dramatic necessity in *sentences*, not in whole poems. In shifting and enlarging the drama of speech from the sentence to the speaker and then to what Brower calls the dramatic situation of the whole poem, we are led to expect two things: first, a kind of coherence of personality; second, a sense of personality made coherent in relation to an event. But Frost's point about the dramatic vitality of sentences promises neither of these things.

The Frost poem that Brower uses to illustrate speaker and dramatic situation in *Fields of Light* is "Once by the Pacific."

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before.
The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
The cliff in being backed by continent;
It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage.
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God's last *Put out the Light* was spoken. (CPPP 229)

Rereading Brower's remarks after years of teaching this elusive poem, I am struck by how vividly they may illustrate the actual strain of reading Frost through a partial version of his ideas. After noting the strongly

felt presence of sound and action in the poem, Brower remarks the dramatic artifice that makes us experience this vision through Frost's special "voice":

Strictly speaking the situation is not that of the watcher by the sea, but (as indicated by the tenses) that of the reminiscent poet speaking after the event to no one in particular or to a receptive listening self. The speaker has a character of complete definiteness, which is why the poem is so *palpable* when read aloud.

By noting that the imagined recipient of speech in "Once by the Pacific" is indeterminate – anyone, the speaker himself – Brower relinquishes without fuss one part of his earlier point about someone always speaking to someone else in poems. But he is less ready to acknowledge that the speaker here also lacks definite character, nor does the character, such as he is, have any very definite relation to any situation. What character and in what situation would recall his experience of an ocean storm in this peculiar mixture of exaggeration and understatement, of colloquialism and literary parody? Almost despite the title's promise of recollected event, "Once by the Pacific" does not offer a sound of reminiscence, nor is it either meditative or conversational. One can, to be sure, contrive a "speaker" whose personality is complex enough to accommodate all the audible tones, but this exercise may mask the more obvious and more important point that the most definite identification is of a storytelling voice – but in a way that seems also to parody storytelling, with its exaggerated dangers and lucky escape. If you do not like the poem, it is probably because it seems too self-protectively jokey. If the poem succeeds for you, it is probably for the reason that you enjoy the way Frost can seem to put you in firm possession of the poem, even while denying it to you by his elusive tones and combinations of tones. This, according to Randall Jarrell, is characteristic of Frost's successes generally; he refers to Frost's "careful suspension between several tones, as a piece of iron can be held in the air between powerful enough magnets."⁵ Jarrell's analogy suggests an achievement of exact but also invisible, seemingly magical powers, a precarious feat that a clumsy touch might ruin. The reader can ruin it; he can pull down the iron suspended between magnets by grabbing hard enough. Reuben Brower is not that kind of "strong" or strong-armed critic. His further comments on "Once by the Pacific" in *Fields of Light* leave the magnets in place, as he identifies the differing tones of the sentences that compose the poem without forcing them into a shaped characterization of speaker or situation.

In Brower's later book on Frost,⁶ where pedagogical principles matter less, he comments more openly on the effect of discontinuity in "Once

by the Pacific.” He notes Frost’s movement in and out and around the edges of parody: parody of Genesis, of Wordsworth, of Romantic terror in nature. While describing these discontinuous, dislocating effects of parody, Brower simply puts aside the pedagogical directive to identify who is speaking to whom and in what situation. But he is timid about putting aside these principles in his argument about Frost as a whole, with two disappointing consequences. First, his best perceptions about individual poems remain fragmentary, off to the side of his larger conception of “the speaker.” Second, the undertow of the idea of “speaker” and “dramatic situation” pulls many readings toward the shallows of dramatic plausibility. “For Once, Then, Something,” for example, begins, “Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs/Always wrong to the light ...” Brower says that the dramatic movement begins with “the talk of a country well-looker,” as if peering into wells defined a familiar rural type, like beekeeper or woodcutter. But who knows of a type called “well-looker” outside of poetry – and principally allegorical poetry at that (an allusion to the Well of Truth becomes important later in the poem)? At the start, as so often in Frost, it is precisely the discrepancy between colloquial speech sound and the artifice of the situation that makes for wit.

The poem begins by evoking the sound of a conversational report on one’s local reputation for eccentricity or ineptitude: “Others taunt me for milking cows at 10 P. M.” (one of Frost’s gossiped-about habits as a farmer-poet). But in “For Once, Then, Something,” the literariness of the situation is immediately in tension with the ordinary sentence sound. Moreover, even the sentence sound itself is elusive, suspended, as in Jarrell’s image, between magnets. The sound is initially like “talk,” but almost immediately it rises into a more elaborate syntax, a more songlike rhythm. The talking syntax remains one of the sounds in the sentence, but from the start is crossed with other, more “poetic” sounds.

Although Brower’s practice as teacher and reader trains the ear to follow just such feats of language in Frost’s poetry, his commitment to the principles of dramatic “speaker” and “situation” leads him at times to falsify – just the slightest, but crucial amount – what he hears. The gap separating this idea of “dramatic situation” from Frost’s interest in the “dramatic” character of sentences can be measured by going back for a moment to the familiar but still perplexing formulations of the 1913–1915 letters where Frost first expounds his theories of what, in one of them, he rather grandly calls “the abstract vitality of our speech” (CPPP 665). After explaining that sentences are made expressive by their cadences,

almost apart from their content as statement, Frost protests in one letter: “This is no literary mysticism I am preaching” (CPPP 675). The denial of mysticism hardly seems necessary. There is nothing mystical about the empirical observation that both spoken and literary usage in a particular language gives, through repetition, expressive force to certain patterns of word order, pauses, rhythms – what Frost calls “the syntax idiom” (CPPP 670). Nevertheless, Frost’s protest against the anticipated charge of mysticism shows that he did want the empirical point to yield ground for faith in a life-force more than personal, more than private, and more than socially conventional – a force of human life, transmitted over time and from person to person through the intonations of a given language. In 1914, the year *North of Boston* appeared, Frost wanted to believe – and wrote poems out of the belief – that human vitality takes on a suprapersonal existence in the established intonations of speech, intonations the individual may draw on for personal expression and, perhaps even more important, for the reassuring recognition that one’s single life is connected to other lives. The connection need not have anything to do with love or sympathy. It invokes, more radically, the shared possession of a repertory of gestures that is the sign of a common range of human experience. What Frost calls “the abstract vitality of our speech” gives reassurance that the life within us is not eccentric or monstrous. It ceases to be monstrous once it participates in the verbal forms through which other people also enact their lives.

My paraphrase is meant to carry Wordsworthian echoes. Frost’s ideas about sentence sounds affirm a Wordsworthian faith in the one life within us and abroad, and adapt that faith to a human order of life. In Frost, the spirit deeply interfused (Frost likes the word “entangled”) is not supernatural or inhumanly natural. It is human – natural to humans. The Wordsworthian analogy needs many qualifications, of course. It is useful to me because it underlines two easily overlooked points about Frost. First, that he sees the poet’s relation to speech as imaginative, in the Wordsworthian sense, which is to say that it combines recognition and making; it is half perception, half creation. Second, this imaginative activity is valued for the Wordsworthian reason that it promises release from the poverty and isolation of the single self, a release from self-enclosure. In other words, through common sentence sounds, Frost seeks connection with other lives. He seeks not so much the possibility of a greater sincerity or a fuller communion with a listener, but a connection of a more indirect sort, as when our physical gestures – ways of bending or stretching, lying

back or keeping stiff – join us to others because they are, recognizably, the forms of their physical life too.⁷ These are the emphases that I hear in the 1914 letters:

Just so many sentence sounds belong to man as just so many vocal runs belong to one kind of bird. We come into the world with them, and create none of them. What we feel as creation is only selection and grouping. We summon them from Heaven knows where under excitement with the audile imagination. And unless we are in an imaginative mood it is no use trying to make them, they will not rise. We can only write the dreary kind of grammatical prose known as professorial. (CPPP 681)

Like Wordsworth, Frost cherishes an idea of imaginative inspiration that is at once mysteriously private and strangely impersonal. The Frostean twist is that instead of imagination lifting the poet above ordinary speech into the sublime, it carries the poet into the intonations of common speech. Whereas Wordsworth sees the poet as a man speaking to other men from the height (or depth) of his visionary experience, Frost sees the poet as a man enabled by imagination to fasten to the page, in his phrase, the sentence sounds that constitute life in the speech of all men. In the letters of 1913–1915, there is no mention of constructing the illusion through speech of a coherent personality or of showing a consciousness unfolding or of representing a private, interior drama of a self that asks to be known through the medium of a shared language. The reader's activity, like the poet's, depends on recognition of speaking tones, but poet and reader lean not so much toward each other as outward, toward the vitality in language that is their common inheritance and their common means of enacting human life.

What was most disconcerting in Frost's understanding of poetry is that it constituted for him a peculiarly double action. It shielded private experience behind the communal front of language, even while it reached out to a more general human life through speaking gestures. This doubleness is not stated so explicitly in the letters of 1913–1915 as later, especially in his 1935 introduction to E. A. Robinson's *King Jasper* (CP 116–122). There is the menace, first of all, of insanity, figured as isolation in a language that other men would not understand so that one is cut off from them (CP 116). Along with that fear, however, is the equally strong desire for control of how others are to understand, so as to prevent inquisitive intrusiveness. The origin of Robinson's melancholy remains mysterious, Frost admiringly remarks: "Not for me to search his sadness to its source. He knew how to forbid encroachment" (CP 121). To sustain connection

but to forbid encroachment – that is the double action of poetry for Frost, and the double virtue, I think, of dramatic speech in his best practice of it. This conception of speech does not categorize it mainly as a sign of simple yearning, doomed or not, to reveal a source or close a distance. It is an idea of speech as a form of action that, among other effects, can ward off the aggressive pursuit of “sources” by others.

In the short poem “Bereft,” Frost dramatizes depression as it takes the form of a particular fear: that the exposure of helplessness unleashes sinister powers in the universe:

Where had I heard this wind before
 Change like this to a deeper roar?
 What would it take my standing there for,
 Holding open a restive door,
 Looking downhill to a frothy shore?
 Summer was past and day was past.
 Somber clouds in the west were massed.
 Out in the porch’s sagging floor,
 Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
 Blindly struck at my knee and missed.
 Something sinister in the tone
 Told me my secret must be known:
 Word I was in the house alone
 Somehow must have gotten abroad,
 Word I was in my life alone,
 Word I had no one left but God. (CPPP 230)

The speaker in “Bereft” announces his anxiety that his “secret” has been found out, and readers have often taken him at his word. But note the effects of parody and posturing in “Bereft” – its play with different common sounds of fear and self-pity. The poem is moving because we hear in it the intonations of human loneliness and anxiety – including the fear that to be found out in one’s loneliness is to invite sinister reprisals. But even this fear is lifted just beyond our grasp by the poem’s witty manipulations: by the trivializing rhyme and singsong rhythm of the middle lines; by the hovering between the “word” as gossip and the “Word” as divine power; and even by the incongruity of calling this enormity of human aloneness by the slightly childish word, “secret.” The wit in the poem works as a defense against the danger of exposure that is its theme. The combination of sentence sounds even teasingly sustains the effect of secretiveness. The source of the poet’s sadness, as Frost said of Robinson, remains out of our reach even in “Bereft.”

I have said enough to suggest that the monolithic idea in post-structuralist criticism of speech as the sign of doomed yearning for presence and for communion rides roughshod over Frost's more complex and ambivalent attachment to the withholding as well as the communicative actions of language. The double action he prefers – reaching out to sustain connection and yet to forbid encroachment – depends precisely on those communal characteristics of speech that Continental criticism tended to see only as obstacles to desire.

The danger posed to a reading of Frost, however, is perhaps not so much from the threat of a post-structuralist flattening out of his subtleties (in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s) as from the equally flattening opposition to literary theory when such opposition allows itself to be cornered into reductive and resistant categories. Denis Donoghue almost touchingly exemplifies this predicament in *Ferocious Alphabets*,⁸ where he tries to reinstate the “privilege” of speech using the very vocabulary of the other side. By allowing Derridean terminology to govern his own formulation of allegiance to speech in literature and life, Donoghue thinks he will protect a threatened territory, but he gives up more than he gains. Donoghue calls reading for voice “epi-reading” (not a term likely to appeal to those attached to speaking tones). Epi-reading, Donoghue too easily concedes, is an effort to move from secondary to primary, to restore words to a source, to affirm the proximity of voice to feeling, to come to know and to meet another person. Frost's peculiar elusiveness disappears in this simplified definition of speakers and speech in poetry. “We believe in the lines,” Donoghue says of Frost's poetry, “because we believe in the voice speaking them.” Donoghue thus resurrects the dramatic “speaker speaking to someone” that Brower had proposed, even while Brower at his best demonstrated the difficulty of constructing a palpable, believable, coherent “someone” out of Frost's designs of language.

Given that the reading of poetry is not absolutely a team sport, we are free to share Donoghue's love of voice in poetry, and yet emphasize what his division of epi-readers against graphi-readers plays down: that is, the point that the voices we meet in Frost's poetry are often too discontinuous to constitute a personality in a dramatic sense, and that this discontinuity corresponds to the double motive of reaching out and holding back that pervades Frost's entire activity as a poet. Sentence sounds in Frost are meant to embody and dramatize human feelings. But one of the chief feelings they dramatize is the desire to control the dangers of proximity, to control the desire for full presence that may be a less ambivalent motive for readers than for the poets they want to meet.

NOTES

- 1 In *Robert Frost and the Politics of Poetry* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), Tyler Hoffman contrasts Frost's arguments about "voice" to certain positions Derrida takes in *Margins of Philosophy*. The discussion is part of a broader consideration of what Frost called the "sound of sense" (Hoffman 84–121).
- 2 Teachers have yet to take the measure of Frost's thinking about "voice." See James Kelley, "When Teachers Talk to Students About the Poetry of Robert Frost," *Robert Frost Review* (Fall 2011): 24–41.
- 3 Beginning in 1915, and continuing at least until he gave the Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1936, Frost regularly delivered talks, before students and teachers, on such topics as Vocal Reality and The Vocal Imagination. On June 1, 1915, he explained to George Browne (of the Browne & Nichols School in Cambridge): "The further I read in the pamphlets you loaded me with the surer I am that we did not meet for nothing: there was some fatality in the meeting. I see now that I could have gone a good deal deeper in my talk to the boys on images of sound and you would have had no quarrel with me. I can see a small text-book based on images of sound particularly of the kind I call vocal postures or vocal idioms that would revolutionize the teaching of English all the way up through our schools" (LRF 306–07). Later the same year, on October 21, Frost remarked to Katharine Lee Bates (in a letter arranging a lecture at Wellesley College): "It's the colleges I look to for the chance to say certain things on the sound of poetry that are going to trouble me as long as they remain unsaid. Not everybody would be interested in my ideas. I'm not sure that many would be outside the circles where books are made and studied. They have value I should say chiefly in education and criticism" (SL 196–97). See also "The Imagining Ear" (CPPP 687–89) and "The Last Refinement of Subject Matter: Vocal Imagination," an essay Frost composed (likely in 1941) but never published (CP 136–39; 299–304).
- 4 For more on the pedagogical lineage of which I speak, see Richard Poirier, "Reading Pragmatically: The Example of *Hum 6*," in his *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- 5 See Randall Jarrell, "To the Laodiceans," in *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953): 48.
- 6 *The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963).
- 7 Sidney Lanier anticipated Frost in certain of his intuitions, and likely influenced Frost's further development of those intuitions in the letters and talks referred to earlier in the chapter. Consider, for example, the following passage in *The Science of English Verse* (Scribner, 1880), a book Frost likely read in 1894: "Words without tune in . . . a man's voice may be made to convey the impression of the unnatural, even the supernatural. This the reader may illustrate by uttering in an absolute monotone the speech of the ghost in *Hamlet* and contrasting this monotone with the ever-varying tune in which Hamlet must utter

the interjections of tenderness and of horror which occasionally interrupt the ghost's speech. The result will very clearly prove the point now in hand: the monotone of the ghost, that is, the absence of tune from his utterance, freezes us with a sense of the unnatural, while the fervent tunes of Hamlet's brief cries remind us unconsciously of our human kinship with him" (257). For further discussion of Frost's possible debts to Lanier, see CP (299–301).

8 Little, Brown, 1981; reissued by Columbia University Press in 1984.