Excerpts from Chapter 7, "Education by Poetry: Pedagogy and the Arts in Early Modernism" in *Minding American Education* by Martin Bickman

From around 1910 to the mid 1930s innovative educators focused on the relevance to their work of poetry and the arts while poets and artists became especially involved in education. This was not a peripheral interest on the part of either, but the sharing of a deep root metaphor: the making of poetry and art became a paradigm for learning and teaching … More specifically, artists and educators shared assumptions about the use of metaphor to bridge the abstract and the concrete, the making of forms as crucial to the act of knowing, and the need to deconstruct and reconstruct these forms…

Frost, a teacher himself for a much of his career, wrote: "It slowly dawned on me that my poetry and my teaching were one, and if you knew my poetry at all well, you'd see that: that every little while there was the gleam of the teacher, that the two things were working" [1]

As an undergraduate at Amherst College I remember driving across Massachusetts on a bright autumn afternoon with two poets. One of them looked at the brilliant fall leaves, the pastoral farms, the dilapidated stone fences, and said "The New England countryside was really beautiful before Robert Frost gave it all a moral." We enjoyed a laugh at the time, but now I imagine Frost's ghost as having the last laugh, for I have come to appreciate how subtle, elusive, and complex his poetry is, how it actually works against the easy making of morals, against any certainty that can lapse into

smugness. Frost wrote with his typical fondness for wordplay: “People are always asking what I stand for. I never hold tenets on anything—just tentatives . . . I may sound like a man who never changes his mind. Maybe I’m one who never makes it up, but never the other” [2]

An earlier memory of mine is being assigned a high school essay on the tag line of Frost’s “Mending Wall,”— “Good fences make good neighbors”—presented to us without the rest of the poem, as if it were a truth for which we need only give five paragraphs of examples. Only later did I realize that this line, repeated in the poem, is countered and undercut by another twice-told line, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” with its deliberate evasiveness and playful inversion. While the poem entertains the notion that the activity of fence building brings the two neighbors into community for a while, the speaker questions the rationale:

> “*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.” [3]

Here as often with Frost the making of structures is positive but not the finished structures themselves. Praise be, then, to the frost that topples the boulders, and disrupts old saws.

What some of Frost's poems register is a certain relief bordering on delight, when these structures are relaxed or even destroyed, as in an early, breezy poem, "To the Thawing Wind":

> Come with rain, O loud Southwester!
> Bring the singer, bring the nester;
> Give the buried flower a dream;
> Make the settled snowbank steam;
> Find the brown beneath the white;
> But whate'er you do tonight,
> Bathe my window, make it flow,
> Melt it as the ice will go;
> Melt the glass and leave the sticks
> Like a hermit's crucifix;
> Burst into my narrow stall;
> Swing the picture on the wall;
> Scatter poems on the floor;
> Turn the poet out of door. [4]

Traditionally the wind and the coming of spring are associated with inspiration (literally, from its Latin etymology, a "breathing in"), but here their particular power is to release us from the confines of both a physical dwelling and a dwelling in old artworks. The thawing wind turns the "settled" snowbank into moving, ethereal steam, melts the solid ice into a fluid stream, and even dissolves the glass fixed in the window, removing any physical barrier between the poet and the world, subject and object. Most crucially it

flutters and dispatches with the poet's previous work, which always threatens to restrain and repeat itself. Outdoors the poet is freer to find material for new letters instead of dwelling among old litter.

Frost's sense of accepting or creating structures only to playfully subvert them, his taking of the notion of "conventional wisdom" as an oxymoron, pervades his teaching as much as his poetry. In a sentence linking the two, he says: "I accept school just as I accept the sonnet form or any other social convention: only it seems to be in me to want to make school as un-schoolike as possible." [5] A look at Frost's educational career, from his reluctant studenthood to his becoming a teacher of considerable originality, suggests continuities with his vision of poetry.

One of the reasons Frost wanted to make schools as un-schoolike as possible was that they made him sick. On his first day of kindergarten he got lost before he reached the school, and when someone pushed him too high on a swing he got a stomach-ache. When it was time the next day to return, the pain also returned, so his indulgent mother allowed him not only to skip the day but also the year. He was largely home-schooled for the first three grades, until his mother moved to Massachusetts after his father's death. Frost graduated valedictorian from high school, but these early feelings about formal schooling compounded probably with homesickness resurfaced at both Dartmouth and Harvard, where his aversion to formal learning again was marked with physical symptoms—fatigue, insomnia, chest pains.

Unlike many teachers who themselves had bad experiences in school, Frost seemed to have remembered his own difficulties, when in 1906, more out of necessity than desire, he became a high school teacher himself at Pinkerton academy near his New

Hampshire farm. Unable to support himself as either a farmer or a poet, he accepted what was at first a part-time position teaching English. One of his goals was to have his students associate reading with pleasure; a frequent instruction accompanying assignments was

> *To be read—to be enjoyed*
> *Not studied—not skimmed* [6]

He emphasized not so much lectures as oral interpretation and close listening. Later he described his teaching at Pinkerton:

> I never kept on reading a book that made the class listless. If I saw the class uninterested I always closed the book and passed the rest of the hour some other way. I learned to watch for the 'fidgets' on the part of the students, and when I saw them in evidence I recognized them as a danger signal. They were given the children to protect themselves with. [7]

One would expect a poet of Frost's talent to have a special sensitivity to literature, but what stands out in this passage is his sensitivity to students, his realization of how adults might end up boring students with the very things we are most enthusiastic about.

In 1911 Frost followed the principal of Pinkerton to New Hampshire State Normal School at Plymouth, where he taught one course in the psychology of education and one in the history of education. In the former he used two books by William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* and *Psychology: The Briefer Course*. Frost had wanted to study with James, but in his one year at Harvard, James was on leave. But Frost did absorb James on his own, and found confirmations of his own disposition to think through and from experience instead of from a priori concepts. Frost discussed these

readings informally; if he had any agenda, it was that psychology has no definitive answers, no solving words that can dictate success in the classroom. One day Frost read his class Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," and drew the following moral: "Some teachers always load their students so full of facts that the students can't jump; other teachers know better and they tickle the students into having imaginative ideas of their own just by saying in effect, 'Flies, Dan'l.' " [8] In the first class of his other course, Frost found that the janitor had already piled on his desk stacks of the customary textbook, Monroe's *History of Education.* Frost's first request was for volunteers to carry them back down to the stockroom and assigned instead readings from Rousseau and Pestalozzi.

After receiving a small inheritance Frost took his family to England, where he published his first two books. When he returned, the innovative president of Amherst College, Alexander Meiklejohn, hired him to teach beginning in 1917. The students in one of his first classes suggested that the classroom itself did not fit Frost's relaxed approach, and soon the venue was shifted to evening meetings at a fraternity house. Frost pursued this direction to teach out of the box, feeling he could do more on the outskirts of the educational system than in its conventional settings. He was particularly interested in stimulating and encouraging original thought, and would sometimes scatter slips of paper for students to jot down their idea during class. He would often leave the class with from ten to thirty slips, some of which he felt were utterly disposable, but others so good he wished he could steal their ideas. Frost's sense that he could learn from his students as well as vice versa, is suggested in a later comment: "Long ago I gave up the idea of asking my students to tell me what they knew just that I might discover if they knew as

much as I did. Now in classes I ask questions in the correct sense of the word, for I want them to tell me something new, something I did not know." [9] Frost sensed what all good teachers discover, that just as in making love one has to give pleasure to get it, so in teaching one has to learn oneself in the process for the students to do so.

Frost explicitly connected his teaching to his poetry in three related areas: 1) the centrality of metaphor 2) the value of making form as "a momentary stay against confusion," [10] and 3) the pressures put on poetic form by the urgencies of the immediate. In "Education by Poetry," Frost gave his famous formulation of poetry as "saying one thing and meaning another." [11] Frost agrees with Nietzsche that no language apprehends reality "directly," but that explicitly metaphorical language has the advantage of being explicitly figurative and performative. This leads Frost to equate metaphor making with thinking itself. To use metaphor as a tool instead of being used by it, one has to create the metaphor oneself, to be "at home" in it; otherwise, "you don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you." [12] Metaphor is useful not only when it works but when it does not, when we become aware of its limits, its transient temporality: "All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the beauty of it. It is touch and go with metaphor, and until you have lived with it long enough you don't know when it is going. You don't know how much you can get out of it and when it will cease to yield. It is a very living thing."[13]

Frost's sense of the need to make metaphor and then the need to go beyond any single metaphor can be seen as a special case of our second category, his attitude towards form in general:

> I never kept on reading a book that made the class listless. If I saw the class uninterested I always closed the book and passed the rest of the hour some other way. I learned to watch for the 'fidgets' on the part of the students, and when I saw them in evidence I recognized them as a danger signal. They were given the children to protect themselves with. [14]

"Vortex rings of smoke" suggests an evanescent shape that dissolves as soon as it is made, briefer even than a poem, also formed out of breath. Larger forms threaten to substitute themselves for the novelty and chaos of the universe, and thus reduce the need for making more forms. Of our background in confusion and darkness, Frost says, "To me any little form I assert upon it is velvet, as the saying is, and to be considered for how much more it is than nothing. If I were a Platonist I should have to consider, I suppose, for how much less it is than everything." [15] Frost even gave a specific time for how long the satisfaction and clarification of life through form could last: "I don't try to make any permanent clarifications for myself but only shape some things together—for betting purposes. . . . I'm such a lover of form that getting the better of one little poem makes me comfortable for a whole week."[16]

The existing forms that loomed largest for him were the conventions of prosody, especially the iambic pentameter line and the sonnet, which he accepted just as school, as a structured to be altered around the contours of one's individuality. Similarly, he accepts the regularity of the pentameter line only to run across it the immediacy of the rhythms of the speaking voice, what he called "getting the sound of sense." [17] The conventional practice of verse takes these rhythms and overregularizes them to the point of creating too extreme a difference between poetry and the spoken language, just as

school has removed the process of learning so far from what happens outside that any resemblance becomes coincidental. What Frost says about poetry has equal relevance to education: "Poetry has seized on this sound of speech and carried it to artificial and meaningless lengths. We have it exemplified in Sidney Lanier's musical notation of verse, where all the tones of the human voice in natural speech are entirely eliminated, leaving the sound of sense without root in experience." [18] For Frost the ideal poetic line would fuse an existing form with an utterance made in a specific human context. As he wrote in a letter: "You get more credit for thinking if you restate formulae or cite cases that fall in easily under formulae, but all the fun is outside saying things that suggest formulae that won't formulate—that almost but don't quite formulate." [19] This strategy foreshadows the late poem "Directive," spoken by a guide "who only has at heart your getting lost," so that eventually you will become "lost enough to find yourself." [20]

It is in this sense particularly of losing and finding and losing again that Frost's sense of poetry and teaching particularly fuse, as George Whicher suggests:

> As he talked, he seemed to be constantly inviting his audience to help him find just the right form of words. He spoke slowly, often rolling up a phrase with many heaves as though it were a stone to be placed in a wall that needed mending. We felt that we were watching an arduous creative triumph, the shaping into form of ideas drawn from the dark abyss of the unconscious mind. [21]

Significantly Whicher says nothing about the content but speaks of the process in which Frost involved himself and his audience, and he relies our knowledge of the poetry to imply that the stone wall of thought is not a permanent structure. This intersection of poetry and teaching has been well summarized by Pamela Davis: "Frost saw reality as

formless and chaotic, and in order to handle that, one had to participate in constant ordering and reordering of this reality. . . Both thoughts and poems involved an act of making, active shaping of the raw material of ideas. Teaching for Frost was in essence a public performance of such activity." [22] Although neither Frost's poetry nor his teaching was didactic, both were pedagogical in process, stimulating the mind through playful perplexity. In one of his last poems, he says: "It takes all sorts of in- and outdoor schooling /To get adapted to my kind of fooling." [23]

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[1] Frost, R. (1964) Playing for Mortal Stakes. In H. W. Hewlett (Ed.) *In other words: Amherst in Prose and Verse*, 176. Amherst, MA, Amherst College Press.

[2] Mertins, L. (1965) *Robert Frost: Life and talks-walking,* 378. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

[3] Frost, R. (1972) *Poetry and prose,* 17. E. C. Lathem & L. Thompson (Eds.). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

[4] Ibid, 7.

[5] Frost, R. (1963) *The letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer,* 277. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

[6] Thompson, L. (1966). *Robert Frost: The early years, 1874-1915,* 333. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

[7] Lathem, E. C., (1966). *Interviews with Robert Frost,* 23. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

[8] Thompson, 372-373.

[9] Abbot, W. (1925). Robert Frost: Professor o English. *The Michigan Alumnus, 32,* 208-209.

[10] Frost (1972), 394.

[11] Ibid., 33.

[12] Ibid., 334.

[13] Ibid., 335.

[14] Ibid., 344.

[15] Ibid., 345.

[16] MacCann, R. (1939, May 2). Poet startles audience with sense of humor. *University Daily Kansan,* 1.

[17] Frost (1972), 261.

[18] Ibid., 263.

[19] Frost (1963), 47.

[20] Frost (1972), 156.

[21] Whicher, G. F., (1950). *Mornings at 8:50: Brief evocations of the past for a college audience.* Northampton, MA: Hampshire Bookshop.

[22] Davis, P. (1994) Teacher-poets: Robert Frost's influence on Theodore Roethke. In E. J. Wilcox (Ed.), *His "incalculable influence on others": Essays on Robert Frost in our time,* 37-45. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria English Literary Studies.

[23] Frost (1972), 174.

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