The Education of Robert Frost

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Robert Frost finished only a little more than two years of college, a semester at Dartmouth and the rest at Harvard. His forty-four degrees were all honoris causa. And yet from 1917 until 1963, the year of his death, Frost taught at Amherst College, the University of Michigan, Dartmouth College, and Harvard University. Before 1917, he taught school part-time in 1893, 1894, and 1895, and full-time from 1906 to 1912. To this total of fifty-six years of teaching may be added another decade in which Frost and his wife, Elinor, "home-schooled" their children in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Fittingly, then, when his first book of poems, A Boy's Will, was published in 1913, Frost inscribed a copy of it to a former colleague, "A Teacher to a Teacher."

In 1951, Frost selected some sentences and passages from his notebooks and published them in The Atlantic Monthly under the title "Poetry and School." For these three constants in his life — poetry, school, and the relation between them — Frost had, not a concern, but, as he liked to say, a weakness. That weakness was highly developed and refined by 1951. Some of the sentences in "Poetry and School" come from notebooks he kept in 1912, and some of these in turn go back to letters he wrote in 1894, when he published his first poem at the age of twenty. Earlier still in the education of Robert Frost: in 1879, he dropped out of kindergarten. In 1880, he dropped out of first grade. In 1882, he dropped out of second grade. In 1885, he was placed in third grade. In 1886, he entered fifth grade, to be taught by his mother, who had been his teacher at home since 1880. In 1887, now thirteen, Frost began to read Jane Porter's The Scottish Chiefs by himself, having been read to by his mother — from the Bible, Shakespeare, Poe, George MacDonald, Thomas Hughes, Emerson, Burns, Wordsworth, Bryant, Tennyson, and Longfellow — since 1878. In 1889,
he entered high school, from which he graduated, tied for first in his class, in 1892, sharing valedictory honors with Elinor White, whom he would marry in 1895. In 1893, Frost took his first job as a teacher—of "twelve barefoot children under twelve." He said he "worked the hardest" when he taught high school from 1906 to 1912. After returning from an almost three-year stay in England in 1915, Frost was never away from classrooms and campuses for more than three years at a stretch. He died in 1963.

The teacher's job, as Frost liked to practice it, is to get his students to banter, in writing, with themselves and with ideas. In a notebook that dates to 1912, he wrote: "The mind must be induced to flow: to see that there is a plenty to say on a thousand subjects. Let the teacher threaten to use up all his ideas on a given subject and see how the child will beg for a chance before it is too late." Frost's premises here are those of William James in his Principles of Psychology: Briefer Course and his Talks to Teachers on Psychology, books Frost used in his teaching. James was not alone in trusting that learning proceeds by imitation and emulation of patterns, but he was rare in claiming that imitation and emulation "induce more mental action" in students than instruction. Frost followed James, whom he called "the most important teacher he never had," in refraining from telling students what to do and how to do it. He treated students as he treated himself. "I'm afraid all I see in books and going around is ideas to emulate," he wrote, "to try if I can't have the like of. The only thing that can disappoint me in the head is my own failure to make metaphor. My ambition is to have it said of me: He made a few connections." Frost wanted his students to have the same ambition for themselves. "But," he said, "it must be solemnly laid on everybody in this world to make his own observations and remarks. That's what we mean by thinking, and that's about all we mean. A teacher says to a pupil 'Watch me notice a few things in the next few months: let's see you notice a few things too.' But the teacher's observation must be genuinely his own. A little, if it is his own, will induce more mental action in his pupils than a great deal supplied him by you." Of course, the whole history of education tells us that only
a very small number of all students will want to do on their own and for
themselves anything like what they see and hear their teachers do.

In a 1919 letter to his daughter Lesley, then a student at Barnard
College, Robert Frost intends to offer "just one word of advice" about
writing "essays where the imagination has no chance, or next to no chance." Instead, he catches himself in the act of "writing essay." The letter is a
vivid example of Frost turning teacher— which he was then, at Amherst
College— and having ideas in prose. It shows Frost giving way to his
"weakness for ideas, particularly in education," and to his "very special in
terest in the problem of teaching English." When he wrote to Lesley, Frost
had been teaching English, and talking and writing about teaching, for
twenty-five years.

Frost begins his "one word" of advice to Lesley with a sentence:
"Try to avoid strain or at any rate the appearance of strain." What Lesley
did with this word is unknown; what Frost did with it is evident to both
casual and critical readers of his prose and verse: he obeyed it, in letter
and spirit. The casualness that marks his style— style, Frost says, "indicates
how a writer takes himself and what he is saying" — marks his performance
as a reader and teacher. He "goes to work." "Read your author once or
twice over having an eye out for anything that occurs to you as you read
whether appreciative contradictory corroborative or parallel." The first
result of this work "should be more or less of a jumble" even after two
readings. In fact, "Much that you think of in connection will come to
nothing and be wasted. But some of it ought to go together under one
idea," and that will be the subject and title of the essay.

Frost gives an example from the class he was then teaching at
Amherst: "One of the boys here had Longfellow to do. He read him till
he saw his idea go by. He expressed that in his title Longfellow and the
Middling Virtues." The idea "goes by," the boy notices it; he catches it
and then writes, going back to the passages that his idea rose "in connection"
with. In going back, the boy may get a few "subordinate ideas." Frost
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tells Lesley: "It's to have those happen to you as read and catch them—not let them escape you in your direct interest in your author. The sidelong glance is what you depend on. You look at your author but you keep the tail of your eye on what is happening over and above your author in your own mind and nature."

Frost now returns to himself: "I've never written essay, but I have the material often when I read—I'm aware of it making—not in every book by any means but in a few." Material "makes" inside Frost's mind and nature, as hay "makes" after it's cut. Material is "had" by Frost, harbored and cultivated, as most havings—of ideas, traditions, rules, and habits—are not, or are not commonly thought of as being "had." A writer's most important material, in other words, is immaterial. But to read in order to write, as students are tasked to do, is to be assigned to "catch" an author's material and, as Frost tells Lesley, "hammer[it] into one lump." Frost reminds Lesley that another person's material can only be caught with material of one's own. As yet, Frost has not caught himself writing an essay about writing essay. He has not seen that idea go by, and so it is not yet his. Frost's ostensible subject, reading-in-order-to-write, which is the problem Lesley's teacher has imposed on her, has not yet become incidental to what's going on over and above it in her father's mind and nature. Nothing "either corroborative appreciative illustrative or very contradictory" has yet "happened" to him in giving his daughter advice.

"Out of a class of sixty boys," he tells Lesley, "only seven have seen what I mean by all this." He then turns to "the rest" of the boys, the ninety percent, for material that bears on his idea. Frost thinks that the fifty-three boys in his class who don't see what he means have ideas—but, he tells Lesley, they

will put a name at the heads of their papers Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson or Longfellow... and... will simply tell again what these men said and did and wrote. None of their own increment here. Receptivity is all their faculty. They seem incapable of the over-and-above stuff.

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I think maybe it goes on in their heads as they read but they are incapable of catching it. They are too directly intent on the reading. They can’t get started looking two ways at once. I think too they are afraid of the simplicity of many things they think on the side as they read. They wouldn't have the face to connect it in writing with the great author they have been reading. It may be a childhood memory: it may be some homely simile: it may be a line or verse of mother Goose. They want to be big and bookish. But they haven't books enough in their head to match book stuff with book stuff. Of course some of that would be all right.

Lesley, who was home-schooled by her mother and father, and kept a journal from the age of five, and bought her first poetry anthology at the age of ten, had some book stuff to match with book stuff. But for her and for the ninety percent, Frost recommended the same enterprise: to think of reading as a game:

The game is matching your author thought for thought in any of the many possible ways. Reading then becomes converse—give and take. It is only conversation in which the reader takes part addressing himself to anything at all in the author in his subject matter or form. Just as when we talk together! Being careful to hold up our end agreeably without too much contradiction and mere opinionation. The best thing is going each other one better piling up the ideas anecdotes incidents like alternating hands piled upon the knee.

Frost played this game of conversation all his life, and his verse and prose are records of his performance. It is the kind of conversation that Frost in his notebooks Frost calls "Education by joining in with what is done and no questions asked."

If only this letter to Lesley remained of all Frost's prose, it would be invaluable—but in fact it is only one of hundreds of descriptions of the
act of composition in Frost's poems, essays, plays, talks, and letters. Collected, these passages might suggest that Frost had no greater interest than recording what the making of literature is like. The passage that I would make the motto for them all is a single sentence from Frost's notebooks: "A poem is the act of having an idea and how it feels to have an idea."

But this letter to Lesley does more: it sketches a mode of *having* — curating, that is, rather than solving — "the problem of teaching English." Because Frost wants to have this problem, he not only has some not "very contradictory" things say to "the old unity-emphasis-and-coherence Rhetoric," but he can't help having them to say, because he himself wants to be emphatic if not coherent (SL 140). Frost's critique is hard to tune in now, since "the old unity-emphasis-and-coherence Rhetoric" still rules the Composition roost in American education. It does so now by having incorporated Frost's metaphor of reading as "conversation," and of reading and writing as *in* conversation, but without Frost's zest for the game of life. Frost, after all, taught neither composition, nor critical thinking, nor communication. If one word is wanted, Frost taught "correspondence," the word he preferred to "communication." Correspondence begins in infancy, without strain — "eyes seeking response of eyes," as Frost has it in his poem "All Revelation." Frost had handbooks and rhetorics to teach from, and he had the grammatical and rhetorical terminology we still use, but he didn't use them, neither here with Lesley nor with his students at Amherst and elsewhere.

In the the old "unity-emphasis-coherence Rhetoric," Frost emphasized "emphasis" in his famous principle of "the sound of sense," or "sentence sounds," which goes unmentioned in this letter to Lesley. This principle is Frost's "very special interest in the problem of teaching English," and I turn from the letter briefly to describe it.

Frost's deviation from the norm of English composition teaching can best be seen in his idea of the sentence. The norm is to teach the sentence "as a grammatical cluster of words." To write the sentence, the student
first has to master grammar and sentence structure, so-called "mechanics." Wrong, Frost says. That is the "wrong way" to make students "conscious of sentence form." First, he says, "Teach all the satisfactions of successful speech." Ask students to recall and write down a sentence they have spoken that they themselves knew at the time to have been successful. By contrast, the English composition norm in 1906 is represented by a colleague of Frost's who said, "Aim low enough. As much as we can expect is to get them to write a good business letter." To Frost, that sort of condescension resulted in a prose of "poverty and inertness." Frost wanted instead "something of the artistic experience for all," and "exercises to be blue-penciled for" "hand writing spelling grammar punctuation paragraphing" discouraged that. Frost wanted students and teachers to write, read, and judge sentences for "ideas imagination reality tones."

Frost proposed that a "new definition of the sentence" would "revolutionize" the teaching of English composition, and he gave one to John Bartlett in a letter of 22 February 1914: "A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung." With this definition, Frost would begin his assault on the "prejudice" that a sentence is "a grammatical cluster of words," that a sentence is chiefly a written thing. It is a voice thing: a sentence is mouth stuff, ear stuff, body stuff, not paper stuff. Who is not aware, when called to attention, "of having acquitted" him- or herself "well in speech" before doing so in writing? Many more people speak with satisfaction than write with satisfaction, hear with satisfaction than read with satisfaction. Frost's new definition of a sentence—a sound—fits the facts that people sound off and sound in certain ways when they do, and that we identify ourselves and each other by our sentence sounds. Frost's new definition of the sentence is biological, anthropological, and psychological. It says that our sentences express and record what Catullus called "mens animi," a phrase that Frost was happy to translate as "the thoughts of my emotions."

In prose, Frost noticed that writers frequently marked the tones they heard, and wanted their readers to hear, by tagging the dialogue with
adverbs and adjectives of manner and mode. Playwrights did this in stage directions. In life, Frost heard people in their talk doing many other things with other tones, without preface or tag. Written and spoken, tones of voice make a difference in how a speaker gives and how a listener takes the bare words, or "other sounds," of the sound that is the sentence. In life, there is "hinting"; in literature, there is "metaphor." In both, tone controls how we take hints and make metaphors. In a remnant of a talk he gave called "How Can You Tell When You're Thinking," Frost claims that "All there is to thought is feats of association." The "under part of every poem," he goes on to say, is "a feat of association, putting two things together and making a metaphor—anything you want to call it, analogy and all the different words for the same thing—putting this and that together, to your own surprise, as well as everybody else's."

This is what Frost in his letter to Lesley is reminding his daughter to do: put this and that together. "It's out of conversation like this with a book," he tells her,

that you find perhaps one idea perhaps yours perhaps the book's that will serve for other lesser ideas to center around. And there's your essay. Be brief at first. You have to be honest. You don't want to make your material seem more than it is. You won't have so much to say at first as you will later. My defect is in not having learned to hammer my material into one lump. I haven't had experience enough. The details of essay won't come in right for me as they will in narrative. Sometimes I have gotten round the difficulty by some narrative dodge.

Of course this letter is essay. It is material that has come to the surface of my mind in reading just as frost brings stones to the surface of the ground.

That last sentence, with its surprising analogy, is as artless an image of how Frost felt when he wrote as ever occurred to him, so clearly was he
not thinking about his writing (or his surname) when it occurred to him. Its casualty itself is a reason why writing of the sort Frost did think about probably can't be taught but only recognized. "To know a moment when you see it—that is to be a teacher... The problem will be to show... that such moments are literary and they must be repeated. They must be extended to other feelings and brought into... writing."

In Frost's view, all of us are almost always composing or making in our heads, or are subject to the making or composing that occurs there; but only perhaps ten percent of us ever write with deliberate speed. Yet neither the ninety nor the ten percent seemed to Frost more likely to be helped than hindered by the winds of educational doctrine and composition theory. But who can be certain? Frost's none-too-sureness, tempered by his prejudice in favor of "the idealizing part of people's nature," mark his concluding paragraph to Lesley, begun just after he compares the act of reading to the action of frost:

I don't know you know whether its worth very much—I mean the essay—when you have it written. I'm rather afraid of it as an enemy to the really creative writing that holds scenes and things in the eye voices in the ear and whole situations as a sort of plexus in the body (I don't know just where). Take it easy with the essay whatever you do. Write it as well as you can if you have to write it. Be as concrete as the law allows in it—concrete and experiential. Don't let it scare you. Don't strain. Remember that any old thing that happens in your head as you read may be the thing you want. If nothing much seems to happen, perhaps another reading will help. Perhaps the book is bad or is not your kind—is nothing to you and can start nothing in your nature one way or another.

For more than forty years, Frost talked of doing "a book about his educational experiences and devices." In 1914, it was to be a book about what his "new definition of the sentence as a sound in itself" "means for
education." In 1915, he could "see a small text-book based on images of sound particularly of the kind I call vocal postures or vocal idioms that w ould revolutionize the teaching of English all the way up through our schools." Lacking that book, which Frost never wrote, we have this letter to Lesley, one of the fullest unfoldings of what her father considered the essential problem of education: "learning how to have something to say."

The phrase is from a 1939 notebook, and Frost wrote it after he quit Amherst College for the third time and accepted an appointment as the first "Ralph Waldo Emerson Fellow in Poetry" at Harvard. In this notebook, Frost makes no mention of his 1919 letter to Lesley — just as, in this letter to Lesley, he makes no mention of any of the letters he wrote in 1913 and 1914 to his former student and former colleague on "the sound of sense," which he said at the time was "the most important thing" he knew. He writes to Lesley, too, as if he hadn't given her this same advice many times before — though on Lesley's later account alone it can safely be said that he had.

But Frost's 1919 word of advice on college essay writing shows up highly reduced in 1939 as a distinction fit for a structuralist. He underlines the preposition in the phrase that makes all the difference: "in thinking about the book." Then he adds: "All of us some of the time just think the book — nearly all of us all the time." That is, fifty-three of every sixty of us, about ninety percent of us, have nothing of our own "increment" to say all the time. We're too absorbed to take notice of what's making an impression on us from without and what's modifying within us in relation to it. The fact is, learning how to have something to say, and then "transferring that to paper at a gain rather than a loss," is a thing only a few of us ever do. Frost, a superior student who never finished college and yet went on to teach in them for forty years, harbored the thought that "No teacher in any real sense seems possible." Nevertheless, he was inclined to believe that he could teach students to write vital sentences. In the last years of his life, he called for high school teachers to be celebrated and honored; he wanted them awarded with time to think.