

Subversive Poetry



Robert Frost, 1913

Many poems of Robert Frost (1874-1963) are remembered for something completely different from what the poet actually wrote. Frost's meaning is often either opposite or orthogonal to what is initially understood.

One of Frost's early poems is *Wall Mending*, published in 1914 as the first poem in *North of Boston*. Many remember the poem as claiming that "Good fences make good neighbors." Walls serve to keep livestock away from crops. However, Frost points out to his neighbor that there is no need of the particular wall that they are mending:

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.

Here the wall's only purpose is to delimit what is mine and what is yours. Perhaps we might do better without such boundaries. However, the poem plays at various levels. The speaker had found breaks in the wall and arranged that he and his neighbour mend them:

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.

There is perhaps a need for walls but this is something that cannot be expressed in the cliché that good fences make good neighbors.

Frost seduces the reader with his simplicity. Yet when he has our attention, he subverts our assumptions. Life is much more complex than what it first appears.

A later poem *Two Tramps in Mudtime*, published in 1936 in *A Further Range* can also be read at different levels. The speaker is interrupted while chopping wood by two loggers who have just been laid off from a logging camp because of the difficulties in working in the springtime. They have become unemployed and homeless: "tramps" looking for work. The loggers would clearly like to get paid for chopping the speaker's wood. However, he appears to decide that his right to enjoy the work is more important than their need.

Nothing on either side was said.
They knew they had but to stay their stay
And all their logic would fill my head:
As that I had no right to play
With what was another man's work for gain.
My right might be love but theirs was need.
And where the two exist in twain
Theirs was the better right – agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done

For heaven and the future's sakes.

Frost was taken to task for this conclusion by Malcom Cowley (1962). Claiming that work should be enjoyed for its own sake and not for gain is all well and good, but in the circumstances human compassion should have trumped self-interest. However, the poem is not clear what the speaker actually decided. The poem was apparently based on a real incident that had occurred a few years before its composition (Parini, 1999, pp 288-289). What happened is not known. My guess is that Frost did nothing and the loggers went on their way.

The concluding stanza of the poem is a sententious sermon. The words do not ring as clearly as in the preceding stanza nor as beautifully as some of the earlier lines describing the vagaries of the New England spring. Frost may have been criticizing himself after the fact for being a pompous fool, who could not bring himself to be compassionate and who rationalized his hardness of heart as some abstract need for avocation. Even if this is not what he meant, the poem still clearly states the two positions, and the reader can decide which one is right.

The most obvious example of Frost's multiple levels of meaning is *The Road Not Taken*. This poem was finished in 1915 just after Frost returned to New Hampshire from England, and was published in the book *Mountain Interval* in 1916.



Edward Thomas, 1913

The idea of the poem had been triggered by his walks in rural England with Edward Thomas (1878–1917), who often had difficulty deciding which woodland path to take and who often later regretted that he had taken one and not another (Parini, 1999, p 153; Hollis, 2011, p 235). Frost himself had decided to return to North America and to write his poetry. He had urged Thomas to join him. Yet Thomas had not been sure what to do, whether to continue as a critic and essayist, to start out as a poet, or to enlist in the army.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I–
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Frost's 1951 reading of the poem:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/frost_road_not_taken.mp3

Most people remember the idea in the poem's last three lines and consider these to represent its meaning. One should decide to take untraveled paths, and thereby to achieve the otherwise impossible.

Yet this is not what the poem states. Frost is really not sure why he took one road rather than the other. Indeed, the more he thinks about it the paths were really not much different: "the passing there had worn them really about the same." He repeats this fact so that he and we are quite sure of it: "both that morning equally lay in leaves no step had trodden black."

He thinks that in the future he will remember that he took the path less traveled, but this is not what happened. Our memories are interpretations of what happened and we often distort them to make ourselves more like our ideals. What we remember becomes what we would like to have happened.

Frost leaves open why one road was taken and not the other. Was there some reason that he now cannot remember? Was it a random choice? Was it something that was determined by everything that had preceded? Did this occur without any intervention of free will, as some recent thinkers might have

us believe (Harris, 2012)? Are all our interpretations of why we choose to do something simply rationalizations of what is determined by causes that are actually beyond any conscious control?

Frost sent a copy of this poem to Edward Thomas prior to its publication. Hollis (2011) suggests that this might have contributed to Thomas' making up his mind to enlist in the British Army in July 1915, despite the fact that his age and marital status meant that he was not required to. For this he could at least not be chided for his indecisiveness.

Thomas spent over a year of his army service in England, working as a map-reading instructor. During this time he wrote most of his poems. His decision to enlist had carried with it a second decision to write poetry rather than prose.

Thomas was posted to France in early 1917 where he served as an observer for the Royal Garrison Artillery. Robert Frost informed him that he had convinced his publisher to accept a book of Thomas' poems. Thomas was killed by the blast of a shell on Easter Sunday, April 9, 1917.

Thomas' book of poems came out later that year. One of them was written in 1915 just before he decided to enlist. He had cut branches for firewood, tied them into faggots, and piled them against a hedge for use in the coming winters:

There they stand, on their ends, the fifty faggots
That once were underwood of hazel and ash
In Jenny Pinks's Copse. Now, by the hedge
Close packed, they make a thicket fancy alone
Can creep through with the mouse and wren. Next Spring
A blackbird or a robin will nest there,
Accustomed to them, thinking they will remain
Whatever is for ever to a bird:
This Spring it is too late; the swift has come.
'Twas a hot day for carrying them up:

Better they will never warm me, though they must
Light several Winters' fires. Before they are done
The war will have ended, many other things
Have ended, maybe, that I can no more
Foresee or more control than robin and wren.

Thomas had sent the poem to Robert Frost, asking him if it was “north of Boston.” The phrase, deriving from the title of Frost’s 1914 book that Thomas had reviewed and praised, was shorthand for the new unadorned style of poetry that they both preferred. Frost called it the “sound of sense” (Parini. 1999, p. 77).

Thomas’ poem is a variation on some of the ideas in one of Frost’s poems in *North of Boston: The Wood-Pile*. On a walk through the forest, the speaker comes upon a pile of wood that someone had cut several years before and not come back to claim. The poem ends on the idea that the cutter must have changed his mind about the future:

I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

Perhaps Thomas was telling his friend that he was about to make a decision that might make his wood-cutting simply an exercise, planning for a future that will not occur. Both poems show that though we do things to improve our lot, the future is not under our control. What we do now may have no meaning in a later context.

We make decisions. These are designed to improve a future that we can neither foresee nor completely control. Many preceding forces contribute to what we decide. Often our decisions are

fully determined by these unconscious forces. In these cases, we can later rationalize that we acted in a particular way for reasons did not actually contribute to our decision. Yet we can make conscious choices. Sometimes we work out as best we can what we should do. Sometimes these choices render what went before irrelevant.

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Hollis, M. (2011). *Now all roads lead to France: The last years of Edward Thomas*. London: Faber. (particularly pp. 233-237). A brief introduction to the book is: Hollis, M. (2011). Edward Thomas, Robert Frost and the road to war. *The Guardian*, July 29, 2011.

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(I am indebted to Constantine Cernenko for discussions of *The Road not Taken*.)