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The Heraclitus of New Hampshire

by Eric Ormsby

On *The Notebooks of Robert Frost*, edited by Robert Faggen

Not surprisingly for "one acquainted with the night," Robert Frost cultivated a lifelong penchant for dark sayings. These sayings included aphorisms and maxims, apothegms and proverbs, wise saws and the occasional *bon mot*, alongside interjections, exclamations, and guffaws, interrupted thoughts and broken utterances. They were dark because they riddled, sometimes as much by their sound as by their content. Many, of course, made their way into his finest poems. "Good fences make good neighbors" is the obvious example, but the closer you look the more you find. So strong is this tendency in Frost's poetry that even his less aphoristic lines have taken on a lapidary sheen. "And miles to go before I sleep," though hardly an aphorism, is often intoned as though it were. These dark sayings of our own Heraclitus of New Hampshire have by now become so familiar as to appear immemorial folk wisdom. And yet, clad in cunning homespun though they are, they conceal contradictory flashes of wit as well as mischief. Like the milkweed pod with its "bitter milk," of which he wrote so memorably, their rough husks hold hidden, and sometimes ticklish, silks.

Now, with the publication of his *Notebooks*, we can gauge just how fundamental such fragmented wisdom was to Frost's own peculiar cast of mind.[1] The effect, over hundreds of pages and decade after decade of a very long life, is one of scattered profusion. The present volume, edited by Robert Faggen, reproduces, in "facsimile transcription," all forty-eight of Frost's surviving notebooks dating from the 1890s to 1962, a year before his death; some notebooks have apparently not survived, and, in those which do, few drafts or versions of the most celebrated poems appear (Frost tended to destroy his first drafts). The transcription retains overstrikes, blanks, misspellings, line-breaks, as well as several excellent reproductions of notebook pages, so that one has the sensation of encountering the originals. The editor supplies an elegant and perceptive introduction, as well as illuminating notes. There are a few unfortunate typos and the occasional incorrect page reference, but these do not mar what is by any criterion a magnificent achievement. The publication of the *Notebooks*, the first volume in a six-volume *Collected Works*, is a literary event of the first magnitude.

Frost's notebooks swarm with disconnected jottings on almost every conceivable topic, from reflections on poetry and poets to reading lists to notes on science, history and American politics; one of the richest notebooks even contains items relating to the years from 1900 to 1909, which Frost spent as a poultry farmer in Derry, New Hampshire. They reveal Frost as inquisitive, searching, opinionated, insightful, and more than a little obsessive. They also make plain that he was a brilliant aphorist as well as a great poet. Despite their haphazard aspect, the notebooks return year after year to certain dominant themes. His recurrent meditations on such topics as the nature of poetry and "the sound of sense" are especially significant, as when, for example, he remarks,

“Metaphor is not only in thought it is in the sentence sounds as well” (his punctuation).

The true riches of the *Notebooks* are to be found not solely in those cogitations which bore fruit later either in finished poems or formal essays but in their very scatteredness. Out of cryptic scribbles, Frost will suddenly loft a polished epigram, all the more beautiful for being still in the nascent state; many of his most impressive remarks in these pages haven’t yet been hammered into final form, and, yet, they’re arresting in their raggedness. Thus, in a notebook dating probably from 1912–1915, he says (with reference to what he calls “an unsystematized fact”), “The poems stand in some such loose relation as a ring of flushed girls who have just stopped dancing and let go hands.” The tacit strands between a sequence of poems in a collection—and in particular, one of his own—have rarely been more exquisitely suggested; in the silences which separate individual poems there is a suspended tension, a felicitous aftershock, like the charged pause that follows the close of a polka. A bit later, in the same notebook, Frost remarks mysteriously, “A poem would be no good that hadn’t doors I wouldn’t leave them open though” (his punctuation). A good poem should have doors but the doors are to be kept shut: could there be a better characterization of Frost’s greatest poems? For his poems are in fact most opaque just when they seem most transparent.

Frost was well aware of this; it was a calculated effect. As he confided to an earlier notebook, “You have to be pretty secret in your thinking if you are going to secrete anything.” And to a friend he wrote, in a letter which Haggen quotes in his introduction, “I have written to keep the curious out of the secret places of my mind both in my verse and in my letters to such as you.” Accordingly, there are few personal revelations in the notebooks, but Frost’s delight in secrecy is so strong throughout that it comes to seem an essential aspect of his aesthetic. After a first reading of the *Notebooks*—and this is a volume which invites repeated readings—I wonder whether Frost’s extreme discretion served to protect not any specific secrets, personal or otherwise, but rather signalled a distinctive quirk of his creative endeavor. The great secret lay not in some dark, hidden wisdom but in an intricate and continually shifting notion of truth itself; truth, in effect, was to be found in the suspension, if not the equipoise, of colliding truths. On the simplest level, this notion of concatenating truths found poetic expression in metaphor; as he notes, “The strangeness is all in thinking two things at once, in being in two places at once. This is all there is to metaphor.” But there were surprising corollaries beyond metaphor, as when Frost says, “Hegel taught a doctrine of opposites, but said nothing about … everything’s having more than one opposite” and then goes on to define the “constant symbol” in poetry as “confluence without compromise.”

As the *Notebooks* show, Frost was a sophisticated reader of philosophy; he knew the Greeks from Thales on and had read Hegel, Schopenhauer, William James, and Bergson (a particular favorite), among others. Here he isn’t making a case for some relativistic notion of truth (indeed, he isn’t making a case at all but having what he liked to call “a think”). Instead, he is winkling out the capacity of poetry to capture, in a single dramatic image or synechdoche, a “confluence” of colliding truths. The object of a poem wasn’t to concoct some slick “unity of opposites;” it was to find those words—“words that have been mouthed like a common tin cup,” as he put it—through which multiple oppositions could flash forth from a single point of compression. An early jotting states, “I thought I was an {acromatic} lense. I’m afraid I am a prism” (his brackets and spelling). Metaphor was one obvious “prismatic” device but for Frost’s purposes, the aphorism, the proverb, and, especially, the figure of synechdoche, offered higher powers of refraction.

The *Notebooks* prove Frost a master of aphorism. Haggen likens him to Lichtenberg; the comparison isn’t far-fetched. Some of Frost’s aphorisms have a classic cast: “The malicious talker commits himself to an enmity” or “Absolute outsideness forever eludes us” or “Repetition analyzes.” Others are lyrical, hovering between incisiveness and suggestion: “Thought advances like spilled water along dry ground. Stopping gathering breaking out and running again” or, in a similar vein: “The smoke flowed down the roof and in the open window and up the chimney again.” A few have a

disturbing, almost Beckettian, bleakness: “Only one way to come into this vast hollow with no surrounding walls.” Still fewer are unexpectedly personal: “In composing poetry I am packing up to go a long way on wings.” These polished dicta spring from the page amid a welter of notations which range from the banal to the truly bizarre (“The bat flew out of my mouth/ I nearly died in my sleep”) and yet, all the jottings send us back to the poetry with new eyes.

To give one example: In “Mowing,” one of the loveliest poems from his first collection, *A Boy’s Will* of 1913, Frost wrote, “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.” I hadn’t thought about the strangeness of this line, a beautifully cadenced aphorism, until I came back to it fresh from the *Note* *Notebooks*. Is a fact a “dream,” however sweet? And how does labor (in either of its senses) know it? From the *Notebooks* we see that fact troubled Frost as much as it attracted him. In one entry he remarked that historians who used novelistic techniques disturbed him because “they can overindulge the dramatic and storified till I lose my confidence that there is such a thing as fact. Maybe there isnt any such thing” (his emphasis and spelling). But in a later entry he stated, “I’m not a realist but an actualist. I set down nothing that hasn’t … to my knowledge actually happened in words and tones I have actually heard.”

Frost’s grasp of fact, as most of us understand the word, could be shaky. During the years when he practiced chicken farming, he occasionally wrote articles for the journal *Farm Poultry*. One such, published in 1903 and entitled “Three Phases of the Poultry Industry,” alluded to a neighbor’s geese and declared, “Mr. Hall’s geese roost in trees even in the winter.” It’s a nice solid Frostian sentence but utterly incorrect, and a concerted cluck of outrage from indignant chicken-farmers ensued. Frost made things worse by brazening his error out. In rebuttal he said, “What more natural, in speaking of geese in close connection with hens, than to speak of them as if they *were* hens?” This was fanciful enough, but Frost made it worse by arguing that “‘roost in the trees’ has here simply suffered what the grammarians would call attraction from the subject with which it should be in agreement to the one uppermost in the mind.” The poultry farmers of New Hampshire failed to appreciate such grammatical sophistries and Frost’s career as a poultry correspondent came to an ignominious end. (Lawrance Thompson, who recounts the episode in his biography, spitefully calls this chapter “Fact as Dream.”)

Clearly, Frost’s “facts” were not those of the almanac; Frost probably couldn’t tell a Toulouse goose from an Embden. But the facts of a poem—or at least, of a Frost poem—were more mercurial than the roosting habits of geese. They represented facts in the making, they were instances of the momentary truths of conjunction, not immutable data. In “Mowing,” the fact is the act of mowing itself (it’s no coincidence that “fact” has “act” tucked inside it). In Frost’s poetry, the fact often assumes the shape of an object, a buzz saw or a grindstone, a prize chicken or a drowsy woodchuck. But, down-to-earth and immediate as these are, they hover teasingly on the brink of allegory, never fully abstracted but also never fully themselves. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Frost was no symbolist (he called himself instead a “synechdochist”). However lovely, dark, and deep the woods, they do not stand in for something else—but neither are they merely “woods.” They are moral figures in a landscape of exemplar, closer to Dante’s *selva oscura* than to Baudelaire’s “forest of symbols.”

In “Mowing,” the “fact” is a composite of particulars: “the long scythe whispering to the ground,” the “feeble-pointed spikes of flowers,” and that “bright-green snake,” all caught in the momentary making of the hay, itself the result of “the earnest love that laid the swale in rows.” But the fact is more than a *datum*, what is given; it is a *factum*, something made or done. The final line of the poem makes this plain: “My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.” Characteristically, it is the sound of the scythe, not its cutting sweep, which Frost accentuates. As he says in the *Notebooks*, “Good writing deals with things present to the eye of the mind in tones of voice present to the ear of the mind.” The whisper of the scythe is a “fact” which briefly makes other facts palpable; it is one of

those “clear images of sound” Frost most prized.

Throughout his notebooks, Frost praises the virtues of proverb, a denser concentration of wisdom than the aphorism; as a poet, he aspired to the proverbial. In one note he says, “It is best to be flattered when your thought is taken for what everybody has thought, just as it is when your simile passes for a folk saying from a locality.” It’s easy to imagine why: in a proverb many voices coalesce; it is a spoken wisdom; and it can be applied to a shifting array of situations. It is the very sound of simultaneity, and anonymous as the whispering of a scythe.

Notes

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1. *The Notebooks of Robert Frost*, edited by Robert Faggen; Harvard University Press, 848 pages, $39.95. Go back to the text.

Eric Ormsby's latest book is *Ghazali* (Oneworld).

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