Whose Frost?
The Biographer, the Poet, and the Reader

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Post-modernists have made us all aware of the ways in which our versions of reality are, at least to some extent, structured by language—selected words, formulated/formulaic narratives through which we perceive, understand, remember, form even our self-conceptions. In this view, we are texts to be read; we create texts and read. And yet, verbal constructs though we may be, we move, breathe, get angry, and love: our blood courses, our pressure rises, and we sweat, shout, and laugh, physically bursting the bo(und)ls of language. When a writer sets out to render a life in words, the matter is no longer theoretical, conjectural, subconscious, or debatable. Constructing a Life is a conscious effort at the verbal creation of a person, involving selection of words and material (whether out of memories, research, or both). When the Life is another's, the responsible biographer must surely feel the combined weights of fidelity to fact but also to the spirit, that elusive essence of personality.

Virginia Woolf asks: "How can one make a life of six cardboard boxes full of tailors' bills, love letters and old picture postcards?" (qtd. by Edel in Pachter 19). And we may ask: once one has made that Life whose is it—whose creation is this character? To what extent does that "maker" have—or feel—ownership of it? Woolf describes the difficulty and the art of the labor: "On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one" (qtd. in Novarr 53)—her mixed metaphors suggesting the almost irreconcilable roles the biographer must play. Complicating the issue is that if the book is to be well organized and readable, it will have the sort of focus and point of view readers have come to expect of any text we are willing to finish, further, to interact with.

To realize this, of course, is to shift our gaze to the one who is doing the focusing, selecting, telling. Shall we trust the tale or the teller, or neither? Edel writes of the biographer's "well-nigh impossible act of incorporating himself into the experience of another,...becoming for a while that other person, even while remaining himself" (Writing Lives 40-41), and this, when his subject was safely dead. We can only imagine how much more difficult the task when one is "Boswellizing," interacting with a living subject as well as with those cardboard boxes, living through the
tensions of a face-to-face relationship while selecting, shaping, planning that book, choosing and combining the words that will "create" in its attempt to re-create that living other.

The story, rather the potential stories, of the Thompson-Frost relationship must yet be written. One version would have been the one Thompson himself wanted, but didn't live, to write: The Story of a Biography. Those of us who have read Frost and Thompson could construct our own versions (see Burnshaw, Sutton, Sheehy, and Francis). My purpose here is not to tell a story, but to use elements of that story to examine what I see as important underlying issues in this dynamic relationship and in the biographical enterprise, among them the question of "ownership," and its corollary, the extent to which a biography is a collaboration between subject and biographer, especially when the subject is alive and in some measure cooperating. While I would hesitate to generalize from the analysis of this one biographical relationship, I suspect that much of it can be applied to others.

Perhaps fundamental to any discussion of biography is what goes into the making of a life (to use Woolf's term), what is happening when one fallible and vulnerable human being sets out, then devotes himself, to the (re)creation of another human being. The gatherer/researcher becomes the teller; the well informed teller becomes the artist/shaper, selecting, dramatizing. What a person does and says is the stuff of narrative, but the biographer is not content only with the "plot"; he is trying to create character--an identity--what one is, not simply what one has done. As we focus on the resulting Life, we all too seldom ask what that process of "incorporating himself into the ... other" has cost the biographer and what he thus, consciously or unconsciously, expects in return if he has indeed deeply invested himself in the work. To what extent has the biographer's investment, his own psychic cost in addition to his earned expertise, entitled him to feel in control of that subject? When the subject is a very alive ego, one can well imagine the drama of that struggle, whether articulated or not.

Leon Edel warns biographers not to fall in love with their subjects and that it is even less useful to write in hate (29). Thompson's notes contain the stuff of a tragic novel: friendship gone sour, mutual trust turning to mutual mistrust, hurt, and just plain surfeit. One feels that the actual relationship between them over the years betrayed, in a way, Thompson's idealized Frost; and as we know, disillusioned idealism or love can become very bitter. In a notebook, begun upside down and backwards in 1939, he wrote:
Only fair that this should start upside down, for my world has been turned topsy-turvy. I promise myself to try hard. Aside from that I have little faith in being able to walk on the ceiling... "It's like being invited down to Stratford by the bard" (Notebook 12 August 1939).

Or this: (Notebook 24 February 1940) "lucky he doesn't know how much I love him." Or this: "But my first reaction is one that will not leave--my downright inability to do the task worthily." (Notes 1). And then, written in 1963:

[H]ere I am, pretending that I'm anxious to go up and see Frost when the truth of the matter is that I'm still so puckered at the way he has treated me that I really don't care whether I ever see him again, alive or dead.... The irony...of our going through the motions, to see if we can arrange what neither one of us wants to have arranged. (Notes 866)

How very sad this is, this love-hate drama. "The way he has treated me" seems the giveaway. One is stuck throughout the Thompson notes, right through the obvious resentments, by how much the relationship to Frost matters to him. The nastiness that makes the notes, in Stanley Burnshaw's view, such unpleasant reading must also be seen as expressions of hurt; so much is there that never finds its way into the biography that one can be grateful he had these notes in which to vent his spleen.

Other biographers have written of their struggles to remain objective through intense ambivalence and involvement with their subjects: Doris Kearns (Goodwin) writes of working with the living Lyndon Johnson: "The best we can offer is a partial rendering, a subjective portrait...shaped as much by our own biography...as by the raw materials themselves.... One cannot live with and worry about a subject for years without alternating feelings of anger, admiration, aggression, and affection.... [D]espite the pull of fascination,...I had to learn how to distance myself, in order to describe both his ruthless power...and his vulnerability" (in Pachter 91-92).

Beyond the ambivalence and the tensions between involvement and distance is the fear many share of losing their identity, whether their subjects are alive or dead. Kearns writes of "a counterbalancing need to get away, to leave, not to be owned." (92). Similar to Edel's expressed difficulties of "becoming for a while that other person, even while remaining himself", Steele writes of his: "I came to fear the way in which [Lippmann] would insidiously take over my life (qtd. in Zinsser 14). [At the same time] Lippmann knew that in some sense I held his life in my
hands (18).... A biographer and his subject are both partners and antagonists.... It's like a marriage...to break the pact would be an admission of bad faith...each carefully protects himself while realizing that his full development can come only in union with the other" (123-124). We cannot escape the collaborative--the frighteningly symbiotic--nature of the biographical process these writers describe, one that has to affect a living subject as well, for not only are these subjects being "read," they are in the process of being written. Identities--and texts--become both prizes and stakes in the complex tug-of-war whose players can include even us. Thompson realized that he needed to make of this life a good book that had some kind of unity, not simply a collection of facts in chronological order. While he was drawing from life, he was creating a book with Robert Frost as its main character.

We might also see in this collaboration (as elsewhere) contradictory needs and impulses in Frost. He wanted the truth told, but he feared it. He wanted to be the hero made into that book, but he hated the person who was doing it to him. Perhaps at bottom was Frost's competitive spirit: whose life was it anyway, whose story to tell? For Frost was constantly presenting himself, telling himself, and altering his stories (Sutton), probably out of a need to protect and keep his "self-possession" while another was sharing in the making of this Frost-text. Burnshaw quotes Frost saying to him: "I want you to save me from Larry," and reads this as a plea to set his name aright, his legitimate fear that a wounded name will be left behind. But I see yet another fear, one that Frost may not have been fully or consciously aware of: that of having shared his life-text too much with another, that his life and identity was to be another person's construction, and while he wanted to be "biographed" and known, his contradictory need was to be left inviolate as an entity that only he possessed. He had invited and then, I suspect, deeply feared the collaborative construction that was to be a biography by one who was creating a Robert Frost in competition with Robert Frost. This act of making may have been as threatening in its rivalling Frost's act of self-making and self-presenting as anything that might have been revealed.

The dynamics of identity creation and protection have fascinating psychological ramifications. Edel goes so far as to liken the biography/subject relationship to the therapist/patient one, fraught with all the dangers of transference ("Dilemma"). At the early stages, Frost was confiding in Thompson and seemed to need him as a friend, especially during that difficult time following the death of Elinor (1939). Edel's transference and therapy analogy may have been more actual than analogous for a while and, thus, potentially more damaging.
It will surely be obvious by this time that the stakes were higher, and more complex, than their two reputations, than scholarship, or even fidelity to the historical Frost. True, Frost was Thompson's ticket to posterity—a large stake indeed; still, one feels the weight of a very personal and deeply felt investment in the project and in the relationship. There can be no greater proof of this than in Thompson's limiting the surgery on his brain tumor in order to keep his brain fit to complete this life work. Jonathan Barron suggests that in thus "literally (not metaphorically) sacrificing himself for Frost" Thompson recognized Frost's life (the life, not the work was at issue) as mattering more even than his own. In the context of literary history, of course, Thompson would lose in any competition over who was the more important writer. But his sacrifice to the life of Frost cuts both ways: It was not Robert Frost or his work he was saving, but his Frost—on the one hand his life work, the final fruits of all he had invested in his magnum opus; on the other hand, his version of Frost. While Thompson surely suffers in comparison with Boswell, what Patricia Meyer Spacks writes of Boswell invites application to Thompson as well: Boswell, feeling Johnson always his superior, "reasserts himself by collecting and setting down stories...but most of all as controller of their significance. At the narrative's heart lies Boswell's discovery of his own power in an asymmetrical relationship with an overwhelmingly powerful man" (Gossip 103).

Which returns us to the issue of control—ownership, possession, each of his own self in the face of control or possession by the other; but also control of the narrative—the tale by the teller, the teller by the tale, or its subject. Inseparable from issues of maintaining self-possession by another is that very love that Edel warns against, which when combined with "possession" of a narrative, and certainly of the information so necessary to it, could, and I believe did, result in a feeling of possessiveness (possessed by what he did not as yet possess). Who was to be the most trusted confidant? Who would be privy to the real Frost, the one that no one else would ever know as well? That Frost must have understood this is evident in the language of the conciliatory letter he wrote to Thompson after the "treason" of the Sergeant biography: "I've meant to give you all the advantages, supply you with all the facts, and keep nothing back...And I have left entirely to your judgment the summing up and the significance." He went on to refer to Thompson's having had a long time to look for "some special phrase or poem to get me by," and to reassure him: "any disturbance you felt from [Sergeant] getting ahead of you in time was foolish. You are ahead of her in plenty of other ways." He went so far as to place only himself as "rival" in penetrating a difficult Frost: "One or the other of us will fathom me sooner or later" (Letters 584). He was not only
assuring him of exclusive information; he was shrewd enough to realize exactly what would have meant the most to him, even as he offered his challenge: you can get me best. This rivalry over Frost seems to me no small part of the friction between Thompson and Kay Morrison. It rings loud and clear in Thompson's notes, where resentment of Kay (which seems to have been mutual) often overshadows resentment of Frost. Control of important information is what Thompson expresses concern about; rivalry is what one can read between the lines. This is one other way, then, that we can ask "Whose Frost is he?"

It fell to Thompson, though, as Frost's choice, to present the most comprehensive and reliable Frost to a public who wanted to "know" him, as well as to scholars who wanted to study him. Wallen says of the portrait metaphor so often invoked in biography: "Portraiture implies an interior, an identity, a consciousness linked to a visible, exterior appearance" (55). Such a view certainly validates Edel's claim that a biography must be psychological (Writing Lives) and also Thompson's psychological approach. Edel's views and possible influence may help to explain Thompson's psychological approach, but only partially. Edel had lectured on this subject in 1960 at Harvard, but long before that, Thompson was looking at his task through psychological lenses. At an early stage in his conceptualizing man and scheme for book, Thompson showed a psychological bent:

I'm interested in the motives behind Frost's fears. My task is to watch the separate FEARS, and study the beautiful variety of SEPARATE growths which spring from them in Frost's life and art. Don't forget to sort them out, as being separate. And get back of those fears, eventually, to some deeper source (Notebook, Jan 20, 1957).

In Thompson's psychological approach we encounter a powerful lens through which Thompson read. (The specific psychoanalytic lens of Karen Horney's theory of neurosis is another, fascinating, subject. See Donald Sheehy's excellent article on the subject. I also discuss it in Toward Robert Frost.) There is no question that lenses (and they are unavoidable) have the power to distort, that pitfalls in a psychological method include insufficient competence and flawed conclusions. Thompson himself raises the most tough-minded, introspective questions (as Edel says one must), turns the analytic spotlight on himself to ask what in him prodded him on so tenaciously, why he "took so much from Frost" (Notes 1544). We can see, though, that Frost might have come out worse without psychology:
It's easy enough to get mad at the old bastard, but when you get down deep enough to understand that he was victimized by a whole set of drives which he couldn't control, then the value of explaining the complication is the value of treating them sympathetically and of giving him credit for having intermittently triumphed over his troubles as well as he did. (Notes 1514)

On balance we must credit Thompson with presenting a complex, conflicted, and insecure figure. Rightly or wrongly, Trilling and Thompson between them forced us all to look again, and more seriously, at Frost. Before the letters and biography erupted, Frost was a poet we loved, while Eliot was a poet to study. Suddenly Frost was someone to study as well, to engage us more fully.

Let us notice, though, that psychology was not only interesting to Thompson: it was also giving him his "hook" and providing him with the beginnings of a structure, a unifying principle. He writes: "It would be hard to find an example of a man whose apparent inconsistencies can be explained as part of a larger consistency. And to me, that is the major goal of my biography" (August, 1946 ts. 305). Our reaction may well be: what price consistency? Actually, Thompson--the teacher of literature, the critic, the academic interested in novels--was profoundly conscious that, with no intent to falsify or distort, he was, in some ways, novelizing as well. He had told Stearns Morse that he viewed Frost "from the point of view of one who had for years lectured on the novel." (172). Indeed, Thompson writes to himself of structural concerns, of needing a unifying theme, as well as his determination to remain as faithful as possible to his subject.

What comes first is CONFLICT OF MOTIVE AND FEELING.... It might tell you how and where to start--with tensions. Start with retrospection: the kinds of questions he asked at the end of his life, in terms of cause and effect. (handwritten notebook)

My but there is the making of a fine novel, in matching two lives like hers [Elinor's] and his, and in watching the inevitable tragedy develop from it...a chain of cause and effect...predicated in the minor tragedy of their very strange and dark courtship. (Notes 150)

Furthermore, he discussed these issues with Frost, even as late as 1953, when the relationship was already very strained. On the subject of twisting facts, for example, "Frost pointed out that we were caught between two desires: the desire for truth (ie, the
specific details as to exactly what happened in combat zones) and the desire for a neat story" (316).

Frost also said the importance in a good biography is for the biographer to have some ideas of his own...that those ideas gave the biography some shape: a beginning, middle, and end (532).

No one understood better than Frost the importance of form and of forming. He understood it as a poet and practitioner of poetic form; he understood it as a human necessity, as "everybody's sanity" (Amherst student, Prose & Poetry 345): "Let chaos storm! ... I wait for form." Surely Thompson found that a psychological approach was helping him to manage not only the structure of his book, but his Frost, which had to include his ongoing relationship with the man himself.

Perhaps as we read the poetry and biography we share Thompson's ambitious pipe-dream: "Every once in a while I have a gleam of insight which gives me hope that I can get into Frost..." (Sunday, Feb. 16, 1958). Get into--penetrate--make ours. "Iser writes about texts that entangle the reader, texts whose indeterminacy and complexity engage us in the act of constructing a reading. The complexity that fascinates and the indeterminacy that puzzles tempt us to penetrate and resolve, whether "Stopping by Woods," its author, or both together, which is surely what Thompson was trying to do. Wallen makes the important point that "in the biography of a writer there is always a double transformation: of the life of the subject into the written text of the biography and of a series of written 'texts' into the life that is narrated by the biography" (54). If we agree, we too can question, as he does, whether criticism and biography can be neatly separated. Thompson, in his speech "The Biographer as Critic," certainly speaks of himself as doing both; he is after all, a teacher of literature. He also wrote Fire and Ice--a critical work on Frost. We remember that the credentials for the role of biographer which commended him to Frost were his critical book on Longfellow, which Frost admired, and his "display" of Frost at Princeton: Thompson--here as archivist, researcher, gatherer of relevant material, not to mention scholar with a great interest in Frost--fascinating admiration, in fact. He posits the belief that "the moral or non-artistic idiom of a lyric poet like Robert Frost inevitably preceded and helped to shape his artistic idiom." (4).

In a literary biography we may really be seeking what Proust called the "autre moi," the author, not the man, the author as a different self (qtd. in Wallen), which we might relate to Thompson's theory of Frost's many masks, to the Jamesian notion of a person's many selves (and not least, to the many dramatic personae in the Frost oeuvre, the Frostian-nonFrostian
speaking voices). I doubt that this "autre" can be totally separated from those visibly acting selves or, at the other pole, from the texts that this "autre" has produced. I suspect that we and the biographer are so eager to penetrate the life in the hope that we will thus be better able to penetrate the literary texts we love. Surely this complicates, raises the stakes, for the biographer who began his task loving both the poetry and the poet.

To represent an identity in depth, to attempt to reach to the "interior," one must try to penetrate that interior--the poet's oeuvre--and also the man as he shows himself outside the poetic texts: letters, conversation and, if in a living relationship, those relationships as they are available to view and to analysis. On one hand, one could say that such "penetration" is all in the service of the presentation; on the other hand, one could see the project of an in-depth, full presentation as the occasion for penetration--Thompson wanting to know and understand Frost. The result, in the biographical work, was to be a carefully studied portrait of Frost-the-poet, whatever else it was, and a view of Frost that might influence all its readers in our view of the man and the poetry. Thompson's Frost was to be a powerful Frost that the living Frost, or Frost's autre-Frost, might well fear was supplanting his own version of himself, either as he told it to himself or to others.

This power of a portrait to shape our vision of Frost(s) may well be what readers of the biography most resist. How, for example, does Thompson's book impinge on "our own" Frost? When we ask "whose Frost is he anyway?" we might ask the analogous question: what does a different reading of a poem do to our own? And connecting these two questions: how do we feel about the biographer as interpreter of the poems? Do we deny him that role or privilege him because of all he knows? If we prefer "our own" Frost, that of course raises the question of where ours comes from. What combinations of reading experiences, training, teachers, texts, voices, information do we bring, which is not even to mention where we each come from. Most relevant here, though, is that we can never unread Thompson even if we want to.

If we love and read Frost's poems, theorize about them--and him--are we as readers not also participating in the "creation" of Frost? To read, then, is both to resist control and to exert it; to share our readings is to rival everyone else who does so--including Frost himself--for possession of the poet and the poems. In the letter quoted above, Frost told Thompson he didn't care if he "plucked the heart out of [his] secret." In Hamlet's context ("You would pluck out the heart of my mystery"), the metaphor was not plant, but music--sounding tunes. This kind of plucking is not simply taking but making. When we read a poem, or a "person," we make meaning, maybe we make a book about the person's life, maybe a paper or
an article. We "play" upon it to make our own music, hoping it will be true, beautiful, and original; hoping we are "getting it."

"We dance round in a ring and suppose, / But the Secret sits in the middle and knows." It's both the secretness and the middleness that keep us dancing around it, of course. Shall we name it that elusive "essence" of personality biographers strive for or James's "pure self"? Though we cannot ever really penetrate, we keep trying, which suggests another "attraction": we want to be included—not peeking in at a window, included, and not just anywhere but inside a very exclusive circle—as those who understand, who have it right, who are, in Thompson's word, "worthy." So we draw closer and suppose. Frost marked his students for how close they came to poetry, and maybe that's our cue as well. Where shall we go to seek that "essence"? We may go to biography, to letters and other primary materials for help, but as Thompson himself acknowledged in his speech, it is the poems that matter most. We return where we began: to the poems, of course.

Notes

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