

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Robert Frost

Robert Wood · Wednesday, January 17th, 2018

You have seen it before. You know it from your mind, the way the field rolls downwards, the way the sun lights the path. You know these pastures and these hills. You know the woods that butt up against the road. You have seen it before, in your mind's eye, but you have never set foot on this distant shore, never visited this land before.

At present, I am writing of Vermont. I had a feeling of how uncannily familiar it was when I went there some years back. I could swear I had been there before, not in a past life but in this one. I knew it from cinema, art, tv and, most of all, from reading. I knew these maples and these spruce, these conifers and grasses. I knew these quaint towns and main streets. I even tasted the apples that grew in the orchards on the outskirts. I knew Vermont in the recesses of my taught mind.

I had this feeling, this feeling of being here before, when I was standing in the yard of a writer in Montpelier. I had visited the original Montpelier earlier, to see my sister, where we ate *pain au chocolate* and roast vegetables, where we ran through the rain in the early morning and sunned ourselves at midday. I had been there, but here, in what proclaimed to be Montpelier as well, I knew somehow that this was a facsimile of a different idea, a place that made me think more of 'England' as a fiction, an 'England' that titled itself 'New' even as it was, like everywhere else, a palimpsest through and through. It was this belief, in the newness of itself, that made it somehow 'American', more 'American' than the trees in the middle distance past the field that rolled downwards, past the pastures and the corn in the garden next to the beans and squash. Here I was in Robert Frost country, in MFA country. I was there as a writing fellow, to participate in workshops, to #workonmynovel.

One lunch I ate pho with faculty member Xu Xi and decided then and there to abandon the novel I said I was working on, which had been a false pretext for coming here if only because it funded a trip to the wedding of a close friend. It was hard letting go of an imaginary project, hard to say no to an idea that Xu thought might be worth pursuing. My 'novel' was, of course, a crime novel, but literary. The story of backpackers and stolen identity that involved the Central Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths, and a man named Red. It was, in my mind, not quite unoriginal enough.

There were many imitators in Vermont, people skilled in mimicry, who ventriloquise other writers, other 'voices'. There is, of course, the kind of literary industrial complex *lingua franca* somewhere between Romantic, lyric, nostalgic, committed, and liberal, voices that fall in the gaps of all these schools because they are simply eclectic with no guiding principle. They all so desperately want to be original individuals. There are those that sound like Frost himself, less soiled though, less rooted

too. People who we might need to be told:

Magnified apples appear and disappear,
 Stem end and blossom end,
 And every fleck of russet showing clear.
 My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
 It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
 I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
 And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
 The rumbling sound
 Of load on load of apples coming in.
 For I have had too much
 Of apple-picking: I am overtired
 Of the great harvest I myself desired.
 There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
 Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
 For all
 That struck the earth,
 No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
 Went surely to the cider-apple heap
 As of no worth.

The writers here do not think of themselves as apples even in this simulacrum of a garden of Eden, do not think of themselves as needing a ladder to throw away when one is done with thinking, of how overtired they sound pumped up with the circuit of the literary market itself. They do not think to cherish each word and work it round for they are busy ignoring how we are all bound for the cider-apple heap and can only forget our death by embracing life itself. They are, somehow, paradoxically unrepresented by words because they think they know them so so well.

Or so I thought. That is what Frost opened up, something authentic, something greater, but that is not true. These people here from MFA programs, I grew to respect them; I grew to like their work and the workshops I went to; the lectures on craft, the conversations about clarity and style and work. As you know, I am writing of Vermont where I had a feeling of how uncanny it was. I knew it from Frost and I could swear I had been there before, as though I was in some liberal wonderland. I had seen it in *Dead Poets Society* and *Girls*, I had tasted it on pancakes in the diners in *Gilmore Girls*. I knew it all from being here before, in a New England that did not remind me of Cambridge at all. As I sat listening to reading after reading it all seemed the same to me, something I had glimpsed before in pages from my childhood library. One after another these writers knew their lineage but did not know that their world had swallowed up mine way over on the west coast of Australia, in the suburbs of my youth in Perth. They had hit bedrock in the generation before.

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One day, there in Vermont, I was eating table grapes by the Winooski River, thinking of a poem that I wanted to write. When it comes it will seem familiar, homely even, more reality than simulacra, a taste of a honey ant in another Garden of Eden, in the desert as far away from Vermont as I can be. But for now, I turn the pages and think of poets I know who respond to Frost in some way, who reject him. I think of touchstones, of motifs and signs, and in his work that is the

apple but it is also the rose. I think of Autumn Royal's 'She Woke and Rose', which goes:

A sheet, a sheet of paper, served
& displayed beneath a layer of plastic
as ordered, documents slitting
decisions, natural like, rest your elbow

against mine & detail to me the weather
before I tell you how she sang
this, this & it sounded like a *kiss*

& being in such a panic she pressed
the scorching iron against her chest
in an attempt to smooth the silk
stolen from the haberdashery—

if she is to become putty, she will do it herself

because this is her first life as a woman
& poetry will help her to receive
her chosen body & the flowering periods
no matter where the blood discharges,
a full length mirror isn't required for her

to know that not all meaning is drained
from the sink, or even soaked & rinsed
to begin with & although there may be wilt
at least this isn't stagnation, *she*
knows, she knows so she woke & rose.

And in that familiar flower, in that rose, we might yet plant an apple seed of hope once we prepare the soil with a compost and heap of worms we have fed on the words of our dead ancestors who have not left us, not even here in Vermont where the tamed lands stretch for miles and the sun itself hides for half the year and the grasses are covered in snow and frost, afraid of what violence is possible when all seems agreeable and solved.

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