

# “Play for Mortal Stakes”: Work and Play in the Poetry of Robert Frost

di Gregory Dowling

Robert Frost, who understood the importance of image in all senses of the word, liked to have himself photographed while engaged in rural activities: if not actually mowing, mending walls or apple-picking, at least with axe over his shoulders while setting off in winter in the woods alone... Many of his poems describe such activities and the tools needed to perform them: ax-helves, scythes, spades and saws play prominent roles. The usual tendency, when discussing these poems, is to see these activities as metaphors for poetry, or, at least, for artistic endeavour in a general sense. Thus laying “the swale in rows” (*Mowing*) corresponds to arranging lines on a page, “clean[ing] the pasture spring” and “wait[ing] to watch the water clear” are obvious references to the Pierian Spring, and “the lines of a good helve” that must be “native to the grain” are the equivalent of the lines in a good American poem. There is a good deal to be said for such interpretations but just for once I would like to look at such poems in a more literal way, to appreciate the realism of Frost’s pictures of physical labour.

First of all, there is no doubt that these are the poems of a man who really has engaged in such activities. It has been said that Frost was never a very successful farmer and that it is no accident that he moved so frequently from the farm to academe and back again. This may well be true but it is hardly to the point. Successful or not, he had worked on the land and his poetry is full of images that clearly derive

from direct experience. We believe that he has held a scythe and heard it “whispering to the ground” and that he has worn “his fingers rough with handling” the stones of a tumbled wall. Perhaps no poem is more convincing in its images of physical sensation than *After Apple-Picking*:

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.

When teaching this poem I was once asked by a student if I had ever spent a day picking apples myself; I had to admit that I had not and the student, who had grown up on a farm, said that she had never read such a convincing account of the physical and mental exhaustion that such an activity leads to, with its surreal blurring of memories, sensations and dreams.

As well as depicting such activities with convincing realism, the poems pay tribute to the particular skills of such labour. In *The Death of the Hired Man* Warren’s antagonistic attitude towards the unreliable old labourer begins to alter at the moment he recalls one of Silas’s specific talents, his ability to “build a load of hay”:

He bundles every forkful in its place,  
 And tags and numbers it for future reference,  
 So he can find and easily dislodge it  
 In the unloading. Silas does that well.

He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.  
You never see him standing on the hay  
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself

The last two lines are ones that critics have glossed by referring them to Frost's contempt for a certain kind of over-ambitious, pretentious poetry, and there may be something in this. But at the heart of these lines is his admiration for focused craft, which is relevant to all kinds of activities, including – and perhaps we need reminding of this – the specific one that is being described. Silas knows what he is doing and Warren respects him for this (as clearly does Frost).

The poem succeeds in creating a moving portrait of the old labourer, without ever sinking into sentimentality. One of the ways it does this is by keeping things entirely realistic; we believe in Silas's skills just as we do in his foibles. The poem certainly does not idealise him; one of the endearing touches is the description of the arguments Silas had with the college-boy, Harold Wilson, with whom he had worked four years earlier.

He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying  
He studied Latin like the violin  
Because he liked it – that an argument!  
He said he couldn't make the boy believe  
He could find water with a hazel prong –  
Which showed how much good school had ever  
done him.

We can here see a theme that recurs in Frost's works: the encounter between two kinds of worker, the scholar and the labourer, an encounter that all too often is a clash. Silas scorns Harold Wilson's books, just as Harold had scorned Silas's genuine skills (one does have the impression that Frost believed in water-dowsing). We find similar encounters in *The Ax-Helve* and in *From Plane to Plane*, and at one point Frost even conceived the idea of writing a novel around the theme. We get the sense that school had not done sufficient good to Harold, if it could not teach him to appreciate the kind of knowledge possessed by Silas; but conversely Silas is wrong to despise Harold's books. Frost's poems continually endeavour to bring both kinds of knowledge fruitfully together.

*The Ax-Helve* is the poem in which the descriptions of the physical activities and its tools seem most deliberately to nudge the reader towards a metaphorical reading:

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He liked to have it slender as a whipstock,  
Free from the least knot, equal to the strain  
Of bending like a sword across the knee.  
He showed me that the lines of a good helve  
Were native to the grain before the knife  
Expressed them, and its curves were no false  
curves  
Put on it from without. And there its strength lay  
For the hard work.

And, lest we should miss the point, the narrator spells things out:

Do you know, what we talked about was knowl-  
edge?  
Baptiste on his defense about the children  
He kept from school, or did his best to keep –  
Whatever school and children and our doubts  
Of laid-on education had to do  
With the curves of his ax-helves...

One may even feel that the all-too explicit analogy comes close to being an example of a false curve being put on the poem from without. However, what keeps the poem from being merely didactic is again the convincing portrait that Frost gives us of the French Canadian woodcutter. Here too the realism lies mostly in the physical details Frost gives us, whether it is the woodman's "thick thumbnail" "plowing the grain" on the ax-helve to "show how it ran / Across the handle's long-drawn serpentine" or the sharp description of how the woodman interrupted the narrator at his work:

He caught my ax expertly on the rise,  
When all my strength put forth was in his favor,  
Held it a moment where it was, to calm me,  
Then took it from me – and I let him take it.

These four lines are very simply stated, but they have something of the efficacy of the famous opening lines of *Home Burial*; the first sixteen lines of that poem mainly describe the movements on the stairs of Amy and her husband but, as one critic has put it, with this description Frost "maps with scary accuracy the dimensions of their estrangement" (Mason, 182). In "The Ax-Helve", too, with the simple account of the actions and reactions of Baptiste and the narrator, he manages to give us full insight into the relations between the two men; when it comes to physical labour and exertion, Baptiste is clearly the superior and the

narrator has to defer to him. And later in the poem, whatever doubts he might have of Baptiste's educational theories, there is no denying his respect for his skills as woodman.

In other poems the narrator shows the pride and pleasure he takes in possessing at least a modicum of such skills himself. The most famous example is his Depression poem, *Two Tramps in Mud-Time*, in which the narrator is once again interrupted while chopping wood, this time by two tramps who clearly expect to be offered payment for doing the job themselves. This poem is written in vigorous tetrameter octaves, with alternating rhymes and frequent anapaestic substitutions in the iambic lines, so that the form itself communicates the sheer physical enjoyment he derives from the activity:

Good blocks of beech it was I split,  
 As large around as the chopping block;  
 And every piece I squarely hit  
 Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.  
 The blows that a life of self-control  
 Spares to strike for the common good  
 That day, giving a loose to my soul,  
 I spent on the unimportant wood.

The lines alternate between the iambic regularity of "And every piece I squarely hit" and the aptly freer rhythm of "That day, giving a loose to my soul". Just so, the narrator's activity is poised between the drudgery of a routine task and the sheer fun of an outdoor game. The form of the poem already prepares us for the famous line in the final stanza: "And the work is play for mortal stakes", a description that critics have often extended to his own poetry. We remember, after all, that Frost famously compared writing free verse to playing tennis with the net down.

Of course, Frost is aware that work cannot always be so satisfying to those who engage in it, and some of his most powerful poems depict the depression and weariness of those whose work is far from containing any ludic or pleasurable elements. *A Servant to Servants* is perhaps the best-known of such poems, in which the speaker expresses her anguished longing for rest "from doing / Things over and over that just won't stay done". The drudgery of housework has perhaps never been so neatly – and depressingly – encapsulated.

There is certainly nothing sentimental in Frost's depiction of domestic life; for the speaker of *A Servant to*

*Servants* it seems all too natural that a home should contain "a sort of cage [...] of hickory poles" in the attic and she can imagine the incarcerated madman twanging them "until / His hands had worn them smooth as any oxbow". As so often with Frost, the disturbing power of the lines comes mainly from the convincing nature of the physical details; Frost rarely puts a foot wrong when it comes to artefacts made from wood.

In *Home Burial* the wife's dissatisfactions are exacerbated to tragic dimensions by bereavement. In her anguished state she is incapable of comprehending what her husband's physical labour can mean to him; she does not realise that turning to his habitual, season-based activities is his way of coping with his grief. The very act of digging the grave helps him to create some kind of ritualistic framework for the event that has overwhelmed their lives. Amy, however, almost seems to see this action as a way of murdering the baby over again.

I saw you from that very window there,  
 Making the gravel leap and leap in air,  
 Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly  
 And roll back down the mound beside the hole.

These lines, with their hypnotic repetitions and alliterations, reveal the intense and obsessive anguish with which she had watched her husband at work; as Randall Jarrell points out (213), the agility of the gravel, reacting to her husband's spade, is in tragic contrast with the stillness of their dead child. The husband is even so insensitive as to bring the spade into the house; what for her husband is his working tool, and hence some kind of remedy against the pain, for Amy almost seems to be a murder-weapon.

Of course, tools can be literally murderous in Frost's world. Such is the case of the buzz-saw in *Out, Out...*

At that word, the saw,  
 As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,  
 Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap –  
 He must have given the hand. However, it was,  
 Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!

This poem, from the very title, creates its most powerful effects from a determined and almost exaggerated minimalism. The tragic events are recounted with the deliberate economy of language that, as we are told in *The Code*, characterises New England farm-

hands. After the boy's heartfelt cry to his sister – "Don't let him cut my hand off – / The doctor when he comes. Don't let him sister!", the narrator begins the next line with the one-word sentence, "So." It is not an exclamation, but rather a simple constatation. These, we are given to understand, are the facts of working life – and death – in such an environment. We have already been told that "he was old enough to know," and what he knows is that a boy without a hand in such circumstances will find "all spoiled".

There is only one moment in the poem when the narrator allows himself a personal and emotive comment on the little tragedy, and that is at the beginning of the poem, when he says: "Call it a day, I wish they might have said / To please the boy by giving him the half hour / That a boy counts so much when saved from work." Here we are made to confront the source of the tragedy: a boy "[d]oing a man's work" when clearly he should be at out swinging birches or playing baseball. If it is not possible for work itself to be "play for mortal stakes", then at least a suitable balance should be found between play and work, between vocation and avocation. Just so we remember that in "Directive", with its terrifying picture of a vanished community, one that had failed in its struggle against the forces of nature, the narrator tells us that the pilgrim to this lost land can still find traces of both the "house in earnest", where work was carried on, and the "children's playhouse". It is in the latter that the mysterious and salvific "broken drinking goblet like the Grail" is found.

What is truly terrifying in *Directive* is the fact that so few traces of the working life have remained: there is just a single field that is "no bigger than a harness-gall" – a pitiless simile that not only exaggerates, in true pioneering "tall-tale" fashion, the exiguousness of the mark that the workers have left on the land, but also testifies to the pain of their struggle. For Frost the terror is always that of annihilation. This is a fear that in part derives from the history of the land where Frost lived and set nearly all of his works. New England, with its rigid climate and thin soil, had witnessed numerous failed attempts at settlement and "conquest" of the land over the centuries, and the countryside is dotted with abandoned homes, farms and even entire villages which testify to this struggle.

In some cases, as in *Directive* or *Desert Places*, it seems that the forces of nature are overwhelmingly hostile and all man's endeavours are destined to be

swept away, leaving nothing but "[a] blanker whiteness of benighted snow / With no expression, nothing to express". The mending of walls, however practically useless it may be, is at least a way of ensuring that some kind of testimonial to our presence remains on the land; one is reminded of Frost's remarks in his "Letter to an Amherst Student" about the need for form: "When in doubt there is always form for us to go on with [...]. The background in hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos: and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration. What pleasanter than that this should be so?"

However, there are also poems when the devastation is one that has been wrought by man's labour on – or against – the land; this is the case in the bleak poem *The Census Taker*, where the ax-wielding former inhabitants have left nothing but "[a]n emptiness flayed to the very stone". All that is left to testify to their presence is "a slab-built, black-paper-covered house / Of one room and one window and one door" and "the pitch-blackened stub of an ax-handle". It is all too appropriate that the ax itself is reduced to a stub, like the trees that it has reduced to "rotting trunk[s] / Without a single leaf to spend on autumn". Equally appropriate is the singleness of each remnant ("One room and one window and one door"...), making it clear that there is no hope of any kind of germination or fruitfulness in such an environment. Indeed, the narrator intimates at the very beginning of the poem, in a telling parenthesis, what lay behind such wanton destructiveness: "It never had been dwelt in, though by women [...]."

Fruitful labour, Frost seems to suggest, can only come about when men and women work together; and in all of Frost's tenderest love poetry, the love between men and women is closely, if sometimes mysteriously, connected with a love for the land. Clear examples are *The Telephone*, *Two Look at Two*, *West-Running Brook* and *Putting in the Seed*. This last sonnet, indeed, suggests that the combined labour of the couple on the land is akin to the act of love-making itself. The concluding image of the poem, while explicitly referring to the burgeoning of the crops sowed by the narrator, clearly hints at a parallel fruitfulness in the couple's own relationship:

How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed  
On through the watching for that early birth

When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,  
 The sturdy seedling with arched body comes  
 Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

The seedling itself seems to come into the world with the irruptive vigour of one already prepared for a life of physical labour.

It is always hard to draw simple and all-purpose conclusions from Frost's poetry, and this also applies to his poems on the subject of work. Work can be demeaning drudgery, as in *A Servant to Servants*, or it can be cruel and life-destroying, as in *Out Out...* It can also seem desperately fruitless, leaving no discernible traces, as in *Directive*, or leaving only negative ones, as in *The Census Taker*. However, his poetry also offers plenty of examples where the act of labour, whether it be putting in the seed, apple-picking, mowing, gum-gathering, knife-grinding or gathering leaves, is the fruit of a "springtime passion for the earth" and is thus in harmony with the rhythms of nature. Manifestations of this passion may range from the "sheer morning

gladness at the brim" that led the mower to spare the tuft of flowers to Silas's careful tagging and numbering of each forkful of hay "for future reference". In such cases, Frost seems to suggest, there is the slight possibility – "a fraction of one per cent at the very least", as he says in *Our Hold on the Planet* – that the earth might return our love, thus giving sense and meaning to our labour. In *Two Look at Two* he describes such a reward as an "unlooked-for favour" on the part of the earth, and hedges it with an "as if". But this poem, like so many of those in which a boundless moment seems to offer a positive revelation, suggests that if it is an illusion, it is at least an illusion worth having.

### Works cited

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## C.K. Williams

### Invisible Mending

Three women old as angels,  
 bent as ancient apple trees,  
 who, in a storefront window,  
 with magnifying glasses,  
 needles fine as hair, and shining  
 scissors, parted woof from warp  
 and pruned what would in  
 human tissue have been sick.

Abrasions, rents and frays,  
 slits and chars and acid  
 splashes, filaments that gave  
 way of their own accord  
 from the stress of spanning  
 tiny, trifling gaps, but which  
 in a wounded psyche  
 make a murderous maze.

Their hands as hard as horn,  
 their eyes as keen as steel,

the threads they worked with  
 must have seemed as thick  
 as ropes on ships, as cables  
 on a crane, but still their heads  
 would lower, their teeth bare  
 to nip away the raveled ends.

Only sometimes would they  
 lift their eyes to yours to show  
 how much lovelier than these twists  
 of silk and serge the garments  
 of the mind are, yet how much  
 more benign their implements  
 than mind's procedures  
 of forgiveness and repair.

And in your loneliness you'd notice  
 how really very gently they'd take  
 the fabric to its last, with what  
 solicitude gather up worn edges  
 to be bound, with what severe  
 but kind detachment wield  
 their amputating shears:  
 forgiveness, and repair.