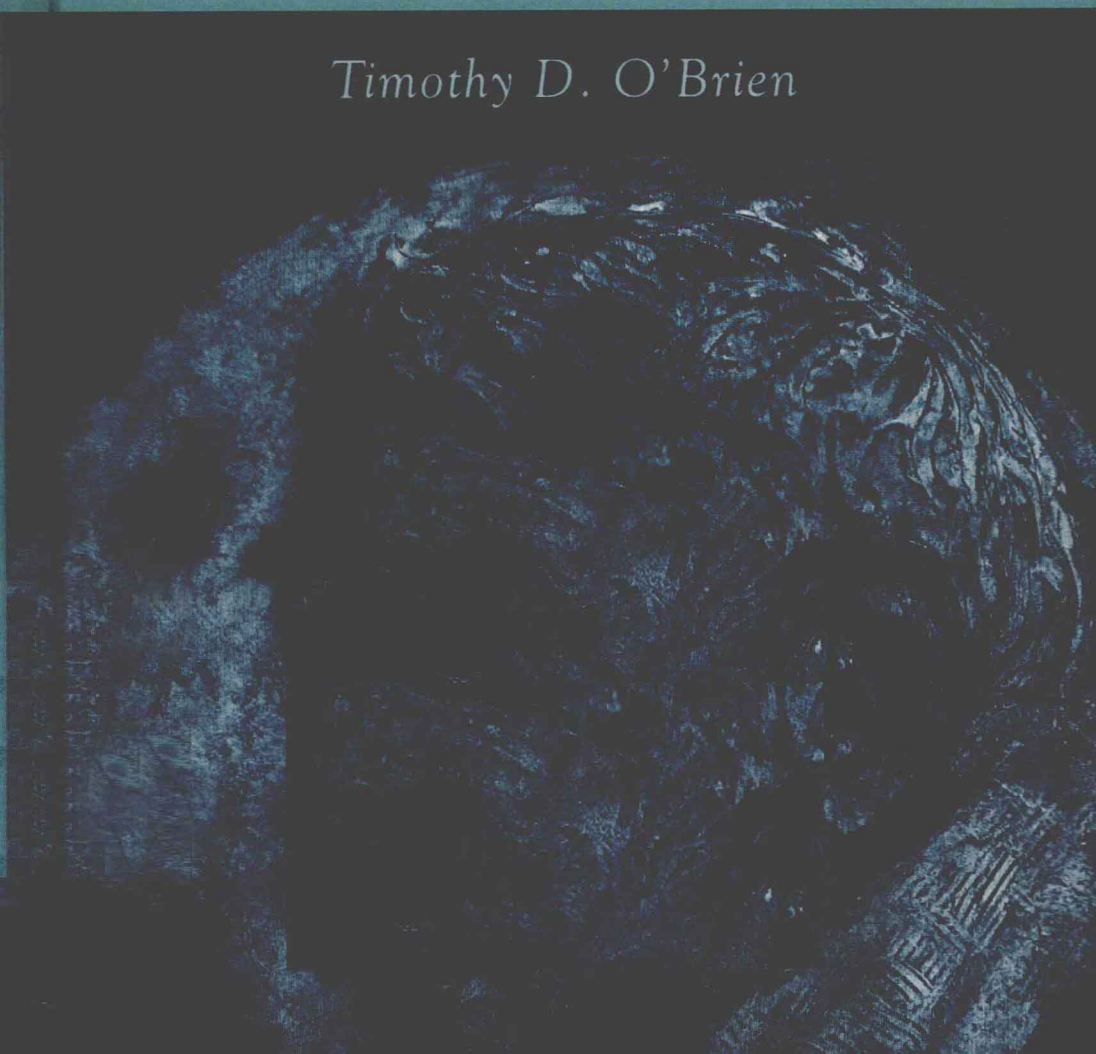


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AND MATERIAL TEXT IN
ROBERT FROST

Timothy D. O'Brien

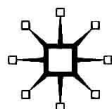


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TIMOTHY D. O'BRIEN



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Introduction

Sorry to have no name for you but You

When Robert Frost, in “The Figure a Poem Makes,” describes a poem as “[finding] its own name as it goes and [discovering] the best waiting for it in some final phrase . . . ” (777), he provides a glimpse into an important, though largely ignored, theme in his poetry.¹ This theme, which I will call the quest for a name, cuts across all stages of Frost’s career and all forms of his poetry—the lyric, the meditative poem, the narrative, the eclogue, and the play. It emerges from Frost’s works in a number of ways—from his naming of the characters in his poems and plays to an entire poem, “Maple,” devoted to the problems loaded upon a child by overdetermined naming, to a short play, *A Way Out*, dramatizing the theft of a name and identity. It occurs in about forty poems partially or entirely devoted to the need to name and the limits of naming. And it shows up in, and in some cases controls, the structure and descriptive details of about forty other poems that express the author’s search for his poetic signature, for versions of a more authentic name than his own, some original sense of self that resists the vagaries of language and the material world.

In depicting the poet as namer, Frost both follows Emerson and Thoreau and creates space between himself and them. As it emerges imaginatively from a large cross-section of his poetry, but in a concentrated way from *West-Running Brook*, this concern with names and naming takes on an impressive level of sophistication, treating such matters as the actual linguistic status of the name, the connection between name and identity, and the relationship between name and thing. Haunting this concern is Frost’s deep-seated questioning about his own name and his own identity, amounting in some cases to confessions about whether or not even the designator “I” points to anything that really exists. The body of Frost’s work displays a full array of positions on naming, ranging from the arrogant persona of *New Hampshire*, who easily labels people as either “prudes” or “pukes,” to the committed narrator of “Kitty Hawk,” who sees the human

need for “nomenclature” as the force driving us toward a union of spirit and material, and to the hopeful, yet resignedly puzzled, Narcissus figure in “For Once, Then, Something,” who finally spots an object at the bottom of the well into which he habitually peers, a presence beyond the mere reflection of himself, but can only name it “something.”

This abiding interest in naming and the name that a poem arrives at as if by some magic of language and landscape underpins the other concerns that occupy this study, concerns that have been largely ignored in the sophisticated body of commentary on Frost’s poetry, politics, and life. One of these preoccupations is the proverb—in simple terms, a slightly longer version of the name in that it too identifies and captures, contains and packages, a human problem. As a testament to how fully commentators have ignored this proverbial inclination in Frost, the most thoroughgoing examination of it occurs as just a small part of Robert Faggen’s introduction to *The Notebooks of Robert Frost*. Those notebooks, as Faggen observes, display the ways in which Frost’s mind naturally turns toward the short, aphoristic observation, a “think,” to use the term favored by Frost (xviii-xix). About this tendency, Faggen makes three points that deserve repeating. The first relates to this notion of the proverbial expression as a “think”: Frost uses such expressions in his notebooks, letters, and poetry as openings for thought, not as closures to it. However, Frost’s use of proverbial-like expressions in his poetry has created *the* problem for many readers, as Faggen states it: “The power and lure of his aphorisms has made him both one of the most remembered and yet widely misapprehended of modern poets” (xx). The second point worth repeating from Faggen’s remarks is that Frost distinguished between obscurity in poetry, which he criticized, often when thinking of Eliot, and what he called in a 1961 reading at Yale, “dark sayings” (xxii). Frost explained: “Some people don’t know the difference between obscurity and what are called in ancient times ‘dark sayings,’ that you go deeper, darker in your life. But obscurity isn’t that. Obscurity is a cover for nothing. You go looking for it and it comes out ‘A stitch in time saves nine.’ But there are dark sayings” (qtd. in *The Notebooks* xxii). Faggen offers a further explanation: “A ‘dark saying,’ as Frost well knew, was the ancient Hebraic phrase for proverb, and it appears in both Proverbs and Psalms. The Hebrew word for proverb was *mashal*, which meant ‘coupling’—in other words an association of ideas demanding considerable thought and interpretation. Frost reminded his audience that the power and validity of ‘dark sayings’ was neither their inherent gloominess nor their opacity, but their power to inspire continued thought” (xxii). The third observation that Faggen makes about Frost’s attraction to the proverb is that it speaks to the poet’s notion that conflict is essential in real thinking and that it is part of his cultivation of a posture

of rebellion against convention: "Wisdom literature," writes Faggen, "particularly of the Hebrew Bible, was a rebuke to the Deuteronomic world of law and national covenant. Frost's love of the proverb became symbolic of his particular approach to the contradictions of individual freedom within the constraints of social and national identity" (xxiv).

As vital as they are to an understanding of Frost's poetry, these observations do not fully enough interrogate Frost's work with proverbs nor delve into the particular critique of them that, as Frost I think was well aware, the Book of Job offers. If proverbs are so invigorating to original thought, why does Frost so patronizingly dismiss "A stitch in time saves nine" when distinguishing between obscurity and "dark sayings?" That saying is certainly part of "the good old folkways" that Frost in a letter actually advises his friend Louis Untermeyer to follow. As Thoreau works with that very proverb, moreover, it does function as a "think": "Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches to-day to save nine tomorrow" (Thoreau 74). Also, if Frost's attitude toward proverb-like sayings remained as positive as Faggen's introduction leads us to believe, why does he use the figure of God in *A Masque of Reason* to express the limitations of those proverbial explanations for Job's sufferings? The God in Frost's masque, in fact, thanks Job for setting him free from the proverbial mind-set, "From moral bondage to the human race," which put God in the position of having to "follow him/ With forfeits and rewards he understood" and of having "to prosper good and punish evil" (374).

What Faggen characterizes as "Frost's love of the proverb" must be seen more as "love/hate" of it, a rebellion against it, but a reliance on it as something which he can, as Poirier suggests in regard to the excursions in Frost's poems, escape from but always return safely to (*Robert Frost* 172). It permits him to "be a swinger of birches." In that poem about escape from the mundane, the speaker tempers his desire for escape by worrying that some fate will misunderstand his wish and "snatch" him "away not to return." And at the very point of the spell that he puts upon that imagined "fate"—"May no fate willfully misunderstand me"—the speaker, interestingly, resorts to a mundane, proverb-like expression: "Earth's the right place for love" (118). As with the exploration of the name in Frost's poetry and other writings, so it is the case with this proverbial inclination: the affair unfolds as a repeated pattern of avowal and disavowal. The pattern moves through a search for a way of capturing the imponderable mystery of human existence and individual identity; it comes upon a name or a saying by which to make that recognition of the imponderable comprehensible; and then just as soon, it backs away from that naming, although even in the process of that withdrawal, it often fastens onto some fixed text—a

name or saying—as the very means of withdrawal and reconstitution of a temporarily secure sense of self.

The third version of naming dealt with in this study is the riddle—not just *of* but *in* Frost's poems, writings, and talks. The scholarship over the last thirty years has now made it commonplace to discuss Frost's deviousness and complexity, his mischief making. The underdeveloped area in the growth of this critical commonplace—though I do not mean to suggest that the commentary emerges from anything but careful attention to various misdirections in Frost's poems—is the identification of a formal way of appreciating this mischief. Poirier calls upon the psychology of D. W. Winnicott, particularly his notion of “transitional objects,” to explain Frost's playfulness. And Katherine Kearns argues that the tension between appetite and control explains this perpetual game of hide and seek that many of Frost's most sympathetic readers observe. My approach is more simply generic: the riddle as a minor genre can become a powerful way of detailing the transactional and cognitive dynamics, as well as the dangers and gains to Frost's sense of self, of this sort of play. Again, this formal, and I hope productive, view of Frost as “riddler,” and even as the figure who fashions life as a predicament of having to be able to answer a threatening riddle, has not found its way into commentary of Frost's works, even though that commentary often observes the enigmatic element in his writings.

The riddles embedded within a number of Frost poems operate in similar ways to the trope of naming and the proverb. The riddle, obviously, involves naming, as the riddlee must come up with the name of the object enigmatically described by the riddler. In miniature, and in cognitive and psychological terms, it requires a quest. As ancient minor genre, moreover, it is part of the folkways that include also the proverb, though it operates in reverse of the proverb: it poses an oblique question and requires an overt answer, perhaps one tacitly involved in the question itself. The proverb offers a solution or answer to an implied problem or question. The interplay of these two genres itself adds to the overall rhythm of avowal and disavowal within Frost's works. While undercutting conventions of power and authority, the riddle openly enacts power relations, though all the while tending not toward radical disruption but toward reaffirmation of a culture's way of knowing. The inability to guess that the “whale road” is the sea, after all, both disarms one of complacent awareness and reaffirms cultural values.

The riddle also operates on the border between language and objects: its descriptions defamiliarize objects so that the riddlee must experience them anew and must attend to their undeniable materiality. This is the area in which the riddle connects with our examination of the final expression of Frost's quest for an identity: the attraction in his works toward and reaction

against a materialism by which he defines his identity as poet. I refer to this broad tendency toward self-definition as the material text in Frost's poetry. In part, Poirier has treated an aspect of this concern by focusing on "the problem of 'thingness'" in Frost, even reversing the common sense of how words and things relate by suggesting that in Frost things stand for words (*Robert Frost* 330). Another aspect of this concern emerges in the way Frost does much to undermine his poems as autonomous texts. Part of that activity involves his carefully cultivated image as a bard, emphasized occasionally by the same aphoristic, proverbial tendency that, as Faggen explains, makes him such a misunderstood poet. This image was also created by his public readings, which, along with the aura of authorship and even celebrity that the Frost publishing industry fostered, put Frost in an uneasy relationship with his poems. Some sense of his presence was almost required for the poem to exist, especially when we consider the exaggerated emphasis his commentary on poetics gives to the "sound of sense," the oral aspect of poetry as opposed to what he saw as the "barbaric" reliance on eye reading. The pattern of avowal and disavowal emerges in this arena as well. With the help of collectors, particularly Earle Bernheimer, and the various ways of issuing collections of his poetry, Frost also materialized his poetry to an extent likely unrivalled by any other poet. The very object—a signed copy of the juvenile *Twilight*, signed copies even of fabricated drafts of plays and poems and essays, the annual production of Christmas cards by Spiral Press fusing some form of visual art with a poem or passage from Frost's works—became more materially valuable than any sentence sound echoing from the page. Like the name, the object, in these forms, functioned as a marker of the poet's identity almost apart from the poetic expression. In addition, many of the poems themselves, in one way or another—the motif of black upon white that Kearns observes, various descriptions of nature as book, and techniques of defamiliarization—call attention to the text as a material entity and thus curiously undermine Frost's emphasis on the oral element of poetry and poetry's suggested dependence for its force on the implied presence of the poet's voice. In essence, the success of Frost's attempt to secure a formidable identity as poet through various materializations of his works undermines that very attempt to be known and understood as a poet.

At stake in all of these related modes of exploring identity—of seeking the essential name of something or someone—is not just genre but also gender. Naming, the proverbial inclination, the material text itself, and in some ways the riddle are variously situated as male or female depending on the needs of the poet or the poet's persona at the site of expression. Proverbial wisdom often represents male wisdom, but at the most fundamental stages it can represent something of a retreat, what is often posed

as a feminine undermining of the heroically male effort at staring into the face of meaninglessness. Naming, too, is a function of the patriarchy and yet, like the proverbial inclination, it operates in a way similar to Robert Graves's "cool web" of language, a maternal, safe retreat from "too much joy and too much pain." The riddle, though approaching the feminine and the taboo, at the same time preserves the rational, hierarchical, male world view. What is more, the frightening prospect of the material text in Frost's works has much to do with its feminine aspect. The very word "material," as we shall explore more fully, is closely related to the word "mater" and to the ancient word for tree or tree trunk. As if it were not enough that the trees and woods are alone seductive, smothering, and frightening sites in Frost's poems, they must have this fundamental relation to both the maternal and the material. At the same time, however, Frost works overtime to define himself and his poems as material, as commodities of real, solid value.

An eighteen-line poem in triplets, "To an Ancient" from *Steeple Bush* can serve as a brief means of looking forward to the ways in which these themes, sometimes one more dominant than the others, emerge from Frost's poetry:

Your claims to immortality were two.
The one you made, the other one you grew.
Sorry to have no name for you but You.

We never knew exactly where to look,
But found one in the delta of a brook,
One in a cavern where you used to cook.

Coming on such an ancient human trace
Seems as expressive of the human race
As meeting someone living, face to face.

We date you by your depth in silt and dust
Your probable brute nature is discussed.
At which point we are totally nonplussed.

You made the eolith, you grew the bone,
The second more peculiarly your own,
And likely to have been enough alone.

You make me ask if I would go to time
Would I gain anything by using rhyme?
Or aren't the bones enough I live to lime? (345)

In a version of *ekphrasis*, the persona of this poem speaks to two objects, one a bone from an ancient human and the other an eolith that the ancient presumably fashioned with her hands. The poem works through

routine scientific evaluation and comes to an impasse: "We date you by your depth in silt and dust / Your probable brute nature is discussed. / At which point we are totally nonplussed." The persona then wonders about the value of the eolith and whether or not the bone itself is not enough to express this brute identity, which in the third line the persona admitted could only be captured by the pronoun "You"—"Sorry to have no name for you but You." The final stanza becomes more intimate, abandoning the evaluating first-person plural and adopting the first-person singular, who wonders about the relative value of his own artistic endeavors and his mere material composition, wonders ultimately whether his poetry has anything to do with who or what he is. Like the more famous example of ekphrasis, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," this poem concentrates on an artifact, emphasizes its visual and material qualities, and thereby struggles to find meaning for itself beyond its own mere physicality as reflected in that artifact. Such encounters between the poem and the material world occur again and again in Frost's poetry, and often the feature encountered has been dislodged from its familiar place in a whole, has become a fragment of some sort, and thereby, as with Heidegger's broken hammer, turned into a striking expression of its basic, material nature. The same thing has occurred in this work, as the cooking device and bone pieces are displayed, yes for scientific inquiry, but also for their mere materiality, a materiality which requires us to see ourselves as made of just such basic parts and to question our accustomed sense of wholeness and unity. The very bone, for instance, is more the ancient's own than the artifact, but it is more *peculiarly* his own, as if what is innate is stranger than the fashioned product. In fact, Frost uses the focus on fragments to pull apart the features of his own poem and to see it as an amalgam of material elements. "Going to time," after all, means both to be given over to history and archeology eventually as mere bone *and* to write in meter. "Using rhyme" is another more obvious instance of this synecdoche. Such disaggregation of wholes leads to the radical question about whether or not an attempt to achieve meaning and identity through verse, which has been rendered a mere amalgam, matters anymore than merely living to die and fertilize the soil: "Or aren't the bones enough I live to lime?"

The dire prospect of life as no more than a material existence is so thoroughly emphasized in this stanza—even in the question of whether *anything* is gained through poetry—that it is also easy to overlook the verbal play. In fact, that final line unfolds in a strange enough way to open up its syntax to ambivalence. It seems as though "bones" works as the object of "lime," so that the speaker lives merely to provide some sort of element, like lime, that would preserve his bones, or in a sense fertilize

them. But the meaning of this more conventional syntax seems a stretch—how does the flesh fertilize a bone that will not grow? This catch in the meaning opens the final line up to its shadow implication, the product of its double syntactical nature: “Or aren’t the bones enough” comprising one unit and “I live to lime” making up another, a mere assertion about the purpose of the speaker’s life. In this way, the word “lime” can mean birdlime as well, suggesting that the persona-poet lives as well to ensnare unwitting “birds.” He lives to fool those bones, his materiality, into feeling they comprise a unified identity and/or to fool others with his poetry, perhaps fooling them into thinking it is meaningful. Like many of the poems we will investigate, this one moves toward a generalizing conclusion, in this case not something like a proverbial statement, but more its opposite, a riddling question. This riddling question also casts the poet as potentially the devious riddler, who lives to “lime” his trees with ensnaring material, who “limes,” in the sense of flattering and deceiving, his readers. The poem, then, troubles our feeling of security in naming with its sense that the only name for this ancient is the mere linguistic pointer “you,” nothing more meaningful and integral to identity than that. The poem calls into question its own status by inviting us to see its reflection in the material fragments dug up in delta and run across in cavern. It also subverts the need for a palliative, proverbial conclusion by offering instead an enigmatic, riddling alternative, “I live to lime,” perhaps the embodying description of the poet as Frost sees “him.” All of these functions undermine certainty and put the reader in the position of the subordinate riddlee, depending on the poet for some name that he will not, and cannot, provide.

Though Karen Kilcup and, to a lesser extent, Robert Hass, for example, have quite persuasively highlighted shifts in Frost’s stylistic and thematic emphases, my assumption in this study is that Frost’s poetry does not display obvious, bold phases of development, beyond perhaps an early youthfulness and a later decline. In terms of the several related themes I examine in this study, however, certain books do express a more-than-usual concern with each. For instance, the poems in *North of Boston* often pivot on a saying or proverbial statement, explore the ways in which such prefabricated ways of knowing interfere with and also preserve relationships. As I have mentioned, *West-Running Brook* collects the most poems representing the problems of naming. In less obvious but still noticeable ways, the poems of *A Further Range* betray many of the traits of riddles, not only in terms of form but also in terms of the way they communicate a certain tone and relationship between their persona and readers. And the extraordinary volume, *A Witness Tree*, with its opening identification of poet and tree, more than any other volume, captures Frost’s concern with

the materiality of his poems. These rather modest claims about emphases in these four volumes, however, will not keep us from ranging throughout Frost's works—from the poems to the drama to the essays and the various records of public and private communications—as a way of delving into these largely ignored underpinnings to Frost's ambivalent quest for identity as a poet.

Chapter 1

The Quest for a Name in “Frost”

By proper names I find I do my thinking

In an interview conducted by reporter John Sherrill for the August 1955 edition of *Guideposts*, an inspirational monthly publication, Frost offers some curious observations about naming. In fact, he anticipates the questioning by saying, “I hope you won’t ask me to put names on things... I’m afraid of that” (*Interviews* 148). And in response to Sherrill’s first question about what God meant to him in “Bereft,” he says, “If you would learn the way a man feels about God, don’t ask him to put a name on himself. All that is said with names is soon not enough” (149). Sherrill sums up Frost’s message in this way: “Imagine that you see a butterfly, and its beauty is something you want to capture and take home with you. You catch the butterfly and place it carefully on a cardboard under glass. And to your sorrow, you haven’t caught the butterfly at all. You can examine the thing that you have under glass, and give it a name. But your relation to it is changed. Where once the butterfly had a subtle, vibrant aliveness, the very act of pinning it down has destroyed it for you” (150). In his attempt to express his close understanding of Frost in a Romantic way, Sherrill partly does to the complexity in Frost’s words about naming what he claims ought to be avoided in the case of the butterfly. In this chapter I would like to move beyond this limited response and explore Frost’s dauntingly complex sense of the name, including both his negotiation with the idea of poet as namer and his repeated poetic attempts to find or create his own name through his poems. In both cases, this theme of the name and of the poet’s signature emerging from his works involves the issue of identity that I have discussed in the Introduction.