

*Lesley Lee Francis*

## Robert Frost and the Child: *Mother Goose* and “The Imagination Thing”

A COMMON THREAD running through my work on my grandfather, the American poet Robert Frost, has been the dynamics and interaction between the poet and members of the Frost family, focusing roughly on the years 1900-1915, prior to public recognition in America (while on the Derry Farm and while in England).

Misunderstood—by critics, journalists, and biographers alike—is the depth and breadth of Frost’s concern for children, his own and others’, a concern manifest in roles as teacher, parent, and poet.

In 2000 the Cyder Press (in England) published *As Told to a Child: stories from the Derry notebook*, a collaborative production of 18 stories by Frost with illustrations by the children from *The Bouquet*. The limited edition shows us visually the imaginative world of the Frost family as it was shared between parents and children in New Hampshire and Gloucestershire on the eve of World War I. It is clear, from this and other collaborative efforts—what my grandfather would call “education by poetry”—that it was his young audience, at home and in the schools, that helped shape his early verse.

Robert Frost’s parents were both teachers. When, in 1959, not long before his death in 1963, RF put together a selection of his own poems for young readers, he took the title, *You Come Too*, from “The Pasture” and dedicated the volume to his mother, Belle Moodie Frost, “Who knew as a teacher that no poetry was good for children that wasn’t equally good for their elders.” The English edition, with a touching foreword by Eleanor Farjeon,

carries the same dedication and purpose. Frost chose from among his poems a variety he deemed accessible to the young reader, a young reader treated as an adult, without condescension or patronizing attitude.<sup>1</sup>

Re-examining the selection in *You Come Too* from the poet's perspective rekindled my interest in the extent of interaction between RF and children and the concomitant concern reflected in his poetry. In his peculiar approach to the young reader, we can see how the poet's invitation to suspend disbelief, to enter the world of suggestion and intuition, of free association and metaphor, is fundamental to our understanding.

From the letters and other biographical materials we know that RF cared a great deal about his family. He also cared about the development of young people outside the immediate family. In his poem "What Fifty Said," he noted: "When I was young my teachers were the old.../I went to school to age to learn the past./ Now I am old my teachers are the young.../I go to school to youth to learn the future."

As both teachers and parents, he and Elinor were preoccupied throughout their lives with the education of their children. Robert, having assisted his mother in her school at Salem, New Hampshire, went on to teach at the Pinkerton Academy in Derry and the Plymouth Normal School before taking his family to England. After 1915, although describing himself as "imperfectly academic," his association with *academia* would be uninterrupted.

An innovative teacher, RF understood the need for dramatic accent and catchiness in verse. The expression is imbedded in the lines; certain poems, like haphazard knowledge, stick to you like burrs in the field. He didn't need to tell you, the public, how to read the lines because it's in you. You've all been raised on *Mother Goose*. The first two stanzas of "Lines Written in Dejection on the Eve of Great Success" are suggestive:

I once had a cow that jumped over the moon,  
Not on to the moon but over.  
I don't know what made her so lunar a loon;  
All she'd been having was clover.

That was back in the days of my godmother Goose,  
But though we are goosier now,  
And all tanked up with mineral juice,  
We haven't caught up with my cow.

In a conversation with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, he is more explicit about throwing the public “back on their Mother Goose... with the play of ideas in it; how deep the Mother Goose is...” He recites his own humorously perverted version of “Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?/I’ve been to London to see the Queen./ Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you there?/ I frightened a little mouse under the chair.” It’s very deep, it draws you in. The “little insights,” the play; in these lines the idea that “you could stay right at home and see it all,”—and be a regionalist.<sup>2</sup>

In his teaching methods—or lack of them—with his many students as in verse, RF expressed his ideas on education. In his poem “Build Soil,” he explores the problem of a laid-on education in stifling the world of the imagination:

Keep off each other and keep each other off...  
We’re too unseparate out among each other—  
With goods to sell and notions to impart.  
A youngster comes to me with half a quatrain  
To ask me if I think it worth the pains  
Of working out the rest, the other half.  
I am brought guaranteed young prattle poems  
Made publicly in school, above suspicion  
Of plagiarism and help of cheating parents.  
We congregate embracing from distrust  
As much as love, and too close in to strike  
And be so very striking. Steal away.  
Don’t join too many gangs. Join few if any.  
Join the United States and join the family—  
But not much in between unless a college.

Like the French Canadian Baptiste in “The Ax-Helve,” he knew 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.

He emphasized the need of "reading for pleasure" in "families where the word improvement is never heard." It is preferable, he said, "not to have children remember you as having taught them anything in particular. May they remember you as an old friend. That is what it is to have been right with them in their good moments."<sup>3</sup>

During the years the four Frost children—my mother Lesley, her two sisters Irma and Marjorie, and her brother Carol—were growing up on the farm at Derry, their parents acted on the belief that reading and being read to were essential to their education. Through their readings, writings, and direct observations, the children were exposed to the clarifying concepts of justice, fidelity, love, and courage, not as lessons imposed by their parents, but as discovery, as experience, as an organic part of the adventure of living.

While teaching their children at home, Robert and Elinor understood the shaping power of the imagination as an educative force for good. They encouraged reliance on intuition and the suspension of disbelief, on the direct observation of human nature no less than of their natural surroundings. They understood that the freedom of association, the trusting view of life and freshness of response that reduces the distance between reader and writer, all are strongest in the child. "I think young people have insight," RF would write:

They have a flash here and a flash there. It is like stars coming out in the sky in the early evening. They have flashes of light. They have that sort of thing which belong to youth. It is later in the dark of life that you see forms, constellations. And it is the constellations that are philosophy. It is like forcing a too early mathematics on a child, to bring him to philosophy too young. We have system and we have plan all too soon now. You know too well and have convictions too well by the time you are forty. The flashing is done, the coming out of the stars. It is all constellations.<sup>4</sup>

My mother's journals from this period (later published as *New Hampshire's Child*) help us understand the intense interaction and shared family experience. She would recall, for example, how her somewhat anxious dwelling upon fairies and goblins, and the use of her little "stories" to overcome real or imagined fears on the

farm, were strongly stimulated by her father, who liked to read aloud from books of fairy tales or from his own stories for and about his children.

Besides providing a view of the farm that parallels the children's journals, RF's little prose stories, for and about his own children, reflect the poet's developing poetic idiom. Jotted down casually to amuse the children—perhaps, also, to allay their fears on a cold winter's night—the stories represent the trusting view of life, in sharp contrast to the often grim themes of the *North of Boston* blank verse narratives. Always the poet, RF worked through these stories to catch the tones, strategies, and expressions of living speech: colloquial double negatives, hesitations, what he came to call “the sound of sense.” Mimetic mastery and a rich, unsentimental frankness add to the stories' expressiveness and intimacy of detail. The humorous, yet psychologically true, depictions of family situations—with a woodchuck, a squirrel, a monkey, a cow, and even a lion and a rhinoceros—capture our imagination. These are personalized tales, in which the children and the animals appear as characters, and, as one reviewer points out, they have the feel of the prose poem, and the “implicit presence of the poet's *actual* voice.”<sup>5</sup>

In the Derry journals, in RF's made-up stories for his children, and in his verses, we see how one consequence of the persistent concern for the children's education was the enrichment of his own creative genius through the shared family experience. As many as thirty of RF's poems coincide with specific topics or incidents treated in my mother's daily compositions. The topics undoubtedly were those discussed in their walks and evening gatherings; the fact that Elinor and Robert read and commented on each journal entry certainly would have reinforced these mutual associations.

“The Last Word of a Bluebird,” included in the *You Come Too* selection, is also from the Derry notebooks. Originally entitled “The Message the Crow Gave me for Lesley one Morning Lately when I went to the Well,” the poem was written for and about my mother (growing up I thought it had been written for me); it seems her father wanted to reduce her anxiety by having the

crow send her a reassuring message. Long after he had written them, RF added "as told to a child" to this and another early poem, "Locked Out." The subtitle would become the title of the English edition of his little stories with the children's illustrations.

In "Maple," another poem Frost included in the *You Come Too* selection, we find the names of all four children:

What was it about her name? Its strangeness lay  
In having too much meaning. Other names,  
As Lesley, Carol, Irma, Marjorie,  
Signified nothing....  
Better a meaningless name, I should say,  
As leaving more to nature and happy chance. . . .  
Name children some names and see what you do.

We all know how, with the toss of a coin (won by Elinor), the Frosts decided to pull up stakes and cross the Atlantic to England. It was August 1912. Elinor, who in marrying Robert had anticipated "a life that goes rather poetically," could now share with Robert and their children the excitement of returning to the land of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* and the prospect of living under thatch.

At the time of their departure from Plymouth, my mother, Lesley, had turned thirteen, Carol ten, Irma nine, and Marjorie seven. In her Derry notebook, under the heading "Different Feelings," Lesley wrote:

Excited! If we children were not ex[c]ited the last week or two before we left "The Cottage, No. 8 Highland Avenue, Plymouth, N.H." I don't know who ever gets excited. It seemed all like a dream.

Nothing suggests the children were aware of their father's determination to be a published poet. "It became increasingly clear," Lesley would recall years later, that "All that had been contemplated was fresh scenery, peace to write, the excitement of change."

Once settled in Beaconsfield, outside London, the Frost children put together a 120-page notebook they presented to their parents: on the cover they wrote "An Important Year by Four Children, Dedicated to Papa & Mamma." Besides the excitement

of travel and adventure, the sense of an imminent transformation in their lives permeates its pages: seasickness, seagulls, the desolate coast of Ireland, Glasgow Harbor, a train ride across the purple hills of heather to the London metropolis, and on to the London suburb of Beaconsfield. There their shared excitement would find expression in the gathering together of a few poems into two small, typewritten manuscripts. The freshness and surprise shared by the whole Frost family just before Christmas 1912 are revealed in Lesley's recollections of the historic moment:

But actually it was not until a morning in 1912 when a card came to a cottage...in Beaconsfield, that we knew *A Boy's Will* had been accepted for publication. That was splendid. We were pleased because our elders seemed pleased. We couldn't comprehend, because we had been given no foretaste of them, what resolve, what patience in waiting, had gone into that first book: what a climax, what a beginning, was signified by such a recognition coming at last.

My grandfather was almost forty years old at the time, and the euphoria in the Frost household did not translate into any income even after a second volume, *North of Boston*, was in print. In fact, just before Christmas 1913, with no down payment on the recently signed contract with David Nutt, and with no other income in sight for extra cash for presents, the Frost children descended upon the grocer's back room to barter with their three or four pennies each of spending money, for old wood to make one another presents. In "Good Relief," an uncollected poem, their father captures the poignancy of a child's longing at Christmas:

But the two babes had stopped alone to look  
At Christmas toys behind a window pane,  
And play at having anything they chose.  
And when I lowered level with the two  
And asked them what they saw so much to like,  
One confidentially and raptly took  
His finger from his mouth and pointed, "Those!"  
A little locomotive with a train.  
And where he wet the window pane it froze.

Friends in England remarked on the resourcefulness of the Frost children in these straitened circumstances far from home. Lesley and her sisters and brother continued to find writing projects that built on the early journals kept while in Derry. The crowning achievement was *The Bouquet*, an in-house magazine to which the four Frost children and chosen friends (and several parents) contributed.

As the mastermind and "managing editor," Lesley would type and assemble the little magazine, a single copy of which was to be issued monthly, with stories, poems, essays, and illustrations by the invited contributors. At least two of Frost's poems, "Locked Out" and an early version of "Pea-Sticks" (later changed to "Pea Brush") appeared in *The Bouquet*, along with several early poems by Edward Thomas, whose children were also contributors.

Six of some fourteen issues of *The Bouquet* survive and reside in the University of Virginia Library. The body of compositions and artwork is remarkable for its reflection of the children's powerful and imaginative response to their surroundings. Experimenting with various techniques, the children sought to convey a range of emotions (often on a moral plane), of anger, fear, revenge, joy, laziness, curiosity. The fluctuating moods and feelings, and the tricks they play on the brain, were used knowingly by these young writers for suspense and excitement, for surprise and wonder.

For visual effects, each issue of *The Bouquet* was enhanced by the generous use of illustrations, puzzles or riddles, and even advertisements. We know that the Frost children brought to England an interest in painting and drawing, encouraged by Elinor to develop their artistic talent. The profusion of pencil drawings and watercolors, the use of cream wove paper, paper-board covers, when added to Lesley's typed manuscript, give each issue of *The Bouquet* a finished look.

In his last letter to my mother, dictated from his hospital bed, her father wrote: "It must add to your confidence that you have found a way with the young." Lesley was by now enjoying a full life as teacher, writer, and lecturer in her own right. Besides her early journals, reproduced in facsimile as *New Hampshire's Child*,

she published three volumes of stories for children: *Not Really, Really Not Really*, and *Digging Down to China*, in which my sister Elinor and I are the main characters, a telling fictional device used in my mother's childhood journals and by her father in the little prose pieces for his own children. In my mother's narrative reading for *Derry Down Derry* (Folkway Records, 1961), she selected poems from the *You Come Too* selection, linking each of them to life on the farm. (Other publications include a murder mystery, an edited anthology of Christmas verse, and ghostwritten books on literary and political subjects).

We have seen then how the poet's genius was enriched by the persistent concern for the children's "education by poetry" and by the shared experience. As we know, the title of his first volume of poems was a tribute to Longfellow, who, in "My Lost Youth," wrote: "A boy's will is the wind's will, And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts." When *A Boy's Will* appeared in London in 1913, the table of contents included a gloss for many of the poems. For "Asking for Roses" (later dropped from the *Collected Poems*), it read "[He is no dissenter] from the ritualism of youth which is make-believe." We know how RF moved away from the make-believe in the dramatic eclogues of *North of Boston*. But the "imagination thing," the metaphor, the unforced natural thought, were the building blocks of the poet's nature and of his poetry. His mother before him, his wife Elinor, and his children were imbued with the romantic spontaneity and suspension of disbelief of their early readings.

Raised near the Golden Gate, Robert "was one of the children told/Some of the blowing dust was gold." And some of his poems, like "In a Vale," with its "misty fen" and "maidens pale" retain the childlike sense of wonder, others the wonder of love.

The accessibility of RF's poems to children and his writing for them were tendencies that led to their inclusion in his poems in varied and telling ways. Given his preoccupation with children and their upbringing, the fact that he taught Child Development at the Plymouth Normal School, using as text William James' *Principles of Psychology*, and that a number of his poems were published in *Youth's Companion* before 1912, it is

not surprising that children appear as a leitmotif in his work.

We have seen how RF reached out in his poems to children. Besides the two poems mentioned earlier, "Locked Out" and "The Last Word of a Bluebird," subtitled "as told to a child," other poems delve philosophically into the wonder years, often in an adult and challenging context. In "The Black Cottage," for example, he notes how it is

Strange how such innocence gets its own way.  
I shouldn't be surprised if in this world  
It were the force that would at last prevail.

And on the effect of altering the Creed:

But suppose she had missed it from the Creed,  
As a child misses the unsaid Good-night  
And falls asleep with heartache—how should I feel?

And again, in "Directive," he describes

Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,  
The playthings in the playhouse of the children.  
Weep for what little things could make them glad.

A broken goblet in the "children's house of make-believe," where it is

Under a spell so that the wrong ones can't find it,  
So can't be saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.

He found evidence of the innocence "in the bubbling of children," a common, recurring force in his poems. In "Storm Fear," he writes: "I count our strength,/Two and a child," and in "The Fear," he defends a child being out so late: "Every child should have the memory/Of at least one long-after-bedtime walk." Another poem, "In the Home-Stretch," describes the encroaching woods "waiting to steal a step on us whenever/We drop our eyes or turn to other things,/As in the game 'Ten-step' the children play." When "A Bonfire" appeared in Louis Untermeyer's *Seven Arts*, its assertion "War is for everyone, for children too" was taken as a radical comment on current events, much to

RF's dismay. "The Runaway"—a favorite in my household—by inference is about a youngster frightened by a sudden snowstorm:

'I think the little fellow's afraid of the snow.  
He isn't winter-broken. It isn't play  
With the little fellow at all. He's running away.  
I doubt if even his mother could tell him, "Sakes,  
It's only weather." He'd think she didn't know!  
Where is his mother? He can't be out alone.'

.....

'Whoever it is that leaves him out so late,  
When other creatures have gone to stall and bin,  
Ought to be told to come and take him in.'

"Gathering Leaves" reminds us of our children's familiar pastime in the fall of the year; yet the poem—like many others—conveys its metaphorical message.

You are most likely familiar with "Birches," about a boy too far from town to play baseball but who has learned to tame the young birch. You may be less familiar with a companion poem, "Wild Grapes"; its story was given to RF by his first editor, Susan Hayes Ward, who as a young girl was caught up in a birch tree in search of the wild grapes growing there and had to be saved by her older brother:

It wasn't my not weighing anything  
So much as my not knowing anything—  
My brother had been near right before.  
I had not taken the first step in knowledge;  
I had not learned to let go with the hands,  
As still I have not learned to with the heart,  
And have no wish to with the heart,  
That I can see. The mind—is not the heart.  
I may yet live, as I know others live,  
To wish in vain to let go with the mind  
Of cares, at night, to sleep; but nothing tells me  
That I need learn to let go with the heart.

"A Girl's Garden" is another tribute to the young girl. RF, who could travel the spectrum of mood and emotion, explores the darker side of life in "Home Burial" and "Out, Out," where, faced with a child's sudden and violent death, life must go on.

The wonder of unexpected discovery in my grandfather's poems touches me even now. Just this past year I became aware of "The Exposed Nest," included by him in his *You Come Too* selection.<sup>6</sup> It makes my point for me. Drawn in by the simplest of human (albeit humane, as well) experiences—the shared experience of trying to save a bird's nest from destruction—the reader awakens to the broader and deeper philosophical considerations of the human condition: the desire to spare exposure to "too much world at once," a common Frost theme; a likely negative outcome to the best-intended acts of kindness; the forgetfulness brought on by turning "to other things." While moral ambiguities persist, the poet and his daughter "saw the risk...in doing good...but dared not spare to do the best we could/ Though harm should come of it." Father and daughter "could not wait to learn" if their meddling might make the mother more afraid. Above all, the poem conveys the pride and compassion of a father concerned with protecting a child from life's cruelties.

We find in these examples not only the poet's sensitive observation of the natural phenomena but, in my view, a deep parental anxiety and psychological realism that explain and awaken the heart to the artist's impassioned humanity, to the length and breadth of the man. *You Come Too*, he beckons. Invited into the unpredictable world of the imagination, of metaphor and the free association of ideas, young and old readers alike may share the underlying sentiments with the open intuition of a child.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I was startled recently to learn that Robert Frost's publishers (since 1915) determined that there is no longer a market among young readers of poetry sufficient to warrant reissuing the volume *You Come Too, favorite poems for young readers*; readers will recall a lovely hardback, made more lovely in the original by the Thomas W. Nason engravings and a personal introduction by Hyde Cox. Instead, a paperback has now appeared on bookstore shelves with the subtitle (and target readership) changed to *readers of all ages*, referred to on the back as "A collection of poems selected by Frost himself, to be read and enjoyed by readers of all ages." Inside, in the fine print, the volume preserves the 1959 copyright and summarizes its contents as "A collection of poems

chosen by Frost to be read and enjoyed by children (and their elders),” a summary not included in the original volume. Nor does the foreword contribute to our understanding of the intended target.

<sup>2</sup>Published as “Conversations on the Craft of Poetry,” *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* (New York: The Library of America), 858–59.

<sup>3</sup>*The Frost Family’s Adventure in Poetry: Sheer Morning Gladness at the Brim* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 28.

<sup>4</sup>*The Frost Family*, 3. For a fuller description of life on the Derry Farm and the children’s at-home education, see *The Frost Family* and my Introduction to *As Told to a Child: Stories from the Derry Notebook* (Gloucester, U.K.: Cyder Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup>Book review of *As Told to a Child* by Sean Street, *Dymock Poets’ Newsletter* (November 2000), 8. In another review, in *The Robert Frost Review* (Fall 2001):, 102–105, Lorinda Cohoon points to the importance of these stories in providing insight into the Frosts’ everyday family life and its influence on the sounds and content of Frost’s poetry: “I believe that Frost’s stories would invite the children, as they invited the Frost children almost a century ago, to learn to write in order to learn to have ideas.” She urges the publication of an edition for children that would “make an excellent alternative to the sometimes less-than-interesting texts for beginning readers.” Reviewing the book on the Web site [www.frostfriends.org/br-frost.html](http://www.frostfriends.org/br-frost.html) (November 30, 2000), Carole Thompson states: “I am struck with the tenderness and love of a father who would write stories for his children making *them* the characters! How enchanting for the children to be named in the story that Papa was reading to them.”

<sup>6</sup>An unpublished paper by Jonathan N. Barrons (University of Southern Mississippi) entitled “The Harm in Doing Good: Robert Frost’s ‘Mowing’ and ‘The Exposed Nest’” provides a close analysis of the parallels between these two poems, Milton’s *Comus*, and William James’ philosophy of virtue that justifies the emotional state as the basis for action. Barron suggests that in rejecting theological idealism, RF favors a virtue grounded in desire, human experience, and real language, thus justifying his own choice to be a poet, with virtue and freedom intact.