Robert Frost and the “Eye Reader”

Abstract

One salient feature of Robert Frost’s aesthetics was his sharp differentiation of the visual from the audile imagination. Frost (a former schoolteacher) had noticed the difference between visual and audile/phonetic readers, and considered the eye reader to be a ‘bad’ reader. The article examines those features of Frost’s own poetic practice which would have led him to consider the eye reader a bad reader, as well as the sorts of prosodic content an eye reader may be prone to miss. Having examined Frost’s aesthetic objections to the eye reader, the question is then posed: does Frost ever treat the “eye reader,” or oral versus visual predilections, thematically in his artistic writings?

Keywords: Robert Frost, American poetry, eye reader, sound of sense, audile imagination, tone

1. Robert Frost’s Poetic Practice and Objections to the Visual Reader

There seems every reason to conclude that Robert Frost was sincere when he claimed in 1951 that “the eye reader [was] a barbarian.” Frost’s reasoning was that of an audiophile. As early as during his brief stint in London (1914–1915), his correspondence attests to his awareness of reading styles, as well as to his categorical preference for the “ear reader”:

> the ear is the only true writer and the only true reader. I have known people who could read without hearing the sentence sounds and they were the fastest readers. Eye readers we call them. They can get the meaning by glances. But they are bad readers because they miss the best part of what a good writer puts into his work. (Poirier and Richardson 677)

The superlative in the above citation is revealing. Those who learn to read via phonics sound out the words: but, with time and practice, habituated readers may simply parse words or phrases visually. Regardless of whether one pronounces the words aloud or in internal monologue, the eye can scan faster than the fastest auctioneer could speak. As speed readers, eye readers therefore possess a marked advantage in terms of efficiency. Frost, nevertheless, considered them “bad” readers.
Such considerations throw into relief that quality which Frost considered the “best part of what a good writer puts into his work”: namely, the prosody. That a poet should have been particularly keen on sonority need not surprise. That being said, one might also bear in mind that numerous aspects of a literary text are no less accessible to the reader who scans than to the reader who intones. To name only a few examples of such intellectual/aesthetic content: images, ideas/content, narrative/plot, (much of) characterization, setting and metaphor are all quite palpable to an eye reader. Sonority, on the other hand, suffers a significant signal loss when a text is voraciously (or lazily) scanned. In his work, Frost was preoccupied with at least two forms of poetic sonority. As Justin Replongle trenchantly observes in “Vernacular Poetry: From Robert Frost to Frank O’Hara”:

Frost […] had rediscovered an old truth about language. In print, sounds (pitch, length, timbre) can be given special emphasis in two ways. One way is to pile them up in repeated patterns; the other is to make sure they carry a big part of the message. “A dare gale skylark scanted in a dull cage” illustrates the first. “Search me” the second. The first has too many harsh consonants for any reader to miss, and no poetry reader will miss the patterned vowels. This is what Frost means by poetry’s familiar “music.” The second has no patterned sound at all, but to get the message right you have to put a very loud stress somewhere, and arrange pitches to match. This is the “sound of sense.” (137)

Frost’s poetry contains ample examples of both forms of prosody, yet it is clear from his correspondence that he felt the latter, rather than the former, had been most neglected by his poetic contemporaries.

Frost’s two earliest books, as well as the stylistic evolution which had passed between them, serve to illustrate both kinds of prosody. Both books came out while Frost was abroad in London, flirting briefly with expatriate status; critical consensus typically credits the second book, North of Boston (1914), as having established Frost as a noteworthy, innovative poet. Frost’s first book, A Boy’s Will (1913), sees the poet at his most conventionally lyrical. A consistent lyrical persona (presumably “Frost”) delivers poems which employ the “familiar music of poetry,” as in “October”:

O hushed October morning mild,  
Thy leaves have ripened to the fall;  
Tomorrow’s wind, if it be wild,  
Should waste them all. (Poirier and Richardson 35)

While Frost certainly never renounced traditional prosody – (much of his later work is replete with it) – in North of Boston Frost was far more enamored with the second kind of prosody, which he termed the “sound of sense.” Frost never managed to exhaustively define his term, but it figures repeatedly in his letters of 1914–1915. Albeit never honed to a science, Frost’s conceptual vocabulary proved
adequate enough for him to articulate his own poetical method. Broadly – as Replongle and others have observed – “the sound of sense” primarily consists of tone, as well as elements of pacing and stress. Frost himself frequently invoked tone when promulgating his aesthetics:

> When you listen to a speaker, you hear words, to be sure – but you also hear tones. The problem is to note them, to imagine them again, and to get them down in writing. [...] For it is a fundamental fact that certain forms depend on the sound; – e.g., note the various tones of irony, acquiescence, doubt, etc. in the farmer’s “I guess so.” (Poirier and Richardson 680)

Tone, Frost reasoned, could also be used to musical effect. In *North of Boston*, Frost sought to make poetry of colloquial speech by playing “very irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation” against the “very regular preestablished accent and measure of blank verse” (Poirier and Richardson 680): thereby creating a prosodic counterpoint of tone against the iambic pentameter.

Frost’s commitment to this new style was almost total in *North of Boston*: of the sixteen poems in the book, only four do not make use of dialogue. What is more, those poems with dialogue are frequently as long as short stories, whereas the more traditional poems (e.g., “Mending Wall” and “After Apple Picking”) are consistently the shortest. “Frost” as lyric speaker has all but receded in the longer poems, putting in only the briefest appearances to provide sparse narration and a few dialogue tags. Stylized dialogues were, of course, nothing new in poetry, but Frost’s *dialogue* was characterized by a realist aesthetic and a high degree of verisimilitude. One could often believe the conversations had actually been spoken and *overheard*, as in “Home Burial”:

> “Amy! Don’t go to someone else this time. Listen to me. I won’t come down the stairs.”
> He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
> “There’s something I should like to ask you, dear.”

> “You don’t know how to ask it.”
> “Help me, then.” (Poirier and Richardson 56)

This proverbially *fly-on-the wall* technique remains prominent (albeit less so) in *Mountain Interval* (1916) and *New Hampshire* (1923); it appears occasionally throughout Frost’s later work, although frequently integrated with more traditional prosody. In 1914, it attracted critical attention. Poems in vernacular *language* would not have been groundbreaking, but the colloquial *speech* of New Englanders rendered in blank verse played a large role in forwarding Frost’s poetic reputation. Not only was this method idiosyncratic, but it additionally served to found Frost’s strident regional and American identification. On the one hand, that regionalism
would eventually appeal to a popular readership. On the other hand, and more pertinent to the present context, contemporary critics and literary intellectuals were intrigued by Frost’s orality. As Robert S. Newdick retrospectively observed in “Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense” (1937), “[Frost’s achievements were less clearly to be observed in his first book […] than in his second […] for when that ‘book of people’ was published in the following spring the English and Anglo-American reviewers almost to a man singled out for special attention his success in reproduction of the actual speech of men and women” (295).

Returning to the problems an eye reader poses for such a poet, upon first glance, one is tempted to conclude “Home Burial” would suffer far more from being skimmed than would “October.” The rural conversion from “Home Burial” could, after all, have easily been rendered as a short story: an eye reader can glean the general situation between the husband and wife. Frost, however, would certainly have disagreed. The poet who wrote “Home Burial” would have felt it suffered at least as much from the reading style of a cursory, visual scan. Frost had maintained that prosody was the “best part” of a writer’s work, and colloquial “spoken” poems, such as those in *North of Boston*, are not easy to write. Such an approach requires that the poet forego a great deal of traditional prosody; as a result, other means of sonorousness must be found. “Home Burial” largely (albeit not completely) eschews the “familiar music of poetry.” It must do so, if the ordinary speech is to remain credible. Ordinary speech may wax poetic, but it is rarely poetry. Ordinary speech does not typically alliterate intensely, it does not typically rhyme, and it by no means apostrophically addresses an “October morning mild” as “thee.” Poetry is exceptional, whereas “ordinary” speech is, *a priori*, somewhat prosaic. Limiting the use of traditional poetic flourishes therefore poses a challenge for the poet. Although Frost makes it look effortless, there is an innate difficulty in having poems sound like speech and yet be recognizable as *poems*. Frost believed he had found a solution: if the familiar music of poetry was to be foregone, the *sound of sense* would instead supply the sonority.

Unfortunately, this appeal to speech tones poses a second problem. In theory, tones can be transcribed, but not with the familiar 26 letters of the alphabet. Frost had only the English alphabet, italics, and punctuation with which to work, which leads to a curious paradox: those traits which render the dialogue poems in *North of Boston* most popularly accessible, such as concise characterization and the fact they could have been rendered as short stories or scripts for a drama, may largely have been a secondary effect of Frost’s need to situationally constrain the reading of *tones*. Replongle cuts to the heart of Frost’s method when he states that “[i]t takes a special skill to make confusions that intonation can clear up,” and he correctly notes that “readers want to make sense out of what they read (good ones, anyway), and when they can only make sense by getting the voice right, they will get it right—and in so doing foreground the sounds the voice is making” (138). One therefore sees that Frost’s *parti-pris* of orality was twofold. Not only
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was Frost committed to efforts to glean and transcribe the “sound of sense” from lived oral experience, but the practice left him reliant upon the intelligent reader to interpret and “perform” the tones – even if silently – on the basis of one’s own lived experience. As such, in Frost’s dialogue poems, the eye reader is prone to miss out both on sonority and on those nuances of character and situation to which an intelligent au/oral reading forces one to pay attention.

Full appreciation of Frost’s poetry therefore presumes a reader who, firstly, will take the time to imagine how the speech would have been articulated and, secondly, has enough oral experience of the language to correctly intuit how the lines would have been delivered in a given context and situation. Frost explicitly claims that “you cant [sic] read a single good sentence with the salt in it unless you have previously heard it spoken” (Sheehy, Richardson, and Faggen, 168) – and it is telling that Frost says read, and not merely write. Quite consistently, Frost also cautioned that “[n]obody knows how to read Homer and Virgil perfectly, because the people who spoke Homer’s Greek and Virgil’s Latin are as dead as the sound of their language” (Poirier and Richardson 670). This also contextualizes Frost’s stated reluctance to read works in translation, as he believed that “[r]eally to understand and catch all that is embodied in a foreign masterpiece it must be read in the original because while the words may be brought over, the tone cannot be” (Poirier and Richardson, 671). The poem is a script which requires the collaboration of a good “voice actor” who can and will mentally perform the tones on the basis of their lived experience of the spoken vernacular. The eye reader, unfortunately, even if they have had sufficient contact with the spoken language to appreciate Frost’s work, has a reading style which sacrifices the use of the audile imagination in favour of speed.

On the other hand, Frost’s stated preference for the ear reader is occasionally so programmatic as to become disingenuous, as one suspects that a reader or writer capable of privileging the ear to the degree Frost recommends is rare. As has been noted by Tyler Hoffman in Robert Frost and the Politics of Poetry:

some of Frost’s most effective rhetorical schemes, including anaphora and chiasmus, depend at least as much upon visual apprehension as upon aural, despite his theoretical pronouncements to the contrary […] Frost’s assertion that his poetry conveys tones of voice without the aid of graphitic cues does not make sense in light of his poetry. (8)

It is certainly true the anaphora and chiasmus leap out on the printed page, although there seems no reason that a spoken metric line could not convey such devices independently of graphical support. That said, the caveat Hoffman ultimately raises is that Frost almost certainly had mixed motives in developing his own poetics; Hoffman therefore contextualizes the exaggerated claims Frost made for the “sound of sense” by invoking the poet’s situation in London, when he perceived a need to justify his poetic practice. Frost’s combination of conservative verse forms and
a vernacular persona had led to “charges of a lack of sophistication” leading to Frost feeling an “acute” need to defend himself via a theory of poetic form (18).

What is more, print had proven a suitable medium for a more image-based poetry style by 1914, as the poems of Frost’s contemporaries, the Modernists and Imagists, were highly dependent upon the written medium. Long form free-verse poems, although by no means devoid of sonority, would certainly have been forbiddingly difficult to remember without the support of writing. Frost’s penchant for the ear and sound would have allowed him to distance himself from his contemporaries: namely, from the circles based around Frost’s “quasi-friend,” Ezra Pound. In “Robert Frost and the Imagists,” John F. Sears notes that Frost’s innate predilection was “for an imagism of the ear, [...] in which images of sound are even more important than images of sight” (476). Although he cautions that Frost’s interest in oral speech arose prior to his time in London, Sears also convincingly argue that Frost’s penchant for “ear images” was likely spurred on by efforts to differentiate himself from the prevailing trend. As such, Frost reflected that it was “[s]trange [that] with all their modernity and psychology [that the Imagists hadn’t had] more to say about ear images and other images – even kinesthetic.” Exhibiting his sharp differentiation of the visual and auditory senses, Frost’s definition of an Imagist was “simply one who insists on clearer sharper less muddled half realized images (chiefly eye images)” (Poirier and Richardson 735; emphasis mine).

Such factors almost certainly played a role. On the other hand, one should not lose sight of the fact that Frost’s aesthetic theory and poetic practice did, to a significant degree, coincide throughout his career. Roughly a decade later, in a letter to John Freeman, Frost himself openly conceded that there had likely been ulterior motivations to his having formalized his poetic theory while in London, yet it is instructive that in the same letter he also doubled down on the “sounds of sense”:

my theory was out of my practice and was probably a provision of nature against criticism. I haven’t felt the need of talking about it as much lately as I did once. I still hold to it. The imagination of the ear flags first as the spirit dies down in writing. The “voices” fail you. (Barry 80)

Frost, who goes on to remark that “[f]ool psychologists treat the five sense elements in poetry as [being] of equal weight [...] [when] one of them is nearly the whole thing” (81), was still singing the praises of the ear.

So much for why Frost would have deemed the eye reader a barbarian—the eye reader scarfs down content, visual images and information gluttonously, without taking the time to savor and relish the nuances of sonority, and missing ear images. At this point, however, a final question might be raised. On the basis of Frost’s letters and lectures, one finds a pronounced consciousness of ear and eye images, of ear and eye readers, and of orality versus “book language”: do these
concepts ever spill over into his artistic writings? Such notions as the “sound of sense,” the “eye/ear reader” and “eye/ear images” were certainly used by Frost to articulate his poetic process. Frost had also clearly pondered and differentiated the senses of vision and of hearing. An ear reader was a good reader, and an eye reader was a “bad” reader. Turning to a final query: does the “eye reader” ever put in an appearance in Frost’s poetry or plays?

2. The “Eye Reader” in Robert Frost’s Poetic Oeuvre

In one case, the answer is yes: albeit briefly, and only obliquely. Starting in 1929, Frost began branching off into short plays (“A Way Out”; “In an Art Factory”; “The Guardeen”); in 1945 and 1947, Frost’s penultimate poetic production saw him penning his two (Biblical) masques. The second of these, “A Masque of Mercy,” is set in modern day New York, where the prophet Jonah seeks refuge in a bookshop tended by “Keeper” and “Jesse Bel.” It is in a passage from the latter that Frost invokes the eye reader:

Jonah [...] the fault
In nature would wipe out all human fault.
(He stops to listen) That’s a mighty storm,
And we are shaken. But it isn’t earthquake.
Another possibility I thought of –

(He stops to listen and his unspoken thought,
Projected from the lantern of his eyes,
Is thrown in script as at Belshazzar’s fest
On the blank curtain on the outer door)

– Was Babel: everyone developing
A language of his own to write his book in,
And one to cap the climax by combining
All language in a one-man tongue-confusion.

(He starts to speak, but stops again to listen.
The writing on the screen must change too fast
For any but the rapidest eye reader). (Poirier and Richardson 398)

This appears, however, to be Frost’s only mention of the eye reader in his poetic oeuvre, and it would furthermore be a significant misrepresentation to suggest that eye readers or printed books are any primary preoccupation of “A Masque of Mercy.” Additionally, the italicized lines are arguably stage directions. On the other hand, these are stage directions which scan, and – (as throughout the play) – complete the iambic pentameter. What is unambiguously clear is that Frost
Jeremy Pomeroy is using his awareness of ear and eye reading style to attain a technical effect. Using a projector, the script thrown on a curtain from the “lantern of [Jonah’s] eyes” could have been staged in the 1940s.

In terms of content concerning writing and orality, however, the matter is far less clear: yet there is, frankly, a decent amount to unpack here. Taken in isolation, the passage above is strongly redolent of reading, eye reading, and books. One has “script,” “Babel,” a “lantern of [Jonah’s] eyes,” “everyone developing / [a] language of his own to write a book in” and – finally – an impulse to speak, abrogated in favor of listening. As the entire play takes place in the bookshop of “Keeper” and his wife “Jesse Bel,” books would almost certainly be part of any visual set, were the masque to be staged. Unless one uses braille, books are read via the eyes. An interpretation of the passage in the light of Frost’s audile poetics and his notion of a “bad” reading is not, therefore, altogether arbitrary or willful. By “[a]ll language in a one-man tongue-confusion,” Frost may indeed have had something in mind like the professorial or literary prose he had decried against, in favor of “the sound of sense,” years before:

[t]here are two kinds of language: the spoken language and the written language–our everyday speech which we call the vernacular; and a more literary, sophisticated, artificial, elegant language that belongs to books. […] I, myself, could get along very well without this bookish language altogether [1918]. (Poirier and Richardson 694)

That being said, the accent must fall upon the may. Jonah’s snippet of dialogue may bear such a reading, but it does not require it. In the wider context of Jonah’s entire statement, disintegration by Babel is merely one of several ways God might choose to exact judgment upon the wicked city. As regards the “lantern of the eyes,” the medieval belief in “beams” of sight does not appear much in Frost’s wider work; although lanterns do, associations between “light” and “sight” are universal and anthropologically intuitive. Light in “A Masque of Mercy” appears to mean truth or revelation; and the depiction of (printed) books is by no means pejorative, as in “Keeper’s” later passage:

*Jesse Bell* Light, bring a light!

*Keeper* Awh, there’s no lack of light, you –
A light that falls diffused over my shoulder
And is reflected from the printed page
And bed of world-flowers so as not to blind me. (Poirier and Richardson 411)

There may certainly be some subtext, but ultimately the central thrust of Frost’s Masque is that of the original Jonah story: Jonah’s attempt to escape a God he cannot trust to “be unmerciful.” Its leitmotifs are common throughout Frost’s
writing: theodicy, relations between men and women, the human condition, etc. Nor do eyes, ears and reading styles also do figure prominently elsewhere in Frost’s Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays.

Conclusion

The aspersions Frost casts upon the eye reader do follow extremely naturally from his poetics, as well as from the eye reader’s implicit depreciation of precisely those qualities which he was most seeking to capture in his own poetry. Not only the sonority of traditional Western prosody, but also the music of tone, stress and pacing is overlooked by the “bad” reader, who skims or scans the poem visually. Speed-reading poetry, otherwise stated, is not a particularly edifying experience. Printed texts allow for speed reading, yet Frost appears to have no particular bone to pick with either books or the print medium, both of which might conceivably be blamed for the decline in au/orality. Quite the opposite: Frost was proud to be a published poet who, however belatedly, managed to derive a substantial income from his printed work. Never in Frost does one find any jeremiad against books specifically. Broadly considered, it becomes clear that Frost is dealing with the inattentive, hasty reader: not the sense of vision, and certainly not the visual medium. That at which Frost sometimes pokes fun is merely bookishness – self-consciously literary, rather than colloquial, writing and speech (e.g. Professor Titcombe in “The Gardeen”).

Frost could be coherently situated within the world of McLuhan’s “Gutenberg Galaxy,” as a writer who reacted (intuitively) against Western culture’s visual bias by embracing a return to sonic orality. His differentiation of the visual and audile imagination and his tendency to laud the latter were explicit, deliberate and even tendentious. On the other hand, nothing in Frost suggests he viewed the eye reader in any larger historical process or mediatic context. “Eye readers” were simply “bad,” “barbarian” readers, who needed to be slowed down so as not to miss the “best part” of poetry. Neither reading styles nor the act of reading become a recurring theme in his artistic work, nor are ears nor eyes recurring symbolic images in his poetry; thus, “the sound of sense,” the “ear” and “eye” reader, and the “imagining ear” remain part of Frost’s method, rather than a part of his content.

Finally, for all his interest in “speech tones” and “ear images,” Robert Frost obviously no more categorically renounced “eye images” than he did the resources of traditional literary prosody. Frost simply wished to take advantage of the broader sensorium. As Newdick observed in 1937, “it would be quite to misunderstand Frost to take his emphasis on images to the ear as precluding an almost equal interest in images to the eye […] [although] it is true that he values ear-images over eye-images [and] purposely exalts the former” (297). Even in
North of Boston, where Frost’s use of traditional prosody is radically constrained, an occasional line does threaten to break the plausibility of natural speech: as in the wife’s alliterative “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” (Poirier and Richardson 56). Frost, for all his enthusiasm for tones, would gradually synthesize this interest with a stridently traditional poetic technique. A passage from Frost’s fourth book, New Hampshire – (“To E. T. [Edward Thomas],” addressed to Frost’s friend and fellow-poet who had perished in the first World War) – serves as a final illustration not only of Frost’s attitude toward (printed) books, both also of his continued usage of both traditional literary prosody and eye images:

I slumbered with your poems on my breast  
Spread open as I dropped them half-read through  
Like dove wings on a figure on tomb  
To see, if in a dream they brought of you. (Poirier and Richardson 205)

In fact, Frost’s poetic mastery was largely the ability to switch between the colloquial and literary register, as well as to appeal to both the visual and the audile imagination of his reader. As such, although an eye reader might miss much, in most cases they would still take something away from Frost’s poems. The “best part,” however, be it the most integral sonic essence or the icing on the cake, remains impalpable for the visual reader. The subtextual nuance of how “I see” is to be pronounced is missed. What is be done if the eye reader overlooks the sonorous “m’s” of “slumbered,” “poems,” “tomb” and “dream”? How are they to reeducated from their hastiness? One suspects Frost would have simply prescribed a hefty course of oral reading and memorization. The fault is in the barbarian, not in the book.

References