

The Forkless Frost

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It would be tempting to follow the time-honored practice of reading Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" as a reflection on the effects of a foot's falling on one side or another of a fork in a road. That is how, in different ways, Frost's enigmatic poem has for the most part been read. The effects of the choice of one path over another are assumed to be provided within the poem itself or revealed in the poet's personal testimony concerning the poem. This is true even in cases where readers acknowledge the ambiguous nature in which the effects are related. A poem whose literal scenario is uncomplicated—the poem recounts reflections on the choice of one road over another, nearly identical road, made while walking through a wood—has appeared to many commentators to offer moral guidance about which choices to make in life. Taking the "road less traveled" is often assumed to have assured the poet a propitious fate. The lesson thus derived is that "taking chances" or "being different from others" is advisable. William H. Pritchard conjectures that this is how the poem was enthusiastically received by the students of Amherst College upon their hearing it read by Frost. As Pritchard says,

For President Meiklejohn and for the assembled students at compulsory chapel, it might have been heard as a stirring instance of what the 'liberal college' was all about, since it showed how, instead of acceding to the petty pleasures, the 'countless trivial and vulgar amusements,' offered by the world or the money-god or the values of the marketplace, an individual could go his own way, live his own life, read his own books, take the less traveled road.¹

To cast doubt on this popular, spontaneous understanding of the poem, Pritchard cites a much-discussed letter in which Frost explains that the poem was intended to poke fun at his close friend Edward Thomas, who was inclined to fret over his choice of paths as he walked through the Gloucestershire countryside with Frost.² On Pritchard's reading, the prophetic tone of the poem's final stanza would thus have to be understood as good-humored irony carried out at the expense of Thomas; the poem's prophetic conclusion, a hyperbolic parody

1 William Pritchard. 1984. *Frost : A Literary Life Reconsidered*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved on May 1, 2006 from http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/road.htm

2 *Ibid.* Lawrence Thompson discusses this anecdote as the source for "The Road Not Taken" in *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrence Thompson (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), excerpts of which can be retrieved here: http://frost.freehosting.net/poems_road.htm

of Thomas's manner of thinking or speaking.³

Without wishing to dismiss Pritchard's perspective, which is supported by certain of Frost's own letters and public statements, I note that readings such as Pritchard's which assert that the poem offers no broad lesson nonetheless restrict the poem's meaning not only to the experiences of its author but also to the dimensions of an individual lifespan. This is significant since, on my understanding, the final verse and its reference to "ages and ages hence" renders biographical and literal readings suspect. For a similar reason, it invites the reader to look beyond Frost's stated or unstated intentions in writing the poem and to interrogate, instead, the poem's prophetic dimension.

Recall that the fourth and final stanza reads as follows:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.⁴

The point that has not been well considered is that since the conventional or non-hyperbolic sense of "ages and ages" is of a time lasting several generations, the "I" cannot be identified with that of a single subject, for instance, the author of the poem. That is, the reference to "ages and ages hence" removes the significance of the poem's literal scenario not only from the present time, but also from the lifespan of the poet. Since the voice of the poem projects the meaning of the choice of one road over another to a time that surpasses the poet's lifetime, we must be suspicious of readings that assume the "I" of the poem to coincide with any subject capable in principle of announcing themselves with the first-person pronoun—which is to say, any living subject—or to coincide with the poet, Robert Frost, who could then be cast as moral exemplar for the poem's readers. Unless we imagine that the deceased Robert Frost may one day live again, we are compelled to understand the prophetic strains of the final stanza other than as the reflection of an individual's heartfelt intentions or future-bound epiphany. It seems to me that Pritchard and other readers correctly assess the prophetic moment of the final stanza to be ironic in import;

3 The existence of this "other voice" within Frost's poem should discourage readers from arguing, on the model of Howell Chickering, that the poem is a direct reflection of the poet's "sensibility," which to appreciate, we must not delude ourselves into thinking we can fully share. Chickering's argument has general validity for the practice of reading literature; but, as I try to show in the case of "The Road Not Taken," it is not merely the poem's "literary sensibility" that makes impossible reader identification with the poem's claims. Rather, there are structural reasons for not identifying with either its author or presumed voice.

4 Robert Frost. 1916. *Mountain Interval*: 9. New York: Henry Holt and Company. Further quotations of "The Road Not Taken" are from this volume and page. The full text of the poem can be retrieved at <http://www.favoritepoem.org/poems/frost/>.

however, the upshot of the irony need not be tied down to any presumed “source of inspiration” or biographical anecdote. As I read the poem, its confident declarations concerning an event to take place “ages and ages hence” present a problem, uniquely formulated in “The Road Not Taken,” concerning the nature of decision-making in its relation to time.

One must first recognize that the momentous “fork” of Frost's poem falls less between one road and another than between the past and the future. Already, as many readers have noted, the fact that the roads are likened to one another on three occasions—in lines 6, 10, and 11-12— suggests that what is at issue is not any presumed qualitative difference between them. The truly significant difference can be found by considering the poem's structure. After three stanzas recount a decision to take one of two roads, the fourth stanza indicates that, “I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence.” The final three lines of the fourth stanza repeat, in a return to the past tense, that a decision was made and add ambiguously that “that has made all the difference.” Frost's poem would not demand the attention it does if it were not for the insistence that “this” will be told at some unspecified place in the distant future. As to the meaning of “this,” we can conjecture that it refers to either the choice of one road, the experiences that followed this choice, or to the final lines of the poem; but we cannot say with certainty that it refers to any one of these. Despite this uncertainty, the claim about what will have been, or what will have been told, at some far-off time, must be accounted for. Without the reference to “ages and ages hence,” the consequences of the choice would appear to be limited to the period after “that morning” (line 11), which suggests neither immediate proximity nor necessarily a distant past. The poem would amount to nothing more than a casual sigh over a road not taken. It would lose its prophetic punch.

The significance of the choice between roads comes from its being projected towards a future that will exceed the biological time of the subject implied by the poem's use of first person pronouns. The poem appears to posit the subject's capacity to be, to tell, and even to tell with a sigh, ages and ages hence. This implication clearly jars with any biographical reading of the poem. Jay Parini's reading, for instance, while attentive to the possible irony of the final lines, paraphrases them in this way: “When I am old, *like all old men* [my emphasis], I shall make a myth of my life. I shall pretend, as we all do, that I took the less traveled road. But I shall be lying'... Frost wants the reader to know that what he will be saying, that he took the road less traveled, is a fraudulent position, hence the sigh.”⁵ Can we presume, however, to know either what the “voice” of the poem will be telling “ages or ages hence” or

5 From “Frost” in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. Ed. Emory Elliott. 1988. Columbia University Press. Retrieved on May 1, 2006 from http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/road.htm.

what the meaning of the sigh will have been? Should we insist that the voice is that of Frost? Must we take for granted that such a telling, whether by the poet Frost or by “all old men,” is possible? In sum, is it necessary to adopt the poem’s exuberant confidence concerning a scenario that lies beyond the reach of mortal existence?

In light of these questions, how can we understand the workings of the first person pronoun? Is the pronoun, as Parini suggests, a universal “I” meant to serve or stand in for any future (male) reader of the poem? Does the first “I” of the fourth stanza already spy distant readers whom the poem recognizes, and perhaps commends, as fellow distant travelers upon roads less traveled? Or do the side-by-side “I’s” of the fourth stanza peer into eternity and so reflect an author’s quest for posthumous fame? An eternal life in literature?

The statement that “that has made all the difference” raises the question not only what kind of difference but *at what point* the difference was, or will have been, made. Was the “difference” immediately apparent after the decision was taken or will it have been worthy of public declaration only when considered from a future perspective, after its effects have come to light or endured through “ages and ages”? Conversely, if “all the difference” has already been made, why not tell so now and be at peace? Why not have told already, along with the rest of what has been related? As we have seen, it is not uncommon for readers to assume that such a difference has already been made and understood, if not already reported, by the poet. These assumptions, however, are not supported by the poem. They are in fact weakened further by the ambiguous demonstrative pronouns that appear in the final stanza. First, in the line, “And that has made all the difference,” the deictic “that” may point to the choice, the path, the divergence, the wood, the sigh, or even to the telling. It is not clear to me how any reader can presume to know which of these referents is implied or intended. Second, when the narrative voice states that it will “be telling this,” we must ask: are the final three lines following the colon what in fact will be told—that is, a sort of quotation prepared, promised, and rehearsed in advance—or do they merely recount the conditions that call for a prophetic revelation whose secret remains ensconced in “this” and “that”?

“The Road Not Taken” confronts the reader with a singularly confident deferment; its apparent focus on a past decision is displaced by the implication that the decision will have made “all the difference” at some distant time and perhaps only then. The declaration concerning a distant age accentuates this difference, even as the exact qualities of the difference remain unknown. Considering the poem’s structure in this light, we see that the first three stanzas rest on the forkless future prophesized in the fourth stanza—which is to say, a future in which the meaning of one’s choice of one road over another will have fully come to light and be worthy of public declaration. Let us now consider what this settled meaning, once obtained or projected into the distant future, may be.

What kind of difference is made or prophesized in “The Road Not Taken”? That the difference made by the decision may endure or be recounted ages and ages hence speaks to the nature of the decision. If, as it is commonly assumed, “all the difference” is understood in expansive or emphatic terms, thus suggesting a big or decisive difference, we see the tension the difference creates with the fact that the two roads are “just as fair,” to be worn “really about the same.” If, however, the phrase “all the difference” has a restrictive sense and thus implies “the *little* difference that was made” (with respect to certain expectations or potentialities), it makes the flat-footed forecast appear not only gratuitous, but absurd. In either case, the prophetic tone of the final verse would have to be understood, as it has been by certain readers, as sarcasm or irony.

Since the final lines appear ironic, one needs to account for the nature and object of the irony. Frank Lentricchia’s reading, for instance, sees in the statements of the final stanza the very opposite of the prophetic sovereignty they seem to portray. As Lentricchia writes, “this poem tells a different tale: that our life choices are irrational, that we are fundamentally out of control.”⁶ Lentricchia’s conclusion is that the poem uses irony to make a statement about the nature of rationality. The same can be said for Mark Richardson’s conclusion that the “speaker’s” vacillations are “decisive” in that they reveal to us that we “are too much in the middle of things...ever to understand when we are truly ‘acting’ and ‘deciding’ and when we are merely reacting and temporizing...We realize our path only when we arrive at it.”⁷ The problem, as I see it, is that these lessons are themselves weakened or differed by the poem’s reference to “ages and ages hence.” Thus, not only is the “path” not *arrived at* in the “present,” but it appears that the realization hinted at in the poem, if it is a realization, will be reported only at some impossible distance from the present. However, precisely because the distance is an impossible one for an individual conscience, there is, in effect, no realization of the sort Richardson or Lentricchia put forth. Even if we do posit a realization concerning the nature of human rationality within the poet or his poem, the object of the poem’s irony is, more pertinently, the assumption that any “realization” can be fully realized in the present—be it a *present* present or a present projected into the distant future.

For the above reasons, rather than offer either a moral or an anti-moral, the poem’s paradoxical conclusion invites the reader to question the decisiveness that is granted current assessments of past decisions, including decisions that are deemed to mark the periods of one’s life. If we assume, along with the American pragmatist philosophy that Charles S. Pierce and others developed throughout Frost’s early life, that the meaning of a decision can be found

6 Frank Lentricchia. 1995. *Modernist Quartet*. Cambridge University Press: 74.

7 Mark Richardson. 1997. *The Ordeal of Robert Frost: The Poet and His Poetics*. The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. Quotation retrieved on May 1, 2006 at http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/road.htm.

in its sensible effects, we might inquire, for instance, what the effects were of a man's decision to divorce his wife and thereby assess his decision. But if we ask the divorcee, he will have to decide what those effects were, and in so doing, he will remake his decision and thus recast and perhaps alter its effects. The man's wife will certainly never return to him as his never-divorced wife, but the meaning of her departure and "all the difference" it makes in the man's life will be decided time and again. The implication of Frost's irony is that the meaning of the choice made between two roads, understood literally or metaphorically, may always be reevaluated, and this possibility cannot be neutralized or eradicated; rather, it is an integral part of every decision. The same holds for the "sigh" promised in the poem's final stanza: it may appear to Frost or to his readers to be ironic or to indicate regret, but whether we see it as ironic, remorseful, fatalistic, nostalgic, triumphant, sarcastic, bitter, or desperate and defeated, the sigh, too, cannot escape the possibility of reevaluation. The possibility of future reevaluation haunts every present assessment just as do the assessments we have rejected in favor of the one we consider to be "present." That is why it would be absurd to adopt the singular confidence exhibited in the poem concerning a sigh that is to be emitted ages and ages hence.

In sum, Frost's poem invites us to question whether a fork can be either wholly overcome in its passing or neutralized in advance. The second point goes beyond the psychological pragmatism by means of which I characterized the possibility of reassessing past decisions. "Ages and ages hence" may well imply "never." Indeed, by its very attempt to attain the certainty of a forkless road, which is to say, a road the taking of which does not imply a road not taken that, as such, haunts one's choices, the poem suggests not only the "principle of selection in all aspects of life, namely that all choices in knowledge and action exclude many others," as Robert Faggan recognizes in Frost's poem,⁸ but also the principle of deferred consequences, namely that the meaning of our choices in knowledge and action is never fully present to us in the lived present but always haunted by an always not-yet-present and essentially *un-present-able* future. This implies what could be called the "forking" of the present. Moreover, this principle of the *un-present-able* future is suggested by Frost's poem whether or not Frost's intention in penning the final lines of the poem was ironic. It might be objected that the expression "ages and ages" is itself hyperbolic and not to be understood literally; in other words, that it suggests only old age and not a time beyond the poet's lifespan. However, this does not alter the fact that beyond any attempt on the poet's part to reevaluate his choice of one road either in the "present" or in his old age, there remains the possibility of others assessing it anew. Such a possibility is what makes a fully present present unavailable.

Another objection may be raised that deriving larger lessons from Frost's poems is

⁸ Robert Faggan. 1997. *Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin*. University of Michigan. Quotation retrieved on May 1, 2006 from http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/road.htm.

unwarranted because Frost himself, in public lectures and personal letters, clearly stated that he meant the final sigh of the poem to be an ironic reflection on his friend's inclination for second-guessing his own choice of paths to take while accompanying Frost on leisurely walks. However, it is also true that, in a letter responding to the inquiry sent by a young reader from Tennessee concerning the meaning of the sigh, Frost willfully contradicted the earlier references to his friend, Edward Thomas, by claiming that the sigh was in fact "my private jest at the expense of those who might *think* I would yet live to be sorry for the way I had taken in life [i.e., his vocation as a poet]."⁹ The fact that Frost often changed the characterizations of his own work, albeit it at times mischievously, illustrates the principle of reevaluation that I have described as an endless series of forked roads. Moreover, Frost's vacillations only underscore what we know in principle to be true, which is that authors' stated opinions of their own work are not necessarily authoritative or reliable. In addition to this general principle, Frost's poem, I have tried to show, indicates in its own way limitations to the assumption not only that the "speaker" of "The Road Not Taken" should be understood as Frost himself, but that "all the difference" has either been made already or will be made at some distant time in a way that will disallow reevaluation. More generally, it invites the reader to question whether one can render fully present to a present consciousness the meaning of one's choices in a way that not only seals off from consideration past roads not taken but also bars the route to all future forks in the path of understanding. In short, it leads us to ask whether "all the difference" can ever be made in a way that is exhaustive and final.

Consequently, no matter what Frost's stated or unstated intentions in writing may have been, we should remain sensitive to an ironic counter-reading to Frost's poem that is different from the ironic counter-readings offered by Richardson, Lentricchia, and others, in that it responds to the poem's paradoxical reference to a distant future. The a-moral "moral" of this counter-reading can be stated as follows: despite, or precisely because of the poem's ironic promise of a declaration to be made ages and ages hence, death will not fix once and for all the meaning of the choice of one road over another. Rather, death, too, will arrive with decisions and choices. It will be marked by the insistence of the expression *time and again*: in the time of one's life, and again, decisions will be made by oneself or by others. A "difference," Frost's poem suggests, is the only certainty that death will have brought. Old age or death will not have marked an end and cast a significance retroactively onto all that preceded them: rather, they will have marked another moment of decision. Even death will have been decisionary—another fork in another road. Contrary to the ancient Greek adage, the

9 Larry Finger. 1978. "Frost's 'The Road Not Taken': A 1925 Letter Come to Light." *American Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Nov.).

significance of one's life will not be found at, or fixed by, death. The decisionary imperative will not collapse or disappear at the end of mortal existence nor, even, at the arrival of a distant age. Similarly, despite the tone of prophecy in which it is announced, the "I" of the fourth stanza in "The Road Not Taken" will ever "be telling," ever be marked by "difference" and decision. For structural reasons unrelated to questions of "literature" or "art," the poem's equivocation will forever be frozen; and its final meaning, differed.

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(Received May 10, 2006)