

the *Frost Medal* LECTURE

Anthony Hecht

On April 14, 2000, the Poetry Society of America conferred the 2000 Frost Medal upon Anthony Hecht. The Frost Medal is awarded annually at the discretion of the PSA Board of Governors for distinguished lifetime service to American poetry. Hecht's Frost Medal Lecture was the highlight of the 90th Annual Awards Ceremony.

Robert Frost had his first book published when he was thirty-nine. It happened in England, where, with a wife and four children, and utterly unknown as a writer, he had settled with few resources in the hope of launching his career as a poet. The book, *A Boy's Will*, made its appearance around the first of April, 1913, and during the first two months after publication it received only two brief and highly equivocal mentions in the press. The *Atheneum* declared, "These poems are intended by the author to possess a certain sequence, and to depict the various stages in the evolution of a young man's outlook on life. The author is only half successful at this, possibly because many of his verses do not rise above the ordinary, though here and there a happy line or phrase lingers gratefully in the memory." The *Times Literary Supplement* also confined itself to two sentences: "There is an agreeable individuality about these pieces; the writer is not afraid to voice the simplest of his thoughts and fancies, and these, springing from a capacity for complete absorption in the influences of nature and the open air, are often naively engaging. Sometimes, too, in a vein of reflection, he makes one stop and think, though the thought may be feebly or obscurely expressed." It should not surprise us to learn from a Frost biographer Lawrence Thompson that when these slight and slighting notices appeared, "Frost's hopes melted into discouragement."

Within a year he had a second book, much of it held in reserve even as he turned the first one in to David Nutt, his London publisher. The second was to become a celebrated success; but Frost had no way of knowing this in advance, whereas he had reason enough to feel apprehension. I want this evening to speak briefly about the poem he chose to

conclude the book called *North of Boston*. It is one of his most admired and popular poems, though I suspect not fully understood. It is called "The Wood-Pile."

from *The Wood-Pile*

Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
I paused and said, "I will turn back from here.
No, I will go on farther—and we shall see." [...]
A small bird flew before me. He was careful
To put a tree between us when he lighted,
And say no word to tell me who he was
Who was so foolish as to think what he thought.
He thought that I was after him for a feather—
The white one in his tail; like one who takes
Everything said as personal to himself.
One light out sideways would have undeceived him.
And then there was a pile of wood for which
I forgot him and let his little fear
Carry him off the way I might have gone,
Without so much as wishing him good-night.
He went behind it to make his last stand.
It was a cord of maple, cut and split
And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.
And not another like it could I see.
No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.
And it was older sure than this year's cutting,
Or even last year's or the year's before.
The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.
What held it, though, on one side was a tree
Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,
These latter about to fall. I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.¹

The commentary on this poem has been deservedly ample: there's a lot to be said about it, and I am going to sprint lightly past a number of topics worth careful consideration. Among these would be the Dantean setting of a solitary man who is lost in a wood; and the self-division of the speaker

¹Robert Frost, "The Wood-Pile," *North of Boston* (London: David Nutt, 1914).

who not only talks to himself in both the singular and plural modes of address, but is, for a while, “of two minds” about whether to proceed; the amused and amusing projection of the speaker’s own paranoia—that of “one who takes/ Everything said as personal to himself,”—onto a small bird. All this and more I must ignore this evening, and direct your attention entirely to the final lines descriptive of the wood-pile that gives the poem its title. It is a cord of maple, piled and measured “four-by-four-by-eight,” which is the proper measure of a cord. Precision in such matters is commercially significant for any transaction; and even for tallying the extent of a completed task. How curious, how enigmatic, to find this perfectly stacked cord abandoned in the middle of nowhere. What does it mean? Since this wood-pile gives the poem its title, we are surely meant to give some thought to this.

One critic, whom I greatly admire and almost invariably agree with, has this to say of the poem’s end: “The final line has been rightly admired, but its brilliance almost blinds us to the fact that the reflection which it concludes is in no sense stunning or profound. The thought that ‘someone’ who abandoned this pile of wood must be one who ‘lived in turning to fresh tasks,’ is certainly uncontroversial and hardly provocative of further speculation.” I wish emphatically to dissent from that view. To begin with, that wood-pile, in the care and precision of its stacking, while familiar and conventional enough, is only one of a series of symbols recurrent in Frost’s poetry of demanding, sometimes fatiguing physical tasks performed with special accuracy. Consider these lines from “After Apple-Picking.”

There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.

This is a dream-episode, and a frightening one. It unfolds with remorseless and precise detail.

Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.

If you will allow yourself to suppose that the scrupulousness, the punctiliousness, of this apple-picker—in the fastidiousness of his selections, in the scrutiny of his examinations—is a metaphor for the conscientiousness involved in the writing of a poem, the determined discard of draft after unsatisfactory draft, you will, I think, come near to understanding the hallucinatory nightmare at the center of that poem, and the overwhelming sense of fatigue at its close. The same kind of metaphor appears in a later poem, “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” where the poet rejoices in his prowess as a woodsman:

Good blocks of oak it was I split,
As large around as the chopping block
And every piece I squarely hit
Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.

Now I would further argue that when, in the poem under discussion this evening, the poet says, “I thought that only/ Someone who lived by turning to fresh tasks/ Could so forget his handiwork on which/ He spent himself, the labor of his ax...” we, as readers, are entitled to register what we may think of as either a demurrer, or as an avowal the poet is too reserved and careful to express. For surely one easily conceivable reason that pile is there is that the man who cut and stacked it has died. This is not said; it is in fact deliberately avoided. But nothing could be more plausible, when you stop to think about it, and the more you think about it, the more it will strike you that the poet’s declaration that “only someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks” could have abandoned the pile is a transparent evasion, an explanation selected precisely for its blandness, its easy evasiveness; as when with some euphemism we avoid some terrifying or unlucky topic. And if, as I urge you to consider, this “handiwork...on which he spent himself” were poems that had gone virtually unnoticed during the poet’s life-time, and were to be chanced upon by some stray wanderer long after her poet’s death, then this wood-pile might well signify for Robert Frost the secret fears he must have entertained when, a year earlier, his first book was greeted such discouraging reviews; and there he was, husband and father of four—it might have been father of six, but for the early deaths of two children—in a foreign country where his work had been briefly and summarily dismissed.

