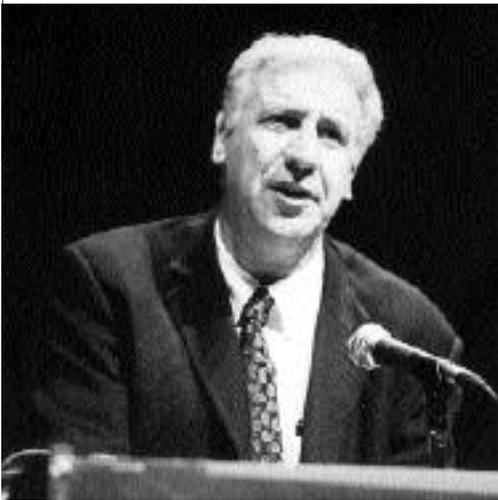


the Frost Medal Lecture 2004



Edward Hirsch

Introduction by

EDWARD HIRSCH

FIRST MET RICHARD HOWARD MORE THAN TWENTY years ago at the Donnell Library. I had just published my first book, and I was one of three young poets that he introduced that night. (How many hundreds of young—and not so young—poets has he generously ushered into poetry?) He bolted immediately after the reading, as I subsequently learned he is wont to do, leaving me clutching my hardcover copy of his marvelous translation of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleur du Mal*, which he has still not signed, and unable to thank him for his wonderful introduction. Tonight the wheel comes round and I can finally take my chance: thank you, Richard.

Richard and I began our ongoing conversation a bit later when our mutual friend Cynthia Macdonald brought us together. I remember suddenly getting Richard’s attention for the first time when I asked him about Mark Van Doren, his teacher at Columbia, whose work I’d been reading with great interest. “You read Mark Van Doren,” he said, a little incredulously, squinting at me over his colorful glasses, and then he began to explain his teacher (“he said things that shocked

us,” Richard reported) with so much warmth, surprise, and intelligence that it made my head swim. I decided I never wanted to be out of his presence again—ever. Our conversation has never desisted, though its intensity grew during the ten years Richard taught each fall at the University of Houston. We lived across the street from each other and talked poetry—talked books—with delicious constancy. Edward Thomas could not have taken more pleasure in Robert Frost’s conversation as they walked together through the English countryside than I have taken in Richard Howard’s conversation during the past two decades.

“Give us immedicable woes—woes that nothing can be done for—woes flat and final,” Robert Frost declared in a piece about Edwin Arlington Robinson. “And then to play,” he continued. “The play’s the thing. Play’s the thing. All virtue in ‘as if.’” There are immedicable woes at the core of Richard Howard’s work, but he has resolutely deflected and transfigured them into other voices, taking Hamlet’s “the play’s the thing” more seriously than almost any other American poet, and remaking it to “play’s the thing.” Howard’s winding syntax, his Jamesian way of talking in poetry, of speaking across strictly charted symmetrical stanzas, has always been a difficult pleasure, but, as the title of his twelfth book, *Talking Cures*, makes evident, it also has a curative dimension. For him, speaking becomes a form of necessary action, a process of making, of constructing and

reconstructing a self in the face of dissolution. Talking, which gives insight to experience, sounds the depths of our solitude, and reaches out to an unseen listener. Wit redresses what is wounded in us. Poetry heals.

Richard Howard is the most unabashedly literary—the most Wildean—of contemporary American poets. His massive learning, a full cultural arsenal, has sometimes made him seem suspect to poetry readers who distrust fanciness and mistakenly equate a plain style and a supposedly unmediated personal voice with “sincerity,” which is a little like saying that vanilla ice cream is more “sincere” than peach gelato. But if it’s true, as Ezra Pound thought, that technique is the test of a poet’s sincerity, then Howard certainly qualifies as one of our sincerest makers, since he has been elaborating his structures—deliberately making something of himself—for well over forty years now. This most multitudinous of poets keeps giving himself away through psychological portraits, dramatic intimacies, and the gift is ours.

As a poet, Richard Howard has, as he said of Proust, “nailed my colors to the past.” He has given us an ongoing critical investigation of the past itself—belated, delayed, interrogated, revisited. Since his third book of poems, *Untitled Subjects* (1969) his preferred method has been a version of the dramatic monologue, the letter, the conversation, the voice of the poet inhabiting another. His interior and dramatic monologues, which owe so much to Robert Browning, have rendered up an extraordinary cast of characters—from Whitman and Wilde to Loie Fuller and Rodin to Edith Wharton and Henry James to Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost. Howard’s dramatic meditations and fictions are almost always portraits of the artist in extremity—the artist in crisis mulling over his materials and his life, witty, worldly, mannered, deeply reflective, painfully and self-consciously struggling to imagine the great work into being. But in the end all these portraits of others become a portrait of the poet himself, and over the past thirty years it has been one of the great pleasures of my reading experience to witness the Song of Everyone Else slowly and distinctly evolving into a most distinctive Song of Myself. The baroque and unbroken poet that we are celebrating tonight has of late returned to elementary principles, to the basics of his imagination in confrontation with change. He demonstrates that his cunning art of conversation, of art as conversation, has evolved into an elegant talking cure, a poetry of deep mortality and humane grace.

The Frost Medal is awarded “for distinguished lifetime service to American poetry.” As a major poet, as a translator who has done more than any other single person

to bring French literature into English, as a most generous reviewer and a wonderfully insightful critic (I am eager to remind everyone of *Alone with America*, an indispensable critical book in which he examined the work of fifty-one highly individual contemporaries), as an indefatigable editor, teacher, and intellectual mentor, as perhaps the most sympathetic reader in the history of American letters, Richard Howard has certainly provided distinguished lifetime service to American poetry and literature. But he has also given us something more. He has given us the very model, the very embodiment, of a deeply responsive creativity, of a life fulfilled through poetry, a life lived in thrall to art. It gives me the deepest joy to introduce him. The Poetry Society of America distinguishes itself in awarding the Frost Medal to Richard Howard.

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Frost as Teacher

RICHARD HOWARD

MANY YEARS AGO, AS A GRADUATE STUDENT at Columbia University, I believed—like many others in my situation—that I enjoyed with my favorite professor a special relationship—a relationship of approval on his side and of admiration on mine. Perhaps it was characteristic of my raw youth in those days that I quite failed to understand that it would have gone much better with me if the relationship had been one of admiration on Lionel Trilling’s side and of approval on mine (as had been the case, I believe, with my contemporaries Steven Marcus and Norman Podhoretz). But nonetheless, whatever the improprieties or inadequacies of relationship I so mistakenly enjoyed with Lionel Trilling, I had the advantage, in worldly terms, of having heard my admired professor explain, in the presence of the poet himself who was being celebrated on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday (an eminence I myself am about to achieve by what I assume is some drastic clerical error), that “Mr Frost, you are a terrifying poet.” And to the terrifying poet’s horror, quite clearly registered on that same occasion, Lionel Trilling proceeded to enlarge on his assertion in terms—now quite banal, but at the time entirely unprecedented, indeed entirely preposterous—presenting Frost as a dark poet, a tragic poet, and therefore a poet entirely misun-

derstood by the large audience he had managed to gather to himself by means of a deceptive masquerade.

In the decades that followed this episode, which was reported with considerable outrage by the chief book-reviewer of the *NY Times* in those days, Mr J. Donald Adams (whom it was the delight of us admirers and approvers of Professor Trilling to refer to as J. Donald Duck), in the ensuing decades, then, Lionel Trilling's insights have been much elaborated in the sense he had so shockingly instituted, for example, by Randall Jarrell, by Richard Poirier, and by many another—why I myself, as my students every year will certainly testify....

But what I want you to know is that I was prepared, I was pre-formed, as a reader, by this insight of my favorite professor. In my case way back then, as is the case of most of us nowadays, I was in no danger of reading Robert Frost as an impersonator of Jack Frost, as a vice-president of the National Association of Manufacturers, in short, as a goodish grayish poet with a twinkle.

And consequently, when I come before you about to palm the Frost Medal and claim, on such an occasion, to speak with apparent enthusiasm of *Frost as Teacher*, it is entirely without illusions as to this great poet's contempt for most teachers, for most students, and indeed for most teaching of students. It was only once, in fact, that Frost was a teacher, but that once was a great and greatly illuminating pedagogical instance, and I shall examine it now.

In 1912, at the age of 37, Frost decided to live in England for a few years and devote himself to writing full time. He resigned his teaching position and sailed from Boston with his family. In October of that year he submitted his first manuscript of poems, *A Boy's Will*, to the London firm of David Nutt & Company, which accepted it for publication in 1913. The book was favorably reviewed by Ezra Pound and Norman Douglas, and furthermore Yeats told Pound that the book was "the best poetry written in America for a long time." David Nutt—I do wish that had not been his name—published Frost's second book, *North of Boston* in 1914, and Frost was pleased to learn that Henry Holt would henceforth publish his books in the United States. Meanwhile, in 1914, and more to the point of my narrative, Ralph Hodgson had introduced Frost to Edward Thomas, a depressed literary man four years younger than the American poet. In the previous sixteen years this Edward Thomas had published many volumes of topography, biography and *belles-lettres*, had compiled sixteen editions and anthologies, and had produced over a million and a half words of

reviews. The week before he met Frost this beleaguered hack wrote to a friend that "I couldn't write a poem to save my life." Frost was to think otherwise. The instinctive understanding these two men were to show for each other in the course of their intimate friendship had its origins in similarities between their backgrounds and temperaments. After Thomas's death Frost called him "the only brother I ever had." Both men had been disappointed by some aspects of marriage, both had threatened suicide, and both resented the public's neglect of their work. But Frost was more combative than Thomas—wasn't he more combative than anyone?—and during the winter of 1913, when Edward Thomas became obsessed with the notion that he should divorce his wife, Frost advised against such a move. He encouraged Thomas to find ways of realizing his true potential, and with the inspired insight of a true teacher, he recommended that Thomas become the poet he gave so many intricate signs of being. He did not advise Edward Thomas to discard everything he had written and start from scratch to be a poet, but rather that he use passages from his prose books—so often rapturous and even ecstatic—as the framework on which to build poems. By August of 1914 the Thomases were staying with the Frosts in their rented cottage in Gloucestershire, and it was Frost's continual society that Thomas found not only congenial but formative. On their walks together the younger Englishman heard, questioned and corroborated Frost's notions about "the sound of sense", and was confirmed in his slowly acquired belief that idealization of landscape and ornamentation of language were largely responsible for his artistic frustration. "If I am consciously trying to do anything," Edward Thomas wrote, "I am trying to get rid of the last rags of rhetoric and formality which left my prose so often with a dead rhythm." And it was, I believe, the 142 poems he was to write between December 1914 and his death two years and four months later, which fulfilled the strange prophecy Edward Thomas had made two years before: "I am certain in my own mind that nothing can seriously affect me for good except some incalculable change that may come with time or by some spiritual accident or by no possible deliberate means." Frost continued to work with Thomas throughout 1914, to *teach him poetry*, assuring him that "you are a poet or you are nothing," and by the time that Frost decided to return to America in February 1915, the friendship was an entirely transformative relation. The Frosts sailed from Liverpool, taking with them as a kind of wonderful pledge Thomas's oldest child, Mervyn; and Thomas began to write poems (always under the name Edward Eastaway—

he never published a line of verse under his own name, this author who supported himself by his 30 volumes of prose), and at the same time enlisted in the British army. As the editor of the newly published correspondence of Edward Thomas and Robert Frost remarks, the friendship has absolutely the intensity of an affair. We feel this in Thomas's wonderful words from the artillery camp in England to Frost in Franconia, New Hampshire: "The next best thing to having you here is having the space (not a void) that nobody else can fill." And then the astounding words in the last months of his life, when Thomas asks Frost if some verses had reached him: "Don't think I mind. I should like to be a poet, just as I should like to live, but I know as much about my chances in either case, & I don't really trouble about either."

Isn't it remarkable that the intervention of the teachings of Robert Frost convinced the man who had said "I couldn't write a poem to save my life" to say, three years later, "I should like to be a poet, just as I should like to live."

We know that Thomas lost his life in France, but in a sense he saved it for us by those 142 poems, most of them written there in France in circumstances of entire solitude, that solitude which was the space (not a void) which no one else but Frost could fill. To Helen Thomas, Frost wrote from America, upon hearing of Edward's death: "I knew from the moment when I first met him at his unhappiest that he would someday clear his mind and save his life. I have had four wonderful years with him, only I can't help wishing he could have saved his life without so wholly losing it. I want to see him to tell him something. I want to tell him what I think he liked to hear from me, that he was a poet."

Now I am quite aware of the extravagance of my notion, which you have probably seen coming through the lineaments of this wonderful story, the conviction that one

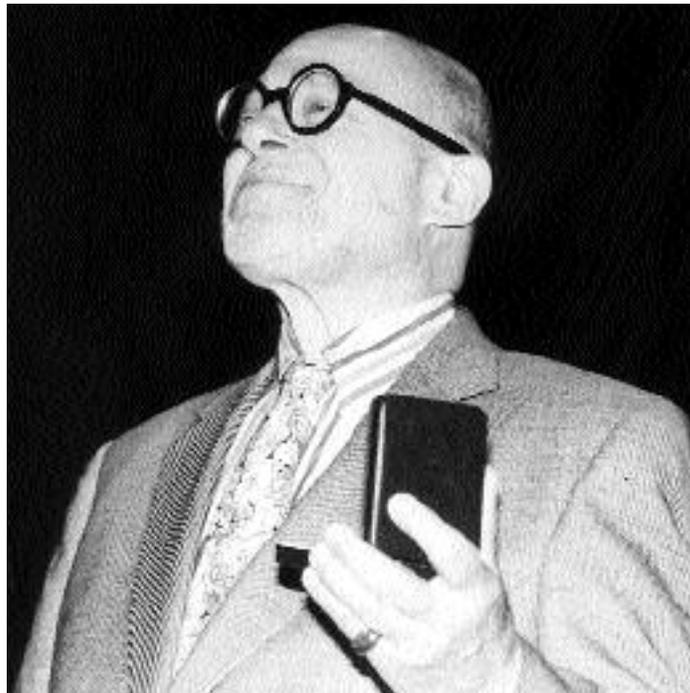
human being can teach another human being to be a poet. Perhaps such a thing is credible enough when the human beings involved are Robert Frost and Edward Thomas, but I take the two poets, the teacher Frost and the learner Thomas, to be no more than icons of the process I wish to assert and celebrate for the rest of us. It is my understanding, if I have heard my friend Edward Hirsch correctly, that this Frost Medal you have awarded me is not awarded merely—merely!—in recognition of my poems, but further—further!—in recognition of the value of my activities as a teacher of poets and of poetry. I hope this is the case, for it is my fond intention to

continue such pedagogical endeavors, disputed and frequently discountenanced as they are in many quarters, for a long time to come. It is the example of Frost as teacher which gives some credibility to my intention, and a good deal of hope to those endeavors.

I didn't mean, just now, to speak at all modestly about my poems, in accepting the Frost Medal for my activities, as they loom before me and behind, as a teacher. In proof whereof, I'd like to leave the platform with the performance of one of those very poems, one which concerns Mr.

Frost on the occasion of his meeting Wallace Stevens—it was in Key West that the two mistrustful giants of our American poetry encountered one another. The poem is too scandalous to be entirely imaginary, too scholarly to be entirely true. I'd like to read it to you now, with the warning that the last two words, like the title, are in Latin. The title, "Et Dona Ferentes," is of course Laocoon's remark to the effect that he fears the Greeks especially when bearing gifts. And the last two words—they refer to the Latin dictionary which Stevens proposed to send to Frost—*tolle lege*, "take up and read," are from St Augustine's *Confessions*. Here's the poem.

[following page]



Richard Howard

...ET DONA FERENTES

for Eleanor Cook

About offering they were often wrong-headed, these two modern masters; about receiving too—perhaps that accounts for why they are masters;

genius, after all, is related to disregard, a dour sort of attribute engaging neither human heart nor angelic grace, just divine apathy.

Take, for example, that business of a Latin lexicon given—on what pretext, what premise?—by Wallace Stevens to Robert Frost one March: “Rather than sending

my copy, I shall procure a fresh one for you and mail it to Key West, where you can look up such things as *lotus eaters*, and so on.” Always a deliberate

matter with Stevens, *procuring* lasted well into July: “Not, as I had thought, the Liddell & Scott (they confined their attentions to Greek) but the Liewis & Short—

I have had to send to England for it. Nonetheless I hope its occasional use will yield as much delight to you as it has given me.” Frost was 61

and still to Stevens (by five years the younger man) “Mr. Frost.” Odd that Key West should constitute a tryst for these two Northern Spies—it must have had everything to do

with “*lotus eaters*,” but why a *Latin* dictionary then? Weren’t they Greek, the *Lotophagoi*? The occasion strikes me as historic, mythical—fraught with

symbolic portents for any future poetry, the way meetings between monarchs once signified, after ritual gifts had been exchanged, new frontiers imposed, whole populations henceforth compelled to speak another tongue. . . . The episode (but what did Frost send *back*? Seven years later he was “Dear Robert”) figures tellingly

in our chronicle of culture, the muzzy *chanson de geste* whereby we may recognize, however disputed the phrasing, the figures of What Is Remembered.

I translate freely: Wallace the Wily, Lord of Qualified Assertions, did to Duke Robert, Dynast of Dogmatic Doubt, deliver—feeling himself adequate

among the orchids but a lost soul in the kitchen-garden—the ceremonial key, the Gift Proper “in the porches of Florida, behind the bougainvilleas” . . .

After lunch, His Grace recalled that the Bible says to forgive our enemies, not our friends—“Is there not a touch of vulgarity, Stevens, in any reward, for

anything, ever? If you’re given champagne at lunch, there’s sure to be a catch somewhere. Honor among thieves, I think, is complicity in crime.” And just about here,

when neither poet was taking the hint of an ignorance he never knew he had, would be the place where a neutral text, say Ovid (upon which each paladin

might feel himself god enough to descend to the sons of men) came in handy for the polite consensus much needed now, along with a napkin and a kindly nap.

Thence the lexicon was but a natural move, like a man reaching for a glass across the table. “Do let me send mine to you, Mr. Frost . . . With it one opens

eyes of the living gently as one closes eyes of the dead.” To which Duke Robert, looking at Wily Wallace as if he were an intensely musical cobra

caught listening to the snake-charmer’s flute, was heard to reply (but who was there to preserve such words dropped from the eaves? The chronicle submits): “You speak as you write,

Stevens, in patches
of deep purple. If Latin were a bridge,
I should prefer to swim. But I enjoy
your generous offer—I'll put myself
back to school for you."

"With me, Mr. Frost—
school is merely the continuation
of politics by gentler means; surely
we are together as politicians,
if not as poets?"

"Who knows what we are
as poets?" And the two laughed, with that tact
which is the capacity to engage
the egoism of others. How one broods
over that encounter

of 1935;
henceforth, according to the chronicle
—the Golden Legend and the Leaden too—
relations diminished to the point of
becoming lasting.

No more offerings
are recorded, and no theory of
reception advanced. As if they neither
expected nor could resist rebuttal,
we leave the poets

equally enforced,
avoiding the odd advantage as
savoring too much of a conclusion.
Meanwhile the Latin dictionary lies
there. *Tolle. Lege.*

—Richard Howard
From *Like Most Revelations*
(Pantheon, 1994)

THE VICTOR VANQUISHED

for Tom, 1989

At the going rate, your body gave you
—made you—too much pain for you to call it
yours. Oh, not the pain, the pain was all yours

and all you had; by the end you hugged it
closer than their anodyne substitutes:
pain was your one religion, pain was bliss.

But this body, where almost everything hurt
and what didn't hurt didn't work—*yours*? Never!
Like anybody's, it gave nothing up

that soap and water couldn't wash away.
Whose was it then, this desecrated pond
where all fish die, where only scum persists?

Anybody's. Nobody's. Like a king
who keeps recognizing as "my people"
the rebels who have pulled him off the throne . . .

Your body not your body. What about
"your" friends? We want playmates we can own.
Could these be yours? Since every friendship

grows from some furtive apotheosis
of oneself, who were these dim intruders
presuming they inhabited your pain,

as if there could be room for them as well?
You would not have it—let them all go hang!
For two years, the body alone with its pain

suspended friendship like the rope that holds
a hanged man. All you wanted was to drop
this burden, even if it meant that you

would be the burden dropped. And "your" lovers?
What about love—was it like "your" disease,
an abnormal state of recognition

occurring in a normal man? Love is
not love until it is vulnerable—
then you were in it: up to here in love!

The verdict of their small-claims court: it takes
all kinds to make a sex. Had you made yours?
Everything is possible but not

everything is permitted: in love
you were a shadow pursuing shadows,
yet the habit of the chase enthralled you,

and you could not desist. You would make love
by listening, as women do. And by lying
still, alone, waiting. You did not wait long.

Life in general is, or ought to be,
as Crusoe said, one universal Act
of Solitude. You made it death as well.

—Richard Howard
From *Like Most Revelations*
(Pantheon, 1994)