#5

THE NEW YORK CENTER FOR VISUAL HISTORY

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A VOICES AND VISIONS FILM

ROBERT FROST

ROBERT FROST: Matthew Arnold said, "Nature is cruel. It's man that's sick of blood." And man doesn't seem so very sick of it. Nature is always more or less cruel...The woods are all killing each other anyway. That's where the expression came from, "a place in the sun." A tree wanting a place in the sun that it can't get, the other trees won't give it to it.

NARRATOR: "I want to reach out to all sorts and kinds," Robert Frost once said. He said also, "These poems are written in parable, so the wrong people won't understand and so be saved." He was unknown and virtually unpublished until almost 40, when the nation made him, like Whitman, an American symbol. Eventually he became his own myth.

SEAMUS HEANEY (Poet):

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
....
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.

That was one of the first Frost poems I ever encountered, and my primary attraction I suppose was the sense of familiarity with the world that was in the poems, that world of actual hard rattling buzz-saw snarling action of a farmyard. It seemed to me here was a poet who touched things as they are somehow.

WILLIAM PRITCHARD (Critic): Frost when he talks about poetry tends to make formulations that pull you up short: "Poetry is organized violence with language." Is poetry a way of making one feel easier about life, is it an escape from life, would you say? And Frost said, "No, it's a way of taking life by the throat." Organized violence upon language. No classic poet, no Romantic poet, no Shelley, no Yeats would employ such an idiom, "a way of taking life by the throat." Is he serious? Well, yes. Is he playful? Yes indeed.

FROST (reading from "The Gift Outright"):

> The land was ours before we were the land's.
> She was our land more than a hundred years
> Before we were her people. She was ours
> In Massachussetts, in Virginia...

PRITCHARD: From early along, he's got a kind of ironic purchase on the myth, and yet he means it too: he is going to be known as the Yankee poet.

FROST: I like to be called a humanist, I guess, pretty well, though I'm not strictly a humanist. I guess I'm not a nature poet. I've only written two poems without a human being in them. Only two, all of my poems have got a person in them.

Yes, oh yes, nature, too much nature, ya gotta have people in it. Somebody said I had a good many trees. And he said he was going to write about it. And I said, go ahead, but don't be too arbitrary.

It's a real story how I have done it. Who first recognizes a good one? Not his home town. Because it's very hard in the village when the village idiot gets started.

PRITCHARD: Why was it an interesting life? Well, that's perhaps too big a question. Except that he was quite determined, from early on in his life, to make this career into a myth of adversity overcome, triumphed over by the voice and the man's will that wrote the poems, and fathered the children, andlived the life that he lived.

TEXT ON SCREEN (from unpublished Frost poem)

It shall be no trespassing
If I come again some spring
In the grey disguise of years
Seeking ache of memory here

He says in one of his letters, "I kept farm, so to speak, for nearly ten years, but less as a farmer than as a fugitive from a world that seemed to me to disallow me. It was all instinctive, but I can see now that I went away to save myself, and fix myself before I measured my strength against all creation." This is the man making poetry, making a myth if you will, out of those years of isolation, as he liked to think of them, on the farm at Derry.

FROST: I was a farmer all the time when I was doing other things, I always had a farm in the backyard.

PRITCHARD: Well, if you always have a farm in your backyard, are you a real farmer? Well, yes and no. A symbolic farmer, as he said he was a symbolic teacher.

FROST: I guess in my being a teacher I had to be understood, and that put me in the class of poets that wanted to be understood. Somebody said a poet ought to learn all the other poets had ever said before he undertakes to say anything so as to avoid repetition, you know, but if he did that he'd be fifty years old before he started. And all the poetry that was ever written was really started somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five, you know, you've got to start on insufficient knowledge, and you've got to have that kind of courage.

NARRATOR: In 1905, in the sonnet, "Mowing," Frost demonstrated a fresh, subtle mixture of rhythms and voice tones.

(TITLE ON SCREEN): MOWING

(SILENT TEXT ON SCREEN):

whispering

whispered

whispered

dream

dream

whispered

In one letter about the poem, he said, "I come so near what I long to get that I almost despair of coming nearer."

HEANEY: It's not "writing school" proficiency of mimicking the movement of a mower by the line breaks; it's a deeper rhythm of labor, as he said, the slightly lulling, consoling rhythm of a repeated motion. (Reads from "Mowing"):

> There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
> And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
> What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself...

That "What was it it whispered," if you look at it on the page, "What was it <u>it</u> whispered," is colloquial; it does have the little spring of spoken English about it.

TEXT ON SCREEN OF "Mowing," with FROST reading:

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound--
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed to weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

PRITCHARD: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." Period. "My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make." The scythe is just going on, just making its sound, finishing its task: "My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make." You leave it right there, you don't say any more, you don't try to connect up those two things. It's really the poet who makes poetry, not nature, not scythes.

RICHARD WILBUR (Poet): He's not the kind of poet who works in large structures, which require considerable advance planning and a thorough knowledge of where one is going to arrive, that is, he doesn't work in the epic, he doesn't write cantos, he doesn't write suites, like Wallace Stevens' more or less philosophical "Man with the Blue Guitar." He's a lyric poet for

whom the experience of writing is, or seems, passive. He doesn't go to the poem, the poem comes to him -- what Frost calls the "transition from delight to wisdom." You start with a happy perception, and the thoughts then come, and the images then come, there are discoveries and surprises, and finally there is a statement, and one has arrived at wisdom.

FROST: Pretty much everything I've ever done, you know, there's always this element of extravagance. It's like snapping the whip, you know -- Are you there? Are you still on? Are you with it? -- or is it snap-jaw?

HEANEY: Another "gift" poem, if we are to believe himself, was "After Apple-Picking," which he says somewhere that he wrote without fumbling a line, and it does have that sense, again, of something willowy and yielding. I think the rhythmic principle there is in the slight sway of the ladder of the yielding bough.

(TITLE ON SCREEN): AFTER APPLE-PICKING

WILBUR: It's perfectly satisfying as a poem about a weary orchardist who's picked his last apple, but then there are certain words that have overtones to them, what Frost called "displacements." "My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree/ Toward heaven still." He could have said "sky," but he said "heaven," with a capital letter, so what he's telling you is that apple-picking is an operation that takes place not on earth, and not amongst the stars,

but part way there. And this word "Heaven," has got its opposite in the poem. He says, "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." Heaven and earth -- between heaven and earth this apple-picking, this aspirant activity, goes on.

HEANEY: The way it can be taught in high school, in a melodramatic way, is to say that it is a poem about death. And yet that robs it of all of its life. It's Frost's ode to autumn. It's about hibernating. In fact, it's the one place where he does surrender to the wood.

FROST (reading "After Apple-Picking")

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.

Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
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.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

NARRATOR: By 1912 Frost had written some of his greatest poems. Only a few had appeared in minor publications. He'd failed at poultry-farming, but spent two successful years teaching locally. At 38, after ten years in Derry, New Hampshire, he decided to sell his farm and take his family to England.

RICHARD POIRIER (Critic): I don't think it's possible to overestimate the calculation, maybe a better word is, say, genius, with which Frost laid out his career while he was here in

England. He arrived here with pretty nearly completed three books of poetry, A BOY'S WILL, NORTH OF BOSTON, and MOUNTAIN INTERVAL. He published two of these here, very different from one another. In A BOY'S WILL, you have some of Frost's greatest poems in a lyric mode, short poems. In NORTH OF BOSTON you have nothing but great dramatic monologues, I think perhaps the best he was ever to write. What he wanted to clinch was a reputation back home, as the great American poet of his time, and he knew that the only way to do this was to establish a critical consensus to that effect among the influential reviewers in England, of a kind which didn't exist in the United States.

FROST: I had never been discouraged in America, I had never been very much encouraged. I'd had sporadic poems in the magazines, but nobody had ever written me as good a letter of acceptance as some people get of rejection. And I got over there to England with the idea of writing a novel to put the family on its feet, and one night I sat on the floor and looked my poems over and made up a little book and took it into a strange publisher and in three days signed a contract. But I owe a lot to the British, you see, for that. It might have happened here, don't know whether it could or not, but they were very nice to me, very grand time I had.

NARRATOR: London at this time attracted a vital literary community. Among the poets living there were Yeats, and the influential American Ezra Pound, a leading exponent of Modernism, a movement that would soon dominate the cultural scene with its vision of a world in fragments. While A BOY'S WILL was being prepared for publication, Frost met the poet F.S. Flint at the Monro Bookshop. Flint arranged an introduction to Pound, who then wrote a favorable review of A BOY'S WILL, emphasizing its regional flavor. Frost wrote, "You're not going to make the mistake Pound makes of assuming that my simplicity is that of the untutored child. I am not undesigning."

In 1914 the Frost family moved to Gloucestershire, a farming district in the south of England.

FROST: The reason I came to England is triple: My wife's wish to live under thatch, the other was to live cheap, see, and write poetry, to have my time to myself for two or three years. I'd sold my farm behind me over there, burned my ships to come over. Didn't go travelling, we settled right down there to stay. And the third reason was, I suppose, the great tradition of English lyric poetry.

You know the best book to me when I was young was Palgrave's Golden Treasury. Then my mother gave me a Shelley, a Keats, and Keats has sort of become my poet in a way -- Shelley never so much. Browning,

I'd read Tennyson, one of the greatest to me over and over is Chaucer, you know.

POIRIER: He had come to this place -- he called it the land of The Golden Treasury of English Poetry -- partly in order to test his strength against Yeats, and Pound, the American poet who was then living here, but also I think to establish his credentials as a poet with a critical establishment that was stronger than any at home and that would mean a great deal to the people at home when they heard about it. And he succeeded in this, particularly with the help not only of Pound's reviews, but the reviews of a friend of his who lived nearby here, who did, I think, perhaps the best reviews ever written of A BOY'S WILL, and NORTH OF BOSTON.

JAN MARSH (Critic): They met at the end of 1913 in London. He'd set out, like Frost, twenty years before, to be a famous writer, a great writer, and what he'd ended up doing was simple hack work, and it wasn't until he met Frost that he really understood that he'd taken the wrong direction. Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," is a very crucial poem for Edward Thomas, who understood exactly what that meant.

FROST:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
(from "The Road Not Taken")

I had a friend that I had more in mind that way, never mind which way he went he'd be sorry he didn't go the other, and he'd go on forever, into eternity, sighing. He had a melancholy about everything that I don't have, you know, I can mock anything out of my system. Edward Thomas, poet.

MARSH: This is the beginning of a poem that Edward Thomas wrote about his friendship with Frost: "The sun used to shine while we two walked/ Slowly together, paused and started/ Again, and sometimes mused, sometimes talked/ As either pleased, and cheerfully parted// Each night.We never disagreed/ which gate to rest on." They were spending a lot of time walking and talking and finding out just how much they had in common. Thomas had spent many years feeling extremely sorry for himself, suffering from severe and deep depression. Frost probably recognized in Thomas certain traits in himself that he had faced and overcome. And he was a very much more robust and sort of combative personality, he was almost pugnacious, wasn't he? And he said to Thomas on one occasion that he would like to kick all the nonsense out of him.

POIRIER: Back in about about 1914 when you were probably 9 or 10 years old, there was an episode where Frost and Thomas were taking a walk, and a gamekeeper on Lord Beacham's estate confronted them, and Frost is supposed to have gotten enraged and challenged the gamekeeper to a fight, or said he would beat him up. Do you remember hearing about that?

JACK HAINES: Yes, yes. He said, "Come out, over the fence, and I'll teach you a lesson." He said, "Come on, put em up."

NARRATOR: Frost spent time in Dymock with his friends the Georgian poets, LaSalle, Abercrombie, Wilfred Gibson, and others living in the area. They met at cottages with names like "The Gallows," and "The Old Nail Shop." In letters and notebooks of this period, Frost was already defining his theory about poetry and the speaking voice. He called it "the sound of sense." (Manuscript of following letter on screen): "I give you a new definition of a sentence. A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung. I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense. The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words. Ask yourself how these sentences would sound without the words in which they are embodied:

You mean to tell me you can't read? I said no such thing. Well read then. You're not my teacher. These sentence-sounds are definite entities. They are apprehended by the ear. They are gathered by the ear from the vernacular and brought into books. Themost original writer only catches them fresh from talk."

POIRIER: Frost's theories are revolutionary in the sense that they wanted to get rid of, as did Pound, as did Eliot, some of the more familiar phraseologies of Victorian poetry.

(TITLE ON SCREEN): MENDING WALL
(excerpts)

FROST (reading from "Mending Wall"):

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

POIRIER: "Mending Wall" is an example of the way I think Frost can be too easily understood. I think the line that most people remember from that poem is, "Good fences make good neighbors." In fact the energies of the poem are directed against that proposition. It's made clear that it's a notion in the head of a man who brings the stones to the wall and is spoken of as "like an old-stone savage armed."

FROST (reading from "Mending Wall"):

I see him there,
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

PRITCHARD: Those two lines, "He moves in darkness as it seems to me,/ Not of woods only and the shade of trees," those are lines that it seems to me can bring a shiver, and that coming so quickly, so close upon the heels as they do of the colloquial "I could say 'Elves' to him," shows I think the remarkable nature of the instrument, the flexibility and the subtlety that Frost has brought into blank verse, has brought into poetry. It's a subtlety that neither Tennyson nor Swinburne for all their genius were capable of.... He says he's going to go back home, get a farm, and grow Yankee-er and Yankee-er. Well, that's the conscious forging, with humor, always with some humor, of a kind of myth.

POIRIER: Eliot directly addressed the notion of Frost as a regional poet, and he said he was no more a regional poet than Goethe was a poet of the Rhineland. He is a New England poet in the sense, I suppose, that the speech patterns to which

he seems to be alluding seem to occur there. The subject matter of his poems, if you really want to treat them as being about the weather, that is, about snow, about deserted places, deserted farmhouses, the estrangements between people living under conditions of barrenness, the subjects as easily belong to the central concerns of Romantic poetry.

HEANEY: The poem I wish I had written in the 20th century -- well, there are several -- but one of my anthology of poems which passed the jealousy test -- you say, oh , I wish I had written that -- certainly would be "Home Burial." There's an element of self-accusation in a poem like "Home Burial," if we see it in the context of Frost's own life, where they had a dead child, and, obviously, we can read "Home Burial" as some kind of record of husband-wife relations in the aftermath of that.

(TITLE ON SCREEN): HOME BURIAL

Actor: "What is it you see
From up there always?--for I want to know."

HEANEY: He saw her from the bottom of the stairs before she saw him, and immediately you're in a situation of a trap that is going to be sprung somehow or other.

Actor: "Don't--don't go.
Don't carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.
I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
What was it brought you up to think it the thing
To take your mother-loss of a first child
So inconsolably--in the face of love.
You'd think his memory might be satisfied---"

Actress:
"There you go sneering now!"

Actor: "I'm not, I'm not!
You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
God, what a woman! And it's come to this,
A man can't speak of his own child that's dead."

Actress:
"You can't because you don't know how to speak.
If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand--how could you?--his little grave;
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
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside in the entry, for I saw it."

Actor: "I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed."

Actress:

"I can repeat the very words you were saying:
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had how long it takes a birch to rot
To do with what was in the darkened parlor?
You couldn't care! The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!"

Actor:

"There, you have said it all and you feel better.
You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.
The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up?
Amy! There's someone coming down the road!"

Actress:

"You--oh, you think the talk is all. I must go--
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you---"

Actor: "If--you--do!
Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will!"

NARRATOR: When the Frost family returned from England in 1915, they bought a farm. Frost was to own property in New Hampshire and Vermont for the rest of his life. Frost claimed a fierce devotion to his wife and children. He said once that he had

stuck to only two things: poetry and family. He began making public appearances across the state, and teaching, chiefly at Amherst and the University of Michigan.

JOSEPH BRODSKY (Poet): Well, they met at high school, and it just so happened that they were both called valedictorians at the graduation ceremony. The title of the Frost piece was, "Monumental Afterthoughts Unveiled." What's more important is the title of her valedictory talk, which was, "Conversation as the Force of Life." Between those two, you have the definition of Frost, of Frost's poetry, at least of that period, dating up to NORTH OF BOSTON. Well, it's precisely that combination of those two things, and given the fact that that man was in love with that woman, I think her perception of the phenomenon of conversation played some role in whatever he was doing at about that time. I first read Frost when I think I was 23 or 24. It was way back in Russia, that was in a previous incarnation, and what I read of him, obviously, first, was in translation, and when I read it I couldn't believe it for the moment, because I thought that somebody, somebody terribly clever, was doing some kind of apocryphal job, creating an American poet. I was so astounded because the sensibility was so totally alien to me.

(TITLE ON SCREEN): THE WOOD-PILE

BRODSKY: This poem -- at least the beginning of it -- gives you a fairly good idea, and a slightly different idea, of what his attitude toward nature was.

FROST (reading 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 further--and we shall see."

BRODSKY: This is a poem about him, in this kind of situation in the frozen swamp, but the point is, it's a kind of self-referential poem, because apart from anything else, a wood pile against the snow background looks like a poem against the white page.

FROST (reading from "The Wood-pile")

The hard snow held me, save where now and then
One foot went through. The view was all in lines
Straight up and down of tall slim trees
Too much alike to mark or name a place by
So as to say for certain I was here
Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.
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 flight 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.

FROST: We rise out of disorder into order, and the poems that I make are little bits of order. As if I made a basket or a piece of pottery, you know, a vase or something. And if you suffer any sense of confusion in life, the best thing you can do is make little forms, blow cigarette smoke rings, you see, even those have form.

NARRATOR: While America was gripped by the Great Depression, Europe was moving toward disaster. Frost insisted that both Modernist despair and New Deal planning were harmful because they disregarded the individual's innate capacity

to act despite confusion and disorder. Like William James, Frost believed that there are no large solutions, and that truths are momentary.

FROST:

Some have relied on what they knew,
Others on being simply true.
What worked for them might work for you.

No memory of having starred
Atones for later disregard
Or keeps the end from being hard.

Better to go down dignified
With boughten friendship at your side
Than none at all. Provide, provide!

(from "Provide, Provide")

Once I said that in the good old days of the thirties to someone in Washington, with someone in Washington sitting right in front of me, and I wound it up with more of this intonation that I told you about. I said: "Better to go down dignified/ With boughten friendship at your side/ Than none at all. Provide, provide,/ Or somebody else'll provide for you." And then I added, "And how would you like that?" See, I got two good tones in on top of the poem.

ALFRED EDWARDS (Publisher): When I first met Robert Frost I was an executive at Henry Holt and Co., in New York City. I was young at the time, I had just come into the company shortly before that,

and he wanted to meet the new man. And so we had our first meeting right in my office in New York City. He began to question me about my background, where I'd come from, who I was, and that evolved into a relationship where we found a lot in common. I'd been an athlete and he liked that. He liked the vigorous attitudes that I brought to my life. And he also discovered that my wife's name was Elinor.

NARRATOR: In 1938 while in Florida with her husband, Elinor Frost died of a heart attack. This was the second of three losses to occur to Frost within a period of six years. Four years earlier, Frost's favorite daughter, Marjorie, had died of a fever after giving birth to her first child. In 1940, Frost's son Carroll committed suicide. Frost wrote to his daughter Lesley concerning Elinor. "My, my, what a sorrow runs through all she wrote to all of you children. No wonder something of it overcasts my poetry if read aright. She was not as original as I in thought, but she dominated my art with the power of her character and nature. I wish I hadn't this woeful suspicion that toward the end she came to resent something in the life I had given her.

TITLE ON SCREEN: "Acquainted with the Night"

FROST (reading "Acquainted with the Night"):

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain--and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;
And further still at an unearthly height
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

EDWARDS: We eventually of course made him a public figure more than one who was just a person who had spoken at colleges and to selective audiences. We put him on television for the first time, and brought him out with recordings of his works. He was delighted with this -- at first he stepped back from it. He didn't want that kind of an image. Show biz was not his thing, he said, but he was a ham at heart, and he loved the public aspects of it. And after we did our first show with Spivak on television, Spivak told me that the mail was tremendous.

JAMES RESTON:
Mr. Frost, why do you take so many of your images and metaphors from the world of games and sports.

FROST: It's a strange thing that I do -- I've played games I suppose, and I don't think anybody can think right in this world who didn't play games. I'd as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down -- that brought tennis in.

BRODSKY: Do you know that during World War II the Defense Department, I think, issued a paperback of Frost's with the most terrific drawings by O'Hara under the series "What We Are Fighting For." And that was precisely the moment of Frost's greatest popularity. That book was read in the army, by the soldiers, and they liked it a hell of a lot. And I don't think, frankly, that you can do the same thing to any work of T.S. Eliot or say, Ezra Pound.

POIRIER: Frost would have been popular even if he had chosen not to be, by the nature of his commitment to what he called the sound of sense and sentence-sound. The fact that the readers chose to look not at those delicate inflections in speech, but instead emphasized the common subject matter of his poems, is nothing that he could control and certainly nothing that he wanted. He was, of all the poets of the 20th century, the one most closely associated with the select few who lived in and at

the university. More than Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Crane, any of them, he chose to do a good part of his work in universities as a teacher, to live at colleges like Amherst for extended periods of time, and it was therefore extremely appropriate that he receive so many honorary degrees. In fact, he had the hoods of these honorary degrees made into a blanket. The blanket was unfortunately presented to him before he received the two degrees that meant most to him, those from Oxford, where we are now, at Bailliol College, in 1957, and Cambridge University in the same year.

FROST: It's funny the way I had got to be educated by degrees. Degree-dation, you see, that's Latin. Degradation. That's how I got my education.

EDWARDS: He liked to dabble a little bit in politics, and so we got to know some of the people in Washington through his being Consultant to the Library of Congress.

FROST: I wish it wouldn't grow into a great big department, you know, I wish it would stay like that in the White House. I've just been saying that for the President, that I wish it would stay ascetic, you know, and not get too cultural, calculated and all that you know. It can't help it, it'll go, but I wish it'd stay as long as it can really ascetic. Not get too damn compartmental you know.

EDWARDS: He'd sat at a dinner in Washington, when Kennedy was a young Senator, and told the old Cardinal that he thought young Kennedy would someday be president of the United States. And it was prophetic. He was invited to come down to the White House and he was given a Congressional Medal. And at that time, Kennedy, of course getting in a little political plug, said to him, "Mr. Frost, you've been a good Democrat all your life, haven't you?"

FROST: Oh, everybody knows how I vote, you know. From my books, they don't like to ask me, it's not polite, but you can tell, if you read all my works, you can tell just how I, just what I am. I've been a Democrat all my life, but I've been a little unhappy since 1896.

EDWARDS: Kennedy loved it. He loved the freshness of the remark.

FROST: All is honesty.

NARRATOR: In 1958, in honor of Frost's 85th birthday, a dinner was held in New York at the Waldorf Astoria, at which the critic Lionel Trilling spoke. That speech created a controversy.

POIRIER: While Trilling, when he finally got around to acknowledging the existence of Frost, I think could only acknowledge it by turning Frost into the kind of Modernist quote terrifying unquote poet which he distinctly was not and never chose to be.

WILBUR: Some people didn't want Robert Frost described as the great bard of adrenalin, as the poet of terror and perhaps also of fear and hatred. They wanted the genial old sage of legend, of contemporary myth. Other people, I think, felt that they'd known all along that Frost was a poet of adrenalin, and that Trilling was patronizing them a little bit by pretending to have discovered it for the first time.

EDWARDS: It sort of changed the image of what a grey-haired wonderful old sweet man he was thought to be, and his poetry did not perhaps follow that image. That there were depths to the man, and dark places, and vigor in him that we hadn't suspected in that white-haired gentle old New England poet. He wasn't a gentle old New England poet, he was a ferocious, active man in so many different ways.

FROST (reading from "Away!"):

Forget the myth.
There is no one I
Am put out with
Or put out by.

Unless I'm wrong
I but obey
The urge of a song:
"I'm--bound--away!"

And I may return
If dissatisfied
With what I learn
From having died.

See that's a death poem. And that raises this amusing question, you know, with everybody making other meanings to everything. That's a straight-out death poem.

WILBUR: I think that Trilling's speech, as I remember it's general drift, was quite simply true, and that one of the extraordinary things about Frost is that he had the guts to write about fear and hatred and the terror of emptiness as he did.

HEANEY: The poems for which I think he will be valued forever aren't just the dark poems, aren't just the negative poems, but those poems of temperate, and just balance between negative and positive aspects of experience. He does inhabit the world at body heat.

FROST: You have to like this whether you like it or not, you see. It happens to be an old-fashioned praise poem, it's about a lady's voice. The name of the poem is, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be The Same," see, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be The Same.

He would declare and could himself believe
That the birds there in all the garden round
From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
Had added to their own an oversound,
Her tone of meaning but without the words.
Admittedly an eloquence so soft
Could only have had an influence on birds
When call or laughter carried it aloft.
Be that as it may, she was in their song.
Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
Had now persisted in the woods so long
That probably it never would be lost.
Never again would birds' song be the same.
And to do that to birds was why she came.