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**REALISTIC ASPECTS
OF ROBER FROST'S
“North of Boston”**

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*to Erich Auerbach,
even if you are dead,
your work keeps inspiring generations of scholars*

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FOREWORD

Countless pages have been written on Frost's poetry, but it is rather difficult to find texts exclusively devoted to the theme of realism. The common ground of the majority of works regarding Frost's poetry recognized the concrete aspects of his poetry, but most of them engage in a metaphorical reading of his texts. This brief contribution tries to provide a justification of a literal reading, emphasizing its realistic aspects, and to prove that one interpretation is not necessarily opposed to the other one.

The realistic aspects of *North of Boston*, which will be the subject of this brief analysis, are to a certain extent different from those of *A Boy's Will* or *Mountain Interval*, *New Hampshire*, *West Running Brook*, or *A Witness Tree*. As a matter of fact, Frost's language becomes more explicitly figurative¹ towards the end of his career, therefore, this analysis requires adjusting when applied to the other collections. Nonetheless, an analytic comparison of the evolution of the realistic features of Frost's poetry is too wide a subject to summarize in the short amount of pages here at disposal.

The examination relies on sources belonging to philosophical as well as literary or linguistic studies, as long as they proved suitable to the point of this study. In addition to this, consistent parts of the analysis have been explored in the light of sources belonging to the world of linguistics or drama. Frost's poetry transcends literary categories and

¹ This remark can be found in Judith Oster's study on Frost's use of metaphor "Frost's Poetry of Metaphor." Due to the limited amount of space dedicated to the chapter, Oster does not have the space to develop a systematic study of the diachronic development of Frost's metaphor, opening the discussion to further development and research.

genres, justifying the reference to bibliographic material that does not strictly belong to literary studies.

Trying to provide some answers to the much debated question of realism in Frost's poetry, this work raises many interesting questions on the technique of the American poet, which are meant to be developed in a doctoral perspective, and proves that there is still space for compelling debate on the topic.

Introduction

As one of the most celebrated American poets of all times and as a member of the Canon of American literature, scholars have celebrated Robert Frost with innumerable studies on his work. Literary critics are divided between two interpretations of Frost's work, which derive from the scholars' tendency to privilege the metaphorical, and thus figurative, aspect of Frost's poetry over the realistic one, defended by a minority of critics.

These interpretations might be drawn back to some fundamental passages, sentences even, by Frost, which are widely known and quoted by critics. Thus, those critics who concentrate on the metaphorical aspect of his poetry quote *The Constant Symbol* (CPPP 786-791) where Frost states

And here are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another thing, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor. ... Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing. And there is a sense in which all poems are the same old metaphor always. (786)

or *Education by Poetry* (CPPP 717-728), the meditative monologue, as Frost defined it, where he maintains that the relevance of poetry nowadays is teaching students the necessary critical sense to understand a reality which is interpreted and explained metaphorically. Here, Frost clearly states that 'all thinking ... is metaphorical' (720) and that

The metaphor whose manage we are best taught in poetry – that is all there is of thinking. It may not seem far from the mind to go, but it is the mind's furthest. The richest accumulation of the ages is the noble metaphor we have rolled up. (725)

Pages and pages of scholarly literature have been written on the interpretation and consequences of these passages. Nonetheless, most of the critics who defend the metaphorical interpretation forget to mention that in “Some Definitions” Frost seems to contradict them, when in 1923 he said

There are two types of types of realist: the one who offers a good deal of dirt with his potato to show that it is a real one, and the one who is satisfied with the potato brushed clean. I'm inclined to be the second kind. To me, the things that art does for life is to clean it, to strip it to form. (CPPP 701)

The statement needs little explanation: in spite of his tendency to state one thing to mean another one, Frost personally used to define himself as a realist, and one of a very specific kind. This argument will be central to this analysis and it will further analyzed in Chapter 1. For now it suffices to mention that this statement completely justifies the attempt to moderate the enthusiasm for the metaphorical interpretation of his work and fully justify the desire for a more literal reading of his poetry to be taken into account by the scholarly community.

This brief contribution wants to defend a realist reading of Frost’s work, a comeback to a direct, literal, consideration of the text, which avoids hermeneutic attempts based on speculation rather than on textual proofs and yet it respects the search for ‘another meaning’ by studying what the text provides. In order to do so, it is above all necessary to set a framework to allow a flexible collocation of Frost’s technique of

representation in a specific context, which is entirely grounded on the correction of the widely known assumption of realism as an exercise of perfect and complete appropriation and reproduction of reality in all its details. Although the scholarly literature on the topic is immense, this approach to the theme of realism is still very much present, and constitutes one of the reasons that allows critics to interpret metaphorically and figuratively everything that does not fit into this definition. Therefore, it is essential to counter-argue the first statement in order to prove the second one wrong. Later on, it will be possible to support the thesis it is there to maintain by explaining how the metaphorical reading, as done by most critics, is more of an interpretational exercise than an actual “fact-based” search for the intended meaning of the poem..

The rest of this study will analyze *North of Boston* according to the division of the publics Frost intended to address with his poetry. Frost scholars are familiar with the author’s words in his letter to John Bartlett, from early November 1913, where he declares his intention:

There is one qualifying fact always to bear in mind: there is a kind of success called “of esteem” and it butters no parsnips. It means a success with the critical few who are supposed to know. But really to arrive where I can stand on my legs as a poet and nothing else I must get outside that circle to the general reader who buys books in their thousands. I may not be able to do that. I believe in doing it – don’t you doubt me there. I want to be a poet for all sorts and kinds. I could make a merit of being caviar to the crowd the way my quasi-friend Pound does. I want to reach out, and would if it were a thing I could do by taking thought. (*SL*, 3091)

Frost's pseudo-ironic tone in describing himself as 'caviar to the crowds' seems to go against his desire to approach a large audience of non-specialized readers, contrasting what can be interpreted as fondness for a "democratic" access to the art to the awareness of a sophistication and complexity of his verses the crowd was unlikely to understand at a first reading. While the aim of Chapter 2 was to consider the elements of realism for Frost's broader audience, this Chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of the features that have gained the attention of those Frost called, in the famous letter to John Bartlett of early November 1913, 'the critical few who are supposed to know' (3091).

It seems reasonable to maintain that, while imagery is more easily comprehensible even if the reader does not master the technical language of literature, the elements that most interest the academic public are the structural and linguistic ones.

Chapter 2 will deal with Frost's realistic representation of the image and on his construction of a dramatic technique. The first part of the chapter focuses on Frost's elaboration of realistic images through specific linguistic choices, which show how the author shapes the visual aspect of his poetry through the use of the parts of discourse that refer to the noun phrase, such as the noun, the adjective, and the article.

The discussion proceeds with some considerations belonging to the field of structural linguistics. The analysis underlines how the effectiveness of Frost's representation depends on the fact that its denotative aspect depends directly on the ability of the linguistic sign, which recreates the physical and psychic image in the reader's mind, recreating an objective image by appealing to the subjective psychic and physical image of the object indicated by the sign.

The second part of the chapter will deal with the analysis of the dialogic element, which revolves around the subordination of the story to the dimension of the character. The intimacy of the tragic feelings portrayed in the narration is exacerbated by the realistic representation of the conflict on which the drama is build, based on the author's comprehension of the direct correspondence between the duration of the tension of the scene and the success of its realistic representation. This effect is achieved by the denial of the resolution of the tragedy, as well as the introduction of sudden and unexpected reversals of fortune. Frost's technique appeals to the reader's psychology, which focuses on elements indicating tension or a sense of urgency, such as common acts individuated as the instinctive reaction to a certain situation. This manifests itself both in terms of the construction of dialogue and through the individuation of details on which the attention of the reader is focused.

Chapter 3 will concentrate on how Frost recreates the effect of realism through narratological, linguistic, and metrical choices. The section opens on the analysis of the role of the narrator and focalization, which can be grouped according to three different categories. The first one is represented by the poems from which the presence of the author is completely excluded, where the presence of the narrator is invisible and focalization is external. The second category includes the meditative poems, characterized by internal focalization, reflecting the inner monologue of the autodiegetic narrator. The third category refers to the compositions that present a mixed structure, which deserve a particular space due to the presence of the narrative introduction presented by the external perspective of a heterodiegetic narrator, setting the scene, who is abruptly interrupted by the discourse of the characters. The sudden interruption tricks the reader

into thinking that the characters are reporting the dialogues from an autodiegetic perspective, while, instead, the dialogues are reported by a heterodiegetic one. In addition to this, Frost manipulates the time and space of the telling through references of portions of reality that are external to it, collocating the source of conflict outside the telling, and cutting the narration abruptly.

The study proceeds by analyzing the linguistic aspect of the collection, which is characterized by a fairly standard speech, whose register is occasionally lowered by the reference to old-fashioned dialectal forms, a creative use of colloquial language, and contracted forms reproducing low colloquial speech or vulgarities. Frost's language is also considered in the light of his theory of 'the sound of sense,' which modulates the author's realistic reproduction of everyday language though the particular use of the dash and the parenthesis. The consideration on the realistic use of language closes on some remarks on Frost's elaboration of rhythm and meter.

Chapter 1

1.1 The problem of realism

As Roman Jakobson claims in his essay “On Realism in Art”, the term realism strikes for its extreme relativism (24). To define whether a text is realistic or not, it is necessary to consider several parameters, which guarantee the respect of the perspective of the author as well as the perspective of the reader, the respect of the realistic conventions of the specific historical period (20). Nonetheless, in the case of texts which break the status quo and possibly shift the paradigm it is also necessary to compare the new exemplars to the previous norms of representation and provide a definition of the extent to which the text is revolutionary, and how (22-23).

Apart from the accounts on the topic that belong to the field of linguistics and the technical masterpieces that marked a generation of critics, such as Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, which is an unavoidable reference-point, when dealing with this particular subject, some very well-structured remarks on the controversy of realism are reported in David Lodge’s *The Modes of Modern Writing*. In the chapter entitles “What is Realism” the author points out how the term ‘realism’ or ‘realistic’ is a problematic term for the literary debate, since it is sometimes used in its neutrally descriptive sense and sometimes as an evaluative term. The term can be approached from a philosophical perspective as well as from an artistic one (22-23). The author, after some lines dedicated to the subordination of the word to the concept of truth, which is conventional and therefore dependent upon the character of the discourse (24), defines it as follows: “*the representation of an*

experience in a manner which approximates closely to the description of similar experience in nonlinear texts of the same culture" (25). As far as fiction is concerned, the word 'realism' can be applied in its neutral, descriptive, acceptation to mean that 'the discourse is broadly consistent with historical facts as known and mediated by the contemporary historical consciousness.' (25)².

The most popular books around the time of Frost's birth and early years were of a completely different kind from the concrete and linear style Frost would later adopt and develop as a poet. In December 1893 the review *The Forum* published the list of the four most famous novels in America, which were *David Copperfield*, *Ivanhoe*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Ben Hur*. Observing the literary landscape, it is possible to state that Frost was born in a context in which style tended to emphasize the role of a hero against the struggle proposed by his or her life, enhanced by adventurous or hyper-pathetic echoes aimed at stimulating the reader's feelings of sympathy. In the meanwhile, in Europe the realist movement opposed principles such as the spectacularization of the main character and the events related to him to free the plain situation of common life from their segregation in the *sermo humilis*, breaking the powerful hierarchy that prevented them from being dignified with the use of a higher register³. The dispute

² An account on how Realism entered the English Culture is provided by William C. Frierson's essay "The English Controversy over Realism in Fiction 1885- 1895," which focuses on the delicate passage from a literary scene dominated by the passionate tones of Romanticism to a landscape that was strongly affected by the translation of the fundamental novels of French Realism, which were not welcomed with enthusiasm. In 1886 the appearance of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, of *Les Frères Zemganno* by Edmond de Goncourt, and several works by Zola, including *L'Oeuvre*, considered his masterpiece, were bitterly criticized for their immorality, which 'not only destroyed innocence but corroded human nature' (540). The passage to the American scene is described in Edward's essay "Howell and the Controversy of Realism in American Fiction."

³ See Auerbach's essay "Odysseus's Scar" in his *Mimesis, The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, where he compares the differences of register in the *Odyssey* and the *Bible*. Interestingly enough those same works were quoted by Frost as his two favorite books (CPPP 852).

reached America as well, and, as explained by Herbert Edwards in his article “Howells and the Controversy over Realism in American Fiction,” it immediately found its supporters⁴.

In his 1912 article on the relation between realism and fiction, Arthur C. Benson provides a very good outline of how the topic was perceived at the beginning of the 20th century. The contribution is considered particularly relevant because it is roughly contemporary to the writing of Frost’s *A Boy’s Will* and *North of Boston*, and it is possible to imagine that it gives an insight into the approach to the topic of these years. Benson attributes the rise of realism to the essence of possibly the most relevant development of the 19th century, the foregrounding of science as a method pointing towards exactness, by stating that ‘The essence of the scientific spirit is to observe, to analyze, to accumulate evidence, to look closer into life, to mistrust generalization, to record, and to represent.’ (820). The scholar attributes these striking similarities with the literary interpretation of realism to the desire of escaping a certain traditional practice of approximation and prejudice, a rhetoric of the hero and heroic supernatural situations that had developed in the previous centuries (820). His article proceeds by opposing 1) old interest in private fancy vs. interesting common reality (821); 2) imported beauty of what is not commonplace vs. transcendental beauty of the commonplace (821); 3) caricature of heroism (enhanced through melodramatic elements, overfortunate coincidences) vs.

⁴ The article is interesting because it reports some comments that would be, with the reasonable adjustments to the specific case, equally valid for Frost. See how Howells, in July 1890 already, was advocating for ‘the faithful, almost photographic representation of actual life, with its motives, impulses, springs of action laid bare to the eye, but with no unnatural straining after the intensifier and coarser emotions of blood and fire, no intentional effort to drag in murder, crime, or fierce interludes of passion without adequate reason.’ (Harper’s Magazine, LXXXI, 317, July, 1890) (240-241).

heroism in the commonplace (plainly narrated through the difficulties of the character's life) (822); 4) *Deux ex machina* vs. unemotional and natural *déroulement* of the action (822); 5) invention of situations in which the characters can display their virtues vs. exploration of situations which happen in life (822); 6) representation of the author's bias and prejudices vs. elimination of the author's bias and prejudices (822); 7) the character represents a virtue or a set of virtues (polarization between good and bad) vs. psychological complexity of the character, inconsistent and contradictory (824).

By the time Frost had moved to London the literary landscape had shifted again by the rise of an experimental *avant-garde*, which would divide itself into the many movements of modernism. It is therefore crucial to understand that Frost's poetic fame is collocated in a moment that underwent the influence of all these elements, and derived something from all of them. Surprisingly, as Richard Poirier points out, authors such as Joyce and Eliot have been considered more representative of their century than Robert Frost, due to the fact that after a period of assessment where they were perceived as incoherent, they finally established themselves as a realistic representation of the incoherence and fragmentary nature of the century (38-39). To analyze such a remark, after searching for a realistic approach to Frost, constitutes an interesting matter, showing that it seems easier for our contemporaries to come to accept as realist a highly experimental technique, than a more straightforward one. Far from dismissing Frost's technique as simple, it is undeniable that scholars have rather looked for a metaphorical interpretation for his poetry than for the realist reality it refers to, at worst, labeling him as a contemporary representative of New England rural life, providing a definition he hated. Frost's reputation seems ironic: it is in fact possible to claim that his poetry

expresses very much those themes that are conventionally studied as the feelings of the modernist *zeitgeist*, yet through less transgressive form and style. In fact, it is possible to maintain that the real subject of *North of Boston* is the representation of failure of communication, a topic that, from Joyce to Woolf, was so dear to the modernist *avant-garde*. The second part of the next chapter will focus on this aspect of Frost's poetry, examining how it can be observed both in the poems dominated by dialogue, where the need for communication is violently imposed or completely avoided, and in the monologues where it takes the form of a miscommunication with the external environment⁵. The fact that Frost sets the scene in the rural countryside of New England should not hide a fundamentally 'nihilistic vision,' in Harold Bloom's words (iv), who had Randall Jarrell describing him as "awful" (meaning full of frightened awe) and "terrible" (meaning full of terror)⁶ years before Trilling's inflammatory speech⁷ (Little, 52).

As far as it was possible to remark, Frost's poetry is sometimes surrounded by misconceptions, which derive from a tendency to refuse the possibility of different features of a work as coherently coexisting in one. These misjudgments are democratically distributed in all degrees of analysis, from the representational to the linguistic one.

The most widespread commonplaces on Frost's poetry seem to concern his representation of the image and his reproduction of everyday language. The first critique is twofold: as mentioned in the Introduction, some critics have the tendency to be

⁵ Robert Kern, in his essay "Robert Frost and Modernism" points out how the contrast with the modernist avant-garde to which Frost is generally subject is incorrect: the scholar expresses how the poet represents a different type of modernism, being less exposed to, for instance, the chaos of history, which Frost resolved with the adoption of less experimental forms (2). Nonetheless, the choice of conventional formal structures contributed to making him unpopular among his contemporary scholarly audience.

⁶ Jenner, Randall. "To the Laodiceans." *Robert Frost, A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. James Cox. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. 83-104.

⁷ Little, Michael Robert. *Bloom's How to write about Robert Frost*. New York, Infobase Publishing, 2010.

dissatisfied with a simple interpretation of the raw materials of poetry that Frost portrays in his scenes, trying to provide a metaphorical or symbolic interpretation, and others criticize the simplicity of their representation. Further remarks on the use of the visual element will be provided in Chapter 2.

The most common *j'accuse* held against Frost regards the lack of accuracy in the description of what is called ‘the raw material of poetry,’ which would justify a metaphorical interpretation. This mistake derives precisely from what the most refined critics warn readers about, meaning the misinterpretation of the technique of realism as photographic precision⁸.

Nonetheless, the distinction was always clear to Frost and to several artists before him. It is ironic that around the 1840s, with the rise of the Realist movement, whose motto is the foregrounding of all reality itself as the main theme of the arts, the division between the two perspectives was still clear for the fathers of the movement. In fact, in “L’Aventurier Challes,” in his *Le Réalisme*, Champfleury himself seems to anticipate what Frost to say a hundred years later:

La reproduction de la nature par l'homme ne sera jamais une reproduction ni une imitation, ça sera toujours une interprétation⁹. (92)

⁸ On the same topic see Thomson’s “Realism in Painting.” *The Art Journal* (1875-1887), vol. 6, 1880, pp. 282–284, but, most importantly, Fuller’s *The significance of the photographic message*, where the author explains how the definition of the art of photography as a means to capture reality needs correcting and that photographic realism should be consider a framework to work with, rather than a dogma to compare visual representation to (8). The author explains how photography manipulates vision, distorting truth to align it to the photographer’s intent (9) and, according to Barthes’ definitions of the denotative and connotative aspect of reality, analyzes the different degrees of aesthetic realism the photographic eye can achieve, proving that photography is no less subject to relativism than any other form of visual art (11). For a philosophical approach to the topic, see John Hyman’s. “Realism and Relativism in the Theory of Art.”

⁹ [my translation] ‘The reproduction of nature by mankind will never be reproduction nor imitation, it will always be an interpretation.’

These two statements are fundamental, not only for literary criticism in general, but for the analysis of Frost's poetry itself. In fact, Frost believed that the most successful representation was not the accurate description of its details as much as the impression it leaves in the reader's mind. It is indeed interesting that Champfleury makes the same considerations when he confronts the importance of the impact of a description on the reader's mind:

Si les auteurs savaient combien ces descriptions sont inutiles! ... la description terminée, *je me souviens plus de son paysage*. Or, le livre n'est pas fait pour les yeux, mais pour le cerveau, il en est de même pour les arts. (105)

Frost expressed the same concept in “Conversation on the Craft of Poetry” (1959) with Robert Penn Warren and Kenny Withers, commenting on his poetic choices:

WHITHERS: Mr. Frost, I once heard you say that for a poem to stick it must have a dramatic accent.

FROST: If it doesn't, it will not stay in anybody's head. It won't be *catchy*... (CPPP 853).

Also, in a letter to Sidney Cox dated December 26 1912 he states:

It is hard to fill a vacuum with nothing as it is to fill a poem (for instance) with something.
The best one can hope for is an approximation. (1916)

Frost knew the aim of the arts is not to provide the perfect reproduction of reality, but rather that ‘il y avait un choix à faire dans la nature’ (Champfleury 97), in order to produce a relatable synthesis of reality.

In his famous volume *Languages of Art* (1968), Nelson Goodman makes a very good point that will be fundamental for this analysis, pointing out that the most common

mistake in the writing on representation is to consider that an object A represents an object B only if they resemble each other and to the extent they resemble each other¹⁰ (3). Goodman points out that language is essentially metaphoric, and that therefore to represent an object a picture must be a symbol for it (5). The emphasis is not to be placed on resemblance, since everything can stand for anything else, but on the denotative, descriptive feature of the representing picture (5).

Goodman confirms Champfleury and Frost's intuitions on the approximate nature of realism¹¹, pointing out the impossibility of representing reality in the fullness of its properties, because the representational quality expresses itself in the representation of an object as something else. Therefore, the feeling of concreteness that envelops Frost's poetry is provided by the fact that he represents, say, trees as trees, people as people. Nonetheless, it is not completeness, and plentitude of details is not necessary for realistic representation, because, as stated by Ernest Gombrich in his *Art and Illusion* (1960), the eye naturally 'selects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs' (7-8), reducing the concept of an innocent eye to a mere chimera (7). In short, to assume

¹⁰ Professor Goodman's complete sentence is worth reporting as a whole: 'The most naïve view of representation might perhaps be put somehow like this: "A represents B if and only if A appreciably resembles B", or "A represents B to the extent that A resembles B". Vestiges of this view, with assorted refinements, persists in most writing on representation. Yet more error could hardly be compressed into so short formula. Some faults are obvious enough. An object resembles itself to the maximum degree but rarely represents itself; resemblance, unlike representation, is reflexive. Again, unlike representation, resemblance is symmetric: B is as much like A as A is like B, but while a painting may represent the Duke of Wellington, the Duke does not represent the painting.' (3-4).

¹¹ Goodman's analysis is particularly effective because it approaches representation from a philosophical perspective. He dismantles the erroneous belief that 'to make a faithful picture, [it is necessary to] come as close as possible to copying the object just as it is.' (6) by expressing the simple questions opposing what he calls 'the myth of the innocent eye' (8), a philosophical stance that reached its acme during the Positivist age, based on the assumption that the human senses are able to process reality, receiving and interpreting it correctly in its entirety. Goodman agrees with the epistemological skepticism that is said to have risen in the 20th century, but which was also anticipated by several artists in the 19th century. In his Introduction to *Languages of Art* he addresses these fundamental questions: Is reality perceived through the senses? Are the senses able to perceive reality, and to what extent? What is reality like?

that the eye is able to totally receive and analyze reality is to compare the human mind to a photographic eye interacting with a never-altered world. Nonetheless, it has been repeatedly proved that the artist's success does not depend on the perfection of his reconstruction of reality but that, as in Goodman's effective observation, 'it is not a matter of copying, but conveying. It is more a matter of 'catching a likeliness' than of duplicating.' (14), as can be observed in "The Mountain," where the recreation of the scenery is provided through the presentation of the mountain followed by the listing of the elements composing the landscape, as in

The mountain held the town as in a shadow
I saw so much before I slept there once:
I noticed that I missed stars in the west,
Where its black body cut into the sky.
Near me it seemed: I felt it like a wall
Behind which I was sheltered from a wind.
And yet between the town and it I found,
When I walked forth at dawn to see new things,
Were fields, a river, and beyond, more fields.

(“The Mountain,” CPPP 45, 1-9)

It is possible to remark that the mountain is mostly described in terms of position (high against the sky, near the speaking voice but far enough to be preceded by fields and a river) and in terms of the ambivalent feeling it causes to the protagonist, contained by the word 'wall' which is both incumbent and protective. The situation is presented through the same procedure the reader would probably use to collocate a mountain in real life,

meaning defining its position with respect to himself or herself and the surrounding landscape, described in its general outlines. The reader is not forced into imagining a large quantity of details and is left free to recreate a personal scene. An in-depth analysis of this phenomenon will be provided in the next chapter.

Scholars have often tried to oppose the diffusion of a definition of a photographic quality of Frost's poetry, in spite of it being frequently remarked by both readers and literary critics. For instance, Doyle criticized Amy Lowell for defining Frost's poetry "photographic. The pictures, the characters, are reproduced directly from life, they are burnt into his mind and thought it were a sensitive plate." (27). Lowell's contribution has been dismissed as an inaccurate remark on Frost's appreciation of the displacement of words and registers out of their original context in order to create new meaning, as in "After Apple Picking," which opens with a ladder pointing "towards heaven" and not plainly towards the sky. The use of the word heaven has been interpreted as an element that the camera simply cannot capture (27), thus invalidating the photographic feeling of Frost's poetry. Nonetheless, Lowell understands this respect of essence of Frost's poetry¹² better than Doyle does, emphasizing the importance of poetry's ability to stay with the reader by creating solid images, consistently with Champfleury and Frost's aforementioned remarks.

Doyle defends his position on Frost's displacement technique by quoting from "After Apple Picking" again, providing a metaphorical reading of the two famous lines

¹² For intellectual honesty, it is necessary to specify that Frost did not exactly appreciate Lowell's commentary on his poetry nor on her take on his realistic features. In a 1917 letter published in *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, Frost writes to Louis Untermeyer, that he did not appreciate the label of "Yankee realist" nor that of "Scotch symbolist" (63). In fact, reading Frost as a mere representative of New England countryside life is reductive.

I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass

(“After Apple-Picking,” CPPP 70, 9-10)

where he, like many other critics, reads Frost’s invitation to consider his poetry as his personal experience, filtered through the subjectivity of his human mind, and not as a ‘facsimile of the actual world’ (29). If the theme of the distortion of vision might be justified by a long tradition – one example among many is Shakespeare’s hint at anamorphic perspectives in *Richard II* – and there might be something of it, this seems a weak explanation of the incorrectness of Lowell’s statement. It rather shows a misconception of Frost’s original purpose, which is not to represent a reality created through the accumulation of details derived from real life, but rather a synthesis of it, not to mention a misconception of photography, which, if not used for scientific purposes, does not necessarily have to represent an accumulation of data from reality. That the poet plays with his poetry according to his own will seems self-evident.

It would not be too forward to state that to the contemporary eye not only does Frost’s poetry present a strong visual component, but also a theatrical or cinematic one, presenting the action to the reader, who becomes a silent spectator of a scene doomed from the beginning. Chapter 3 focuses on how Frost adopts the technique of the removal of the author from the scene he narrates: this narratological choice, together with Frost’s use of focalization, presents a scene that takes place before the reader’s eyes without his possibility of interfering with the action that takes place, as in theatre or in cinema.

The visual quality of Frost’s poetry is so relevant and undeniable that studies on a plausible influence of the Imagist movement have been advanced. In his paper for the

“New England Quarterly” *Robert Frost and the Imagists: The Background of Frost’s Sentence Sounds*, John F. Sears maintains that the Imagists helped Frost in the development of his poetic style (468). In spite of the *odi et amo* relationship with Ezra Pound, who openly wanted to impose the modern style and free verse on his contemporaries, Sears points that Frost’s poetry shares some of the programmatic features of Imagism as schematized by Amy Lowell’s anthology *Some Imagist Poets* (1915), inspired by Pound’s “A Few Don’ts by An Imagiste,” (472). The most important point is the presentation of an image that avoids generalities and grand narratives in order to deal with specific details. This aspect is very strongly felt in Frost’s poetry. In his review of *A Boy’s Will*, Pound himself had praised Frost for his “good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing, the thing as he sees it”¹³. The subject will be further explored in the next chapter, but it is possible to introduce the recreation of the landscape Frost actuates in a very short poem such as “Good Hours,” in which, with very few words, the poet evokes very clear and effective images. This is, for instance, true in the first stanza

I HAD for my winter evening walk—

No one at all with whom to talk,

But I had the cottages in a row

Up to their shining eyes in snow.

(“Good Hours,” CPPP 102, 1-4)

where the poet uses the specifier in such a way that it enriches the term it refers to without providing the excess of descriptive elements that would make representation ineffective.

¹³ Ezra Pound’s review of *A Boy’s Will* in Poetry, A Magazine of Verse 2 (May 1913), 72-73.

The difference between just a ‘walk’ and a ‘winter evening walk’ is that the second one appeals specifically to the reader’s sensorial memory, guiding him in the recreation of the scene through the recollection of what it means to be walking in the snow. This aspect of his poetry was also understood by Lowell herself, who in 1925 would pay tribute to her first encounter with Frost, stressing the relevance of *le mot juste* in *North of Boston* as well: ‘here was our vaunted *mot juste* embedded in a blank verse so fresh, living and original that nothing on the score of vividness and straightforward presentation – our shibboleth – could be brought up against it’¹⁴.

In addition to this, the proof that Frost’s language can be considered realist comes from Roman Jakobson and in essay *On Realism in Art*, where he points out the different methods that authors use according to the language they want to convey. Jakobson claims that realism is a relative concept (24) and yet it is possible to convey an idea of realism in language. The Russian formalist specifies that in order to produce the effect of spontaneity that any reader commonly perceives in a text with aesthetic function such as a poem or a novel it is necessary to discard the ‘polite etiquette of everyday language’ (22). Everyday language is, in spite of the spontaneity with which speech acts are performed, based on the common use of euphemisms, formulas, and rhetorical devices, opposed to the feeling of realism in literature, achieved by using the plain name of things, which causes the impression of the *mot juste*. On the other hand, rhetorical structures such as the metaphor and allusions create a more emphatic language (21). Therefore, if scholars have blamed Frost for only recreating an illusion of conversational tone rather than reproducing real speech, they were completely right. Frost’s language is constructed, as

¹⁴ Lowell’s “Tribute to Frost,” 5 March 1925, quoted by S. Foster Damon in Amy Lowell: A Chronicle (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1935), p. 235.

language always is in art, but it is constructed to be natural. Chapter 2 focuses on how the poet recreates the physical and physical impression of the object, resorting to the use of concrete nouns to evoke, together with the use of the determinative article and the adjective.

1.2. The quarrel of the metaphor.

Nonetheless, in spite of the multiplicity of critics who praised Frost's genuine reproductions of life in all its rawness Frost's realism is always neglected for a metaphorical interpretation.

The critics' fascination with the use of the trope derives from Frost's famous statements in *Education by Poetry*:

Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, "grace" metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have. Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another. ... We like to talk in parables and in hints and in indirections –whether from difference or some other instinct. (CPPP 719-720)

In addition to this, in *The Constant Symbol* Frost praises

metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another thing, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor. (787)

A closer analysis of the passages will remark that these two sentences do not place as much emphasis on the rhetorical device itself as on what the metaphor does, saying one thing instead of another one, a result that can be achieved through several rhetorical strategies. In fact, what Frost was interested in was the 'pleasure of ulteriority' he himself

cites as being the essence of the metaphorical quality of the text. When the attention falls on the pages of W. H. Auden's commentary on Frost in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, it is impossible not to be puzzled by Auden's remark on the small number of metaphors¹⁵ actually used in Frost's poetry, which has been confirmed by textual analysis. Auden, similarly to what Jakobson says in his essay on realism, divides the authors into the categories of those oriented to the beautiful, such as Keats, and those oriented to the truth, such as Frost (342). The scholars make two different points of view, a literary perspective and a linguistic one, meet in agreement on the fact that truth-oriented language makes use of few rhetorical figures, which are instead put in service when the authors wants to enhance some aspects of the text (343). This does not mean that a realist text cannot contain any metaphors, but that a limited number of tropes and rhetorical figures should encourage a different reading of the sense of 'ulteriority' Frost was so concerned with, avoiding far-fetched interpretation and connections. In *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, Judith Oster points out how the determination between the metaphorical interpretations of a word, a phrase, a sentence, can be determining for the

¹⁵ In *North of Boston*: "Mending Wall": l. 17 'And some are loaves and some so nearly balls' (CPPP 39); "The Death of the Hired Man": none; "The Mountain": l. 60 'I saw though leafy screens' (CPPP 47); "A Hundred Collars": none; "Home Burial": none; "The Black Cottage": none; "Blueberries": l. 56 'I wish I knew half what the flock of them know' (CPPP 64); "A Servant to Servants": none; "After Apple-Picking": l. 37-38 'One can see what will trouble / This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.'; "The Code": l. 4-6 'Where an irregular sun-bordered cloud / Darkly advanced with a perpetual dagger / Flickering across its bosom.' (CPPP 71), l. 34-37 'No one liked the boss. / He was one of the kind sports call a spider, / All wiry arms and legs that spread out wavy / From a humped body nigh as big's a biscuit.' (CPPP 72); "The Generation of Men": l. 7 'where the ax has gone' (CPPP 74) l. 219-225 'Where shall we meet again?' / 'Nowhere but here / Once more between we meet elsewhere.' / 'In rain?' / 'It ought to be in rain. ... But if we must, in sunshine.' (CPPP 81); "The Housekeeper": none; "The Fear": none; "The Self Seeker": [...] "The Wood-Pile": l. 10 'A small bird flew before me. He was careful' (CPPP 100), l. 14 'I was after him for a feather/- the white one in his tail'; "Good Hours": l. 4 'up to their shining eyes in snow.' (CPPP 102). In addition to this, Goodman invites the reader to attribute the same value to metaphor, simile, and other. Frost also uses the words interchangeably as in *The Unmade Word or Fetching and Far-Fetching*, where he states 'Now "fetching" a word or name from its place is what your textbook calls using words figuratively – metaphor, simile, analogy, or allegory – equivalent to using the word "like"; "like a peach"; he isn't a lemon, but "like a lemon." (695).

final meaning of a certain poem (164). She advances the example of “Home Burial”¹⁶, proposing that if the reader attributed metaphorical meaning to the words of the following lines of the husband

Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.

(“Home Burial,” CPPP 58, 96-97)

the final result of the poem would or should be different, since the metaphorical reference to the lost child’s coffin would justify what the wife perceives as an unnecessary remark. Other critics, such as Deidre Fagan, have embraced this position, agreeing on the presentation of the ‘birch fence’ as a metaphor for the child’s grave (157). Nonetheless, this search for metaphorical meaning in words, whose use is not directly identifiable as metaphorical, does not add much to the meaning of the poem, which does not revolve around the determination of the correctness of the behavior of the wife over the husband’s and vice versa. In fact, if a main theme has to be identified it seems to be the conflict of communication between the two spouses, created by the traumatic experience of the loss of a child, and the stalling of their lives which comes from it. Therefore, to see a metaphorical connection between the wood of the ‘birch fence’ and that of the coffin, does not really add significance or solve the conflict by legitimizing the husband’s sentence: she would still interpret his talking as a profanation of the silence she binds herself to,

¹⁶ Oster’s discourse is not circumscribed to “Home Burial”, also presenting examples such as “The Rose Family” (CPPP 225) where she argues Frost experiments with the value of metaphor, denying its value altogether and questioning the possibility of having meaning without it (168). Nonetheless, cases such as this one are not retraceable in *North of Boston*.

and he would still claim his right to express his feelings. This approach does not seem coherent with what Frost seems to intend with ‘ulteriority,’ proving to be misleading.

At most, it would be possible to replicate what happened to the *avant-gardes* and the more explicitly experimental modernists, as already mentioned in Poirier’s remarks, and assume that Frost is realist towards the metaphorical nature of language and its metaphorical relationship with the world. This thesis could be supported by the definition of Emblemist and Synecdochist Frost provided for himself, which are comprehensive both of a concrete sense of reality and an abstraction derived from it. Frost expresses his affiliation with the emblems in a conversation of 1958 reported in the *Letters to Undermeyer*:

‘If my poetry has to have a name, I’d prefer to call it Emblemism – it’s the visible emblem of things I’m after.’ (376)

Frost seems to emphasize the fact that his poems are the *praetextum*, in its etymological sense an image which precedes another text, or the ‘ulteriority’ of meaning, which can be drawn from a complementary reading of the parts composing the emblem, images, words, and their relations. Nonetheless, the image in Frost’s case is not made of symbolic elements, since Frost rejected the voices who called him a symbolist poet¹⁷, but of elements coming directly from the reality the poet imagines. Frost’s poetry, like the parables, is a moving image, a scene, which teaches us something different from the simple image it represents. The same procedure can be retraced in the definition of

¹⁷ Frost was always inclined to provide definitions of what he was not, rather than asserting what he was. Reading his correspondence, it is possible to understand how his conflict with Pound and his controlling habits influenced his refusal to conform to any super-imposed poetic structure, making his non-involvement with any movement his pride.

Synecdochist. Sergeant reports him saying in his work “Robert Frost: A Good Greek out of New England”:

I believe in what the Greeks called synecdoche: the philosophy of the part for the whole. ... All that an artist need is samples. (148)

The first analogy that crosses one’s mind while reading these lines are probably Heraclitus’ aphorisms from his *Περὶ Φύσεως* (*Perì Physeos, On Nature*), which made him famous as σκοτεινὸς (skoteinòs, obscure, incomprehensible). The point to maintain can be explained with some remarks on one of the most famous fragments of the philosopher:

You could not step twice into the same river. (DK B91)

The ultimate significance of Heraclitus’s aphorism is apparently the paradoxical contradiction between identity and diversity, but it achieves this by describing, directly and indirectly, the physical image of the river whose analysis becomes the means to reach what shall be called a higher truth. Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that no metaphorical process of any kind is involved, and that the determination of the meaning only derives from the exploration of the inner qualities of the river, say the running of its waters, which will never be the same as the first time the subject steps in it. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the river is the part from which human reasoning derives the whole meaning. The difference from a metaphorical approach, which works by analogy of an element A with an element B through a common characteristic C, is that the abstraction is already present within the physical object and its characteristics, and in this the text shows its realism.

This is to be considered the correct approach to Frost's poetry, since it provides both the sense of concreteness derived from the presentation of one simple object, or situation, but can also be enlarged to a meaning derived from it. As proven by the aforementioned examples and by the counting of the number of rhetorical devices of a metaphorical nature, it is necessary to reconsider any method that does not rely on the 'hints and directions' provided in the poems. On the other hand, the author takes advantage of the openness of the words he chooses, and the ease with which the reader reads metaphors in his poetry.

Some scholars already understood this, as in the case of Guy Rotella, who points out how Frost thought that 'any appearance of human meaning results from metaphorical imposition of patterns where none of them demonstrably exists, and from the human tendency to take those impositions as facts or gospel (58). In addition to this, in "The Constant Symbol" Frost also specifies that the world is prevented from revealing the real meaning of the metaphor:

How can the world know anything so intimate as what we were intending to do?
The answer is the world presumes to know. (CPPP 786-7)

As Rotella points out Frost's idea of meaning is 'humanly and provisionally constructed, rather than absolute, permanent,' (66) finally freeing itself from the conception of objectiveness in the determination of fixed correspondences of meaning (typical of a metaphorical interpretation for which A = B).

This reasoning proves that, if the metaphorical interpretation is applied while respecting the text, there is no contradiction between the 'sense of ulteriority' and the literal reading

of Frost's reality, more significant than the search for a meaning that cannot be found within the poet's words.

Some excellent remarks on the topic can be found in Sheldon W. Liebman's essay "Robert Frost: On the Dialectics of Poetry." where the author comments on the relationship between Frost's conception of metaphor and the role of the word. The scholar points out that the most common interpretation of Frost's definition of metaphor "saying one thing and meaning another" leads one to associate his figure with that of "modern abstractionist," which the author openly refused (275). Liebman calls attention to a different evocation of meaning, obtained through a process or re-collocation, and therefore, renovation of the sense of the word, whose meaning depends on the context in which it is collocated. Meaning, according to Liebman, is to be found in the act of seeing and listening to the perspective of the voices that populate Frost's poems.

Chapter 2

2.1 The visual aspect: the image and its denotative value.

The images presented in the poems are first element of contact with Frost's recreation of reality. Their simplicity artfully hides the complexity of the construction of their meaning and the intricacy of the implicit linguistic procedures that, appealing to the psychology of the reader, recreate the impression of realism and objectivity.

Some critics have directed their attention to the topic. In 2015 David Orr dedicated a whole book, *The Road Not Taken: finding America in the poem everyone loves and almost everyone gets wrong*, to the demonstration of how the America audience was easily tricked into an incorrect reading of one of Frost's most famous poems, "The Road Not Taken," from *Mountain Interval* (1916), by a superficial reading of its images. Although Orr's book focuses on a poem from another collection, it still serves the point of the dissertation. The author points out how the audience's reading of the poem is based on a misinterpretation of the images of Frost's poem. The poem reads:

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

("The Road Not Taken," CPPP 103, 5-10)

It is possible to remark that Frost explicitly specifies that the two roads are actually ‘really about the same’ (CPPP 103, l. 10), proving that the poem does not intend to be the heroic description of a man’s choice, but rather ‘a commentary of the self-deception we practice when constructing the stories of our own lives’ (Orr 9). Nonetheless, the poem is best known for this last incorrect meaning, which, as Orr’s analysis explains, depends on the fact that the reader’s attention is superficial in the analysis of the visual image, failing to notice the controversial elements determining its real meaning.

Peter Brooks, in his *Realist Vision* (2005) supports this thesis by stating that the main risk presented by the image is that it is superficial by nature. The realist vision, Brook says, ‘is attached to the visual, to looking at things, registering their presence in the world by sight’ (3) and, thus, tends to ‘deal in “first impressions” of all sorts, and they are impressions on the retina first of all – the way things look.’ (3). Therefore, the audience is likely to neglect the deepest implications of the images, and thus, interpolating the final meaning of the composition. On the other hand, the astute scholar is capable of taking advantage of this to transform it into an opportunity to retrace the procedures behind the possibility of misjudgment.

The *fil rouge* that connects all of Frost’s poetry, far beyond the collection that is here taken into account, is that Frost constructs his texts through a language that denotes what Marianne Moore called ‘the raw material of poetry,’ relying entirely on the reader’s subjectivity to evoke the connotative aspects of his texts.

It is possible to maintain that Frost’s recreation of the impression of a realistic reality depends on his choice to subordinate the connotative aspect to the denotative one. No evaluation of meaning is complete without taking into account the fact that besides

the denotative aspect of language, the reference to a part of reality, every word carries a semantic emotional association, connotation, which is shared by everyone, as Maria Teresa Prat Zagrebelsky explains in an essay entitled “The English lexicon: from words to phraseology” (185). Nonetheless, Frost’s images seem to leave a possible connotative interpretation to the subjective psychology of the reader, rather than deliberately conveying a definite impression. At most, it would be possible to maintain that the connotative aspect is developed in relation to the observation of the scene as a whole, an image in motion, which manifests a level of reading, or a message, that transcends the denotative aspect of the poem.

It seems necessary to approach the topic of denotation by mentioning an essay by Priscilla Paton, “Apologizing for Robert Frost”, where the authors points out how the interpretation of Frost’s poetry has been influenced by the comparison with the complex aesthetics of the transitional period from the nineteenth to the twentieth century (73). In fact, Paton explains how the critics’ attempt to regard Frost as ‘a folksy, crusty, wisecracking old gentleman farmer’ (Brodsky 70), also depends on the persistence of the pastoral mood in the beginning century¹⁸, which made him look out outdated as early as 1914, in comparison to the new modernist and formalist aesthetics (73). Frost’s use of everyday images made him popular with the broader audience he wanted to reach, forcing the ambivalence of the scholarly audience towards democratic subjects and public rise to the surface (73)¹⁹. Nonetheless, it is possible to maintain that the academic audience

¹⁸ The relationship between Frost, the pastoral, and his models of references are analyzed by Robert Faggen in his essay “Frost and the Questions of Pastoral,” where he focuses on the passage from the tranquil tone of Theocritus’s *Idylls* and Virgil’s *Bucolics* and *Georgics* to the violent explosions of the dialogues of *North of Boston*.

¹⁹ Lionel Trilling defined Frost as a “terrifying poet” who would disturb one’s sleep (156,157) Trilling, Lionel. “A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode.” *Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. James M. Cox. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962. 151-58.

should have understood and commented on the complexity hidden behind apparently simple scenarios, whose impression of realism is not provided by the mere presence or reference to objects of common use. If this were the case, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* could avail itself of the label of 'realist'.

It is possible to maintain that the effect of realism produced by Frost's images can be attributed to specific linguistic choices: while dramatic action is most influenced by the centrality of the character's deeds on the scene, the visual aspect of Frost's poetry is affected by his use of the most immediate classes of discourse, which compose the noun phrase. These are the noun and its determiners, the adjective and the article, which Frost conveniently adapts to the reader's degree of proximity or distance from the image he wants to recreate.

Frost keeps the reader's attention on the noun and on the small number of determiners that accompany it, which facilitates the recreation of the physical image in the reader's mind.

As we gather from Prisciani's *Institutio Grammaticarum*²⁰, the function of the noun and the adjective is already present in their etymology (Rigotti, Cigada 203). In fact, both the *nomen substantivus*, literally [my translation] 'the name of one substance,' and the *nomen abiectivus*, literally [my translation] 'the name that is added,' share the quality of expressing some *qualitas*, but the *nomen substantivus* covers the most important role

²⁰ Prisciani, Institutionum Grammaticarum l. XXIII, H. Keil ed., Teubner, Lipsiae, 1855-1859.

of defining a specific entity, while the *abiectivus* expresses general predicates that belong to several entities (203)²¹.

Understanding the general nature of the predicate that characterizes the adjective, Frost does not exceed in the use of adjectival determination, rather focusing on the denotative potential of the noun and its ability to evoke reality with the mere act of naming it. Frost's technique, previously mentioned in the discussion (see Chapter 1, 12-13), is based on the assumption that the physical impression of reality is better recreated on the page when the noun is not overcharged with description, which prevents the reader's mind from grasping the psychic image, focusing the attention on the details rather than the object. One of the many examples of this use can be observed in the opening of "The Black Cottage" [italics not present in the original text]

The *little* cottage we were speaking of,
A front with *just a* door between *two* windows,
Fresh painted by the shower of a *velvet* black.

...

The path was a *vague* parting in the grass
That led us to a *weathered* window-sill.

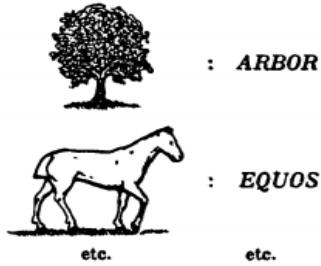
("The Black Cottage," CPPP 59, 5-14)

²¹ Prisciani, Institutionum Grammaticarum I. XXIII, H. Keil ed., Teubner, Lipsiae, 1855-1859, pp. 56-57: 'nomes es pars orationis, quae unicuique subiectorum corpum seu rerum communem vel propriam qualitatem distribuit [...] Nomen quasi notamen, quod hoc notamus uniuscuiusque substantiae qualitatem' (*Inst. Gramm.* I, 56-57).

Apart from the form of intensification (l. 6 just a door), which represents the same function through a slightly different word, the nouns are accompanied by one adjective (l. 5 ‘little,’ l. 6 ‘two,’ l. 7 ‘velvet,’ l. 13 ‘vague,’ l. 14 ‘weathered’), introducing an amount of description the reader easily assimilates and reproduces in his or her mental recreation of the image.

The denotative aspect of Frost’s images, which, until now, has been analyzed from a syntactic point of view, opens some more serious considerations belonging to the field of structural linguistics. In fact, it is possible to maintain that the denotative aspect of the image is recreated by appealing to the psychic memory of the reader and its personal connection of the reality he expresses to a referent.

When he names an object, Frost reproduces the most instinctive process of the working of language itself, as theorized by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916) and the division he operates between the parts composing the sign. As in Saussure’s work, it is necessary to specify that the naming of an object, say ‘wall’ (CPPP 39, l. 1) does not correspond to a pre-identified model of wall, though it is possible to maintain that everyone has a precise idea of what a wall is. One of the most crucial passages of his volume regards the old-fashioned tendency to consider language ‘une nomenclature, c’est-à-dire une liste de termes correspondant à autant de chose.’ (97) Saussure uses the famous example of



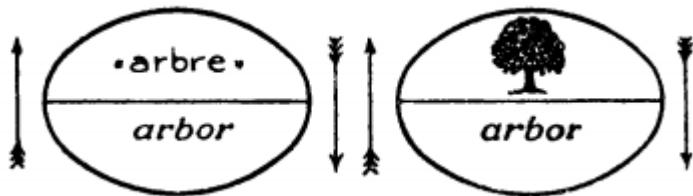
to explain how this vision can be easily criticized, since it is based on the supposition that ideas are pre-existing with respect to words. Some of the most refined literary figures have remarked on the inadequacy of this simplification, which goes to the very core of the topic of realism: Charles Dicken's narration of Mr. Gradgrind's definition of a horse is an example of how the equivalence between an image and a word is incorrect:

'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.' (9-10)

Not only does this image neglect completely the connotative aspect, but also it does not present an exhaustive portrait of the denotative aspect either. The fact that Saussure's grammar understands that 'les termes impliqués dans le signe linguistique sont tous deux psychiques et sont unis dans notre cerveau par le lien de l'association' (98) provides the possibility of recreating a faithful image of the selected object. The acoustic image united to the concept in the linguistic sign is the psychic and sensorial representation of that sound, which we can perceive through our senses (99). The sign is a double-faceted physical entity which Saussure represents through the picture:



Saussure proceeds by stating that thus the speaker is able to associate to the acoustic image the combinations allowed by language that are also conform to reality, excluding all the combinations that are not supported by a correct imagination of reality.



(Ferdinand de Saussure, 97-99)

Frost's realism takes advantage of the sensorial aspect of the sign, both physical and psychic, to provide an image that is as accurate in the reader's mind as the observation of an actual object would be to the viewer's eye. The recreation of the object is no less accurate than the vision of the real object would be, due to the recollection of its subjective psychic and physical image in the reader's mind.

Given this information, it is possible to observe how the same procedure that involves the single noun is repeated on a larger scale. Due to its concise structure and its particularly effective images, "Good Hours" represents a perfect example of how the aforementioned procedure surpasses the dimension of the single word to embrace larger portions of text. There are two passages that most clearly exemplify Frost's technique:

But I had the cottages in a row
Up to their shining eyes in snow.

And I thought I had the folk within:
I had the sound of a violin;
I had a glimpse through curtain laces
Of youthful forms and youthful faces.

(“Good Hours,” CPPP 102, 3-8)

I turned and repented but coming back
I saw no window but that was black.

Over the snow my cracking feet
Disturbed the slumbering village street
Like profanation, by your leave,
At ten o’clock of a winter eve.

(“Good Hours,” CPPP 102, 11-16)

The images presented by the two fragments, which reproduce each other’s structure deal with two types of images. The first type refers to the psychic image presented by the concrete nouns (l. 3 cottages, l. 4 shining eyes, l. 4 snow, l. 6 violin, l. 7 curtain laces, l. 8 forms, l. 8 faces, l. 12 window, l. 13 snow, l. 13 feet, l. 14 village street, l. 16. winter) and develops according to the Saussurian procedure. On the other hand, the second type of image unites the denotative aspects of all the previous images into an organic whole, recreating the image of the speaker walking in the snowy lanes of the village. The

denotative aspect of this portrait is enhanced by two elements: the connotative aspect of the nouns and the presence of verbs of perception (l. 12 saw) and psychological verbs (l. 5 thought, l. 11 repented, l. 12 disturbed), providing both the vision of the external environment and its psychological interpretation. For Roland Barthes, as he states in his work *Image, Music, Text* (1977), the purpose of the photographic image is the representation of ‘the scene itself, the literal reality’ (16), whose realism is defined according to the visual proximity or distance from the vividness of the original experience of the portrayed scene (17). The fragments present two powerful images, respectively of positive and negative connotation, which show Frost’s mastery in the reproduction of reality, which Barthes called the ‘perfect analogon’ of the reality an author wants to represent (17). The first image is the

glimpse through curtain laces
Of youthful forms and youthful faces.

(“Good Hours,” CPPP 102, 7-8)

which is united to the adversative conjunction ‘But’ (l. 3) to oppose the lingering sense of loneliness of the first two lines (ll. 1-2 ‘I had for my winter evening walk – / No one at all with whom to talk,’) to recreate the image of the homely and safe environment that keeps the speaker company. The idea of vision is already introduced by the ‘shining eyes’ metaphor (l. 4), and is elaborated with the word ‘glimpse’ (l. 7), which binds the fleetingness of the narrator’s view of the landscape to the reader’s observation of the scene from the outside. The vision is fragmented in the experience of the narrator, who perceives the scene from scattered images (the sound, the curtains, the faces) and in the

experience of the reader who participates to it. The other fragment deserves the same treatment:

Over the snow my cracking feet
Disturbed the slumbering village street

(CPPP 102, 13-14)

where the image of the ‘cracking feet’ on the snow shows Frost’s remarkable understanding of what strings to pull to recreate an accurate image and feeling of reality. Frost recreates a realistic impression of the scene by appealing to the connotative aspect of embarrassment implicit in the image of the ‘cracking feet,’ touching the reader’s memory of the discomfort of that sound, which resonates even more loudly against the silence implied by ‘slumbering’ and ‘disturbed’. The reader can visualize the scene from the narrator’s perspective due to the psychic and sensorial recreation of the image.

Internal evidence from the text shows how Frost tends to prefer the use of the definite article, the linguistic structure that expresses a connection with an already mentioned portion of reality, which provides a sense of realism by increasing the communication between the world of the sender and the receiver of the message. On the other hand, the use of the indefinite article or the zero morpheme-lexeme (null article), mentions a part of reality with the purpose of introducing it in the discourse, but without the specific intention of including the reader (Rigotti, Cigada 215-216). Frost’s use of the article is visible in the following lines from “After Apple-Picking,”

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.

(“After Apple-Picking, CPPP 70, 18-22)

These lines describe the vision, or rather hallucination, the narrator experiences due to the physical weariness caused by the tiring manual work, comparing the realistic impression of ‘*the ache*’ of ‘*the pressure*’ to the nonrealistic image of the apples (l. 18), introduced by the zero morpheme. Frost’s use of language stresses the imaginative quality of the distorted vision by maintaining a certain distance between sender, message (the vision), and receiver, unlike in ll. 21-22, where the determinative article grounds the nouns it refers to into an existing reality.

There are also occasions in which Frost resorts to some more abstract concepts or words, of more difficult denotation. In these cases, according to Zagrebelsky, the interpretation of the referent, which still expresses an existing portion of reality, is not as straightforward as in concrete words (e.g. wall), but volatile, difficult to identify, as in the case of abstract nouns (e.g. death), non-existing entities (e. g. elves), and names that refer to a whole category (e.g. the truths) (185). Evidence from the text shows that this use of language is present in the poems in the form of the indefinite pronoun, referring to a mysterious identity (“Mending Wall” l. 1), or abstract concepts whose connotative aspect is not universally determined (l. 43 “Death of the Hired Man”), intrude. Thus in:

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,

That wants it down

(“Mending Wall,” CPPP 40, 35-36)

‘*Home*,’ he mocked gently.

‘Yes, what else but *home*?’

It all depends on what you mean by *home*.’

(“The Death of the Hired Man,” CPPP 43, 116-118)

Some remarks are necessary. These uses of language are the only cases of the collection in which Frost subordinates the denotative aspect to the connotative characterization of the word, which is considered above all for its emotive value. In addition to this, Frost’s choice of providing some space for abstract nouns, instead of limiting himself to the inclusion of concrete nouns, shows the author’s understanding and respect for the working of the human psyche, which is as capable of abstraction as of reference and collocation of definite portions of reality. The examples are significant but rare if compared to the quantity of concrete nouns characterized by a dominant denotative function, and have, therefore, to be considered an exception.

It does not seem too forward to maintain that Frost leaves the realistic configuration of the scene entirely to the power of the reader’s imagination, fulfilling Champfleury’s theories on Realism (see Chapter 1), summarized in what would become the 20th century motto “less is more”.

2.2 Dramatic technique and realistic effects

Since the image and its implications have been addressed in the previous section, it seems necessary to proceed with an analysis of the dialogic element, which is preponderant in the collection, in spite of the abundance of images. The narratological implications of the speaking voice in the telling are fundamental for the understanding of Frost's realistic technique and will be later expanded in Chapter 3.

Unlike *A Boy's Will* (1913), which is mostly composed of meditative lyrics of a single voice, *North of Boston* puts a particular emphasis on visual verbs and on verbs referring to speech acts, creating an alternation between images and dialogue. The relationship between Frost's realism and his dramatic technique has to be read in the light of three considerations: hidden subordination of the story to the message, representation of palpable authentic feelings instead of generic considerations, the portrayal of intimate scenes.

In fact, as Radcliffe Squires maintains in his volume *The Major Themes of Robert Frost* "no one [was] less interested in the story for the story's sake than Frost." (77). Several fragments from his letters comment on how Frost conceived the relation between storytelling and revealing of meaning:

A story must always release a meaning more readily to those who read than life itself as it goes ever releases meaning. Meaning is a great consideration. But a story must never seem to be told primarily for meaning. Anything, an inspired irrelevancy even to make it sound as if told the way it is chiefly because it happened that way. (SL 5996)

The reader cannot help noticing that Frost's poems do not portray a story, but rather one of the scenes that compose it. The author manipulates the telling by including in the narration references to an external environment, whose presence has to be inferred by the reader, by referring to external events, introducing the scene in *medias res* or cutting short the representation abruptly in a moment of dramatic tension that is clearly leading to some events, excluded from the scene. An in-depth analysis of these dynamics will be provided in the next chapter. Essentially, the reader is left with the impression of participating in a portion of a larger event, which proves that Frost is interested in the concentrated few actions he portrays, rather than the story that contextualized them.

The letter to Sidney Cox of January 2 1915 adds an element to the first consideration, when Frost, commenting on the teaching of literature in American and British universities, complains about the purpose of their teaching. The text goes:

Why literature is the next thing to religion in which as you know or believe an ounce of faith is worth all the theology every written. Sight and insight, give us those.

(5265)

From these lines emerges an interest in genuine and powerful feelings, such as the ones it is possible to observe in *North of Boston*. Frost points out how his interest in people changed over time in his letter to William Stanley Braithwaite of March 22 1915, where he confesses that, after an initial phase where his interest in people was mainly directed at their speech and at the elaboration of his theory of 'the sound of sense' and 'sentence sounds,' his interest changed (5996). In fact, he goes on by stating:

Right on top of that I made the discovery in doing *The Death of the Hired Man* that I was interested in neighbors for more than merely their tones of speech –and

always had been. ... I like the actuality of gossip, the intimacy of it. Say what you will effects of actuality and intimacy are the greatest aim an artist can have. The sense of intimacy gives the thrill of sincerity. (SL 5996)

The author understands how the sense of intimacy is crucial for the recreation of a realistic scene and puts that in practice by giving voice to the innermost feelings of the characters, whose action, observed in its interaction with the other personae or entities, becomes the center of dramatic action²².

The reader who envisions finding the consolation of a homely and safe feeling in the ‘comeback’ to people (SL, 2129) that Frost experienced around the time of the writing of “The Turf of Flowers” (*A Boy’s Will*, CPPP 30) will be disappointed by the mood that dominates the collection. Frost’s interpretation of the word ‘intimacy’ reveals the author’s concern for the dynamics surrounding those parts of the self that one would rather keep secret, what can be defined as the tragedy of the human being, consumed in an ‘intimate’ space that should supposedly be excluded from trauma. It is not by chance that Seamus Heaney chooses to underline the Sophoclean quality of Frost’s poetry (65), since the tragedy is consumed both inside the character (private space) and outside the character, in the relation with the other (public space)²³. Not only is this true in the most openly

²² See Frank Lentricchia’s commentary in *Modernist Quartet* on the alternation between the lyric mode and the conversational tones: ‘Set in the context of his early practice and the banal norms of the nineteenth century, *North of Boston* is radical stuff. With a couple of splendid exceptions ... most of the poems in Frost’s second book are mid-size narratives, carried mainly by dialogue seemingly gathered without meditation (this is their subtlest art) directly from the lives of the suffering rural poor. ... Far from banishing his lyric impulses to the margins, *North of Boston* places them at their psychological center where they function as release mechanism for freedom, however constricted, however brief.’ (109) The scholar goes on: ‘Frost’s craft encourages us to imagine life before these poems begin.’ (110) Another interesting remark on the realistic portrayal of the characters can be found in Seamus Heaney’s essay “Above the Brim” in Harold Bloom’s *Modern Critical Views: Robert Frost*, where he reports that Pound had found *North of Boston* praiseworthy and stated that ‘Mr. Frost’s people are real people.’ (216).

²³ In this respect, see St. Armand, Barton L. “The Power of Sympathy in the Poetry of Robinson and Frost: The ‘Inside’ vs. the ‘Outside’ Narrative.”

tragic poems, such as “Home Burial,” where the loss of the child clearly affects the emotional sphere of the characters as well as their failing relationship, forcing one of them to seek comfort in the external environment, but also in the meditative poems. In fact, in poems such as “Mending Wall,” “After Apple-Picking,” or “The Wood-Pile,” the external dimension of landscape and the human action that take place in it become a source of preoccupied meditation for the voice of the narrator. Some further considerations will follow.

Of course, every poem presents some differences from the other ones in terms of narration and, for extension, in the use of dramatic devices. The number of pages of this brief work prevents us from carrying out a case-by-case study. Nonetheless, it is possible to summarize some of the techniques Frost uses to create the realistic impression of the tension on which drama is built, based on the author’s understanding of the direct proportionality between the duration of the tension of the scene and the success of its realistic representation.

The realistic impression of dramatic tension is rendered through the placing of the cause of conflict outside the telling, accompanied by the denial of the resolution of the tragedy, as well as the introduction of sudden and unexpected reversals of fortune.

Joseph Brodsky provides the best remarks on the subject, quoting how Lionel Trilling’s definition of Frost as a “terrifying poet” caused a stir among the refined audience who attended a dinner on the occasion of Frost’s eighty-fifth birthday in New York (1959) (7). There are no better words than Brodsky’s to justify this statement:

Now, I want you make the distinction between terrifying and tragic. Tragedy, as you know, is always a *fait accompli*, whereas terror has always to do with

anticipation, with a man's recognition of his own negative potential – with his sense of what he is capable of. And it is the latter that was Frost's forte, not the former. In other words, his posture is radically different from the Continental tradition of the tragic hero. (7)

The tragedy is exacerbated by the fact that Frost's tragedies are deprived of all the elements that lead to the cathartic resolution of the drama. This is true both in those poems where the tone is justified by tragic circumstances, as in "Home Burial" or "The Self-Seeker" but also where the tragedy creeps in disguised as an uncomfortable feeling, as in "Mending Wall," "The Mountain," or "Good Hours". Frost complicates the functioning of the tragic action, traditionally associated with the succession of the mechanisms of error (*hamartia*), sudden reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnosis*)²⁴. In "Home Burial," in fact, the error that leads to the explosion of the tragedy, meaning the husband's words following the burial of the child (ll. 96-97), are external to the scene represented by the author, which describes the fight of the couple and the moments leading up to it, rather than the actual incident. The words

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

²⁴ See "La Parola per la Scena: Teoria, Forme, and Problemi di Metodo," in Ingresso a Teatro: Guida all'Analisi della drammaturgia, a cura di Annamaria Cascetta and Laura Peja, p. 171.

To do with what was in the darkened parlor.

You *couldn't* care!

(“Home Burial, CPPP 58, 95-101)

are reported as a functional element, which provides some context for the reader who, otherwise, would not be able to understand the heated tone of the exchange. On the other hand, in the traditional tragedy, the *hamartia* is introduced from the very beginning of the narration, often through a prophecy that will be fulfilled on the stage. This is for instance the case of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, where the fate of Oedipus is introduced from the very beginning of the tragedy (ll. 360-460) (188-195). The same situation is re-proposed in “The Self-Seeker,” where the incident leading to the narrated situation (ll. 22-29) has already taken place, and the sum of money that leads to the discussion reported in the poem has already been discussed with the lawyer (ll. 60-62).

When the reversal of fortune is a focal element of the poem, as in “The Wood Pile” or “Good Hours,” it introduces the sense of discomfort that is typical of Frost’s poetry. In both cases, the unexpected presence of an element triggers a change in the dominant feeling of the poem.

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,

...

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.

(“The Wood-Pile,” CPPP 101, 18-40)

I turned and repented, but coming back
I saw no window but that was black.

Over the snow my creaking feet
Disturbed the slumbering village street
Like profanation, by your leave,
At ten o’clock of a winter eve.

(“Good Hours,” CPPP 102, 11-16)

These examples prove how Frost reverses the dominant psychological connotation of the elements of the first half of the poems, in order to introduce the tragic discomfort on which the text closes. In “The Wood-Pile,” the image of the ‘small bird’ (l. 10) catalyzes the attention of the narrator until the creature is forgotten for the image of the neglected ‘pile of wood’ (l. 18), creating a continuous alternation between attention and carefulness and their opposite distraction and abandonment. Likewise, the dominant feeling of community and togetherness of the second stanza of “Good Hours” (until l. 9 ‘I had such company outward bound.’), is suddenly reversed for a contrasting sense of solitude and disturbance (l. 11 ‘repented,’ l. 12 ‘no window,’ l. 13 ‘creaking,’ l. 14 ‘disturbed’).

Along the lines of the re-elaboration of a traditionally conceived dramatic technique, it is necessary to call attention to how Frost ends the narration right after the moment of tragic *acme* without providing the *denouement* that leads to catharsis or, at least, to reconciliation. Numerous poems of the collection develop around this technique, which can be observed at its best in “Home Burial,” where failure of communication and understanding lie at the heart of the poem. Frost reproduces the same delaying effect that was typical of the classical tragedy, in which the consequences of the *hamartia*, such as the image of the blinded Oedipus begging for his own exile, are presented in the *exodus*. Nonetheless, the elimination of the final choral commentary does not provide the reader with a correct explanation of the scene he just witnessed: the poem closes on the exodus of the wife, which represents the ultimate denial of the already dysfunctional attempt of communication that dominated the whole narration, and prevents any solution or message for the reader.

At this point, it seems necessary to introduce another facet of Frost’s technique for the realistic representation of drama: the author appeals to the reader’s psychology, emphasizing elements that indicate tension or a sense of urgency, such as a common act identified as the instinctive reaction to a certain situation. This manifests itself both in terms of the construction of dialogue and through the identification of details communicating tension, on which the attention of the reader is focused.

Apart from the case of “The Wood-Pile” and “Good Hours,” in which the voice of the author is clearly expressed in the form of meditative monologue, *North of Boston* is mainly articulated in the form of dialogue, presented according to different narratological techniques, better explored in Chapter 3.

Frost's dialogues are characterized by the quick alternation of the lines of the characters, which do not only contribute to the reproduction of real-life conversation but also collocate the verbal exchanges in a compact temporal space, increasing dramatic tension. It is enough to follow the sequences of punctuation marks to understand the rhythm that Frost creates in the poems. The sentences of the dialogue often reach their conclusion, after two or three lines. On the other hand, the sentences constituting narrative parts are often one or two lines longer than the sentences constituting the dialogues, since their role is to recreate the image in which the scene is set, requiring a more extended space. The already short exchanges marked by the use of the full stop are fragmented into even smaller portions by the use of commas and colons, marking shorter internal stops. The pauses indicated by these punctuation marks are counterbalanced by the use of other forms, such as the exclamation mark and the question mark, which provoke the movement of an otherwise horizontal intonation, making it rise or fall. It is possible to notice that Frost uses punctuation creatively, in order to reproduce the realistic rhythm of the voice in the uttering of speech acts. There are cases, in which one line is divided into two separated sentences marked by a full stop,

Then I don't know. It must be strange enough.

(“The Generation of Men,” CPPP 79, 145)

as well as cases in which the line is divided into three parts, two short sentences in the first half, and a third sentence that continues in the following line through an enjambment:

He's nothing. Listen. When I lean like this
I can make out old Grandsir Stark distinctly –

(“The Generation of Men,” CPPP 78, 109-110)

These two examples provide a hint of Frost’s creative organization of the pauses of the discourse, which is structured around the realistic representation of everyday language, whose fragmentation makes the action progress with the dialogue, contributing to the increase in dramatic tension.

Frost’s dramatic technique has been studied from numerous points of view, but it is necessary to mention John Robert Doyle’s volume *The Poetry of Robert Frost. An Analysis* as a particularly interesting contribution, since it focuses specifically and extensively on Frost’s dramatic techniques within the framework of realism. Some of the points that Doyle tackles, such as the focus on normal actions (55) rather than objects, and the similarities with theatrical and cinematic forms (55), have already been mentioned in the discussion. On the other hand, some other points, such as his considerations on the symbolic value of the actions and situations or nature (59), as already mentioned, only seem acceptable in the light of what was said in Chapter 1 on Frost’s Emblemism.

The author’s skill at the reproduction of reality passes through what Doyle defines as ‘particularizing common action’ (56), a concise definition of the author’s ability to understand the right psychological response to a situation and the relevance of small details in the portrayal of the dramatic scene. The first case plays with the re-enactment of the natural response to an action or situation, which therefore increases the effect of realism and intensifies the reader’s participation in the scene. The tension reaches its height in poems like “The Fear.” The opening of the poem sets the scene for what the reader can only perceive as a nightmarish scenario:

A lantern light from deeper in the barn
Shone on a man and a woman in the door
And threw their lurching shadows on a house
Nearby, all dark in every glossy window.
A horse's hoof pawed once the hollow floor,
And the back of the gig they stood beside
Moved a little. The man grasped the wheel,
The woman spoke out sharply, 'Whoa, stand still!
I saw it just as plain as a white plate,'
She said, 'as the light on the dashboard ran
Along the bushes at the roadside –a man's face.
You *must* have seen it too.'

'I didn't see it.'

Are you sure –'

'Yes, I'm sure!'

' – it was a face?'

Joel, I'll have to look. ...

(CPPP 89, 1-17)

Frost prepares a scene that is meant to be followed by the feeling of terror that dominates the whole poem, disseminating elements that indicate tension throughout the text. The presence of elements such as 'lurking shadows' (l. 3) cast by feeble light in a predominantly dark environment introduces the idea of a restless agitation that is also

reflected in the fidgetiness of the horse (l. 5). The dramatic tension created by these two elements must be interrupted by an incident of some sort, as proven by the woman's statement of line 23 '[the key] Seemed to warn someone to be getting out'. The poem follows the same structure until the end, which reproduces the same sense of uneasiness as the beginning. Frost does not allow the poem to represent an exception to his rule of depriving the poem of *denouement*: although the *anagnosis* takes place with the presentation of the roaming man with the child ('ll. 73-75 and ll. 88-90), the poem closes in a circular structure that duplicates the dramatic tension of the beginning.

The second example, on the other hand, is evident in the details that the reader tends to overlook in the reading. A clear example can be observed in the famous opening of "The Death of the Hired Man," in which Frost's ability to manage reality is shown at its best. The text goes:

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren. When she heard the step
She ran on *tip-toe* down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news

(CPPP 40, 1-4)

The attentive reader is struck by the promptness of Mary's reaction to the hearing of just one step (l. 2) of her husband and is led to interpret the temporal conjunction 'when' (l. 2) as its synonym 'just as soon as,' manifesting a sense of urgency that was not entirely explicit in the verb 'waiting' (l.2). Moreover, Frost adds to that a close-up on the woman's feet and the pace of her steps: apart from underlining her desire to avoid making noises,

so that Silas will not be awakened, the fact that she runs ‘on tip-toe’ suggests that she is taking quick little steps rather than long ones, as one does when under pressure.

Frost plays with elements that are both internal and external to the scene. This phenomenon can be seen in several different ways, of which “The Fear” is the most remarkable example, since the poem revolves around an unknown presence and the effect of the unexpected on the characters. Frost’s skill lies in his ability to understand and reproduce the adequate tones for the described situation, in the realistic recreation of the correct reaction to something, and in his talent for increasing the tension by tricking the reader’s imagination into a similar situation of uncertainty. Doyle maintains that Frost conceals the reason behind the fear, but convinces the reader that this feeling is justified (56), since the object of the fear is not revealed until the very last moment and, therefore, unknown for the majority of the poem. Frost’s ability to increase drama without naming the object around which the tension is built can be observed in “The Mountain” as well, where the central element of the poem is mentioned several times but never described nor reached, becoming almost an uncanny presence, a non-place.

Frost’s effort to involve the reader’s psychology in his poetry has been understood by Victor E. Vogt who states that ‘the poem comes alive and gains power *exclusively* through the dialectic of the reader’s changing cognitive and affective relationship to the local parts, and especially on the underlying configuration of the whole’ (533). Nonetheless, in his analysis of “The Death of the Hired Man,” he reaches the conclusion that Frost’s technique minimizes the mimetic illusion focusing the primary concern on the action that is going to take place. It is quite the contrary: the concision of the narration enhances the mimetic illusion, since the alternation between narration and action forces

the reader to shape the image according to the content and tones of the dialogues, producing a highly realistic effect in the reader's mind.

Chapter 3

3.1 The intersection of realism and narratology

Like any other text, *North of Boston* opens up to a whole range of narratological considerations²⁵, among which the discourse on telling is the most important in the creation of the convincing effect of realism. Although the complexity of every poem would require a case-by-case analysis, due to the differences in mood that each poem presents from the other ones, the brief space allowed to this study imposes some generalizations. In fact, it was possible to individuate three different categories of focalization and narratorial perspective, as well as retracing mechanisms of manipulation of the time and space of the poem through references to an external context.

Frost places himself in what Roland Barthes theorized in his work *The Death of the Author* (1967) where he points out, through the example of Balzac's *Sarrasine* (1830) and the description of the castrato as a woman, that 'writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin' (142). According to Barthes, the focus on the author, together with the critics' attempt to justify his or her work through his personality traits, is a construction of our culture (143). Nonetheless, as Barthes puts it, 'in the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered' (147): the author annihilates his presence to make the characters live without spreading signs of his

²⁵ The discourse on the narratological aspect of the text has been developed according to the terminology that Gérard Genette develops in his *Fiction and Diction* (1991) in the English translation provided by Catherine Porter, published by Cornell University Press.

presence²⁶, but leaving the external perspective of the narrator who observes the characters like the camera, producing the effect of objective realism²⁷.

It is worth noticing that all the poems share this characteristic, often ignored by the critics, who have often misunderstood or ignored Frost's explicit decision to be *super partes* in the representation of his characters. Instead, they have been looking for the author's biography or particular signs of his voice within the poems, thus interpolating the role of the narrator.

The elimination of the author from the narration allows him to play with focalization, creating in the reader the perception that, since the narratorial voice is

²⁶ In this regard, it is necessary to point out how some critics have the tendency to attribute the content of the poems to the author's direct experience, as with "Home Burial," which scholars wanted to interpret as a biographical transposition of Frost's experience of the loss of his own child, in spite of the author's denial of this proposition. The academic audience repeats the same procedure in the reading of "The Fear," in which Frost's passion for late walks at night is always stressed. Some remarks are necessary: the unfortunate experience of the poet does not prevent the effect of realism, achieved by his complete annihilation from the text. The coincidence of the author's experience with the content of a text is not what guarantees the effect of realism, as proved by the fact that the 'sight and insight' of the situation is not deeper or different from that of other tragic poems, such as "The Self-Seeker". Indeed, to a certain extent, the experience of the author is reflected in the poems. It seems reasonable to consider the topic from the perspective of the French school of the 1960s and its studies on the role of the author, as in Michel Foucault's remarks from "What is an Author" (1969): 'The truth is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; ... In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion.' (927). Some other fundamental remarks on Foucault's theory can be found in the anthology published by Cornell University Press *Language, Counter Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault* (1997), which provides extensive content on Foucault's theory of literature.

²⁷ In his essay "The Realistic Tradition" Lodge makes some remarks that are important for the considerations that will be later expressed in this analysis. The author points out how 'the first-person method continues to be favoured by realistic novelists throughout the twentieth century. This might be explained by reference to the collapse of confidence in history in our time – confidence in the onward march of progress, in the possibility of reconciling individual and collective aims, in the responsiveness of public events to private actions: a confidence which made possible the ambitious scope and panoramic method of the classic nineteenth-century novel.' (41). It is possible to remark how this commentary suits Frost's case, in which the I has a dominant role, since dialogue is shaped in order to expose the 'I' of the character's perspective or the 'I' of the interior monologue of the narrator. Lodge goes on by stating that 'Total alienation from history leads to solipsism and, in literary terms, to the abandonment of realism.' (41): it is possible to remark how Frost does not commit this mistake, since the 'I' of the character is often told from the perspective of a heterodiegetic narrator, whose identification is complicated by the attempt of the author to maintain external focalization. Further details will be provided in the text.

completely removed from the telling, the characters live the experience the author presents in the first person, with all the consequences of the case.

As previously mentioned in the discussion, this narratological choice contributes to the theatrical or cinematic impression of Frost' poetry: the external focalization of the author induces the reader to assume the perspective of spectator, an outsider unable to influence the final result of what is happening, perceiving the telling as a matter-of-fact situation²⁸.

This is best experienced in the poems where the telling is assigned to a heterodiegetic narrator, who is external to the story he tells, such as "The Death of the Hired Man," "A Hundred Collars," "Home Burial," "The Black Cottage," "Blueberries," "A Servant to Servants," "The Code," "The Generation of Men," "The Housekeeper," "The Fear," and "The Self-seeker." Nonetheless, although these poems share the same type of narrating voice, they still present some differences of speech form, which deserve further explanation. It is possible to remark that the number of characters and the modalities of their introduction on the scene produce a certain influence on the degree of visibility of the narrator. In poems such as "Blueberries," in fact, the dialogue between the two characters is not presented in the form of reported speech, allowing the author to be invisible and the narrator entirely unobtrusive. On the other hand, the attentive reader will remark that in poems such as "The Self-Seeker," the presence of the author, or of a heterodiegetic narrator, is introduced at a certain point of the telling, to moderate the

²⁸ A beautiful commentary on the contrast between the disconnection between the inside and the outside of the poem is provided by Barton L. St Armand's essay "The Power of Sympathy in the Poetry of Robinson and Frost: The 'Inside' vs. the 'Outside' Narrative.,," in which the author reflects on the theme from a narratological perspective that underlines the point of view of the narrator, as well as from the perspective of psychological incomunicability of the inner 'I' of the character in its relation with the other 'I's populating the scene.

exchange between characters, who would otherwise remain ambiguous. The dialogue starts *in medias res*:

‘Willis, I didn’t want you here today:
The lawyer’s coming for the company.
I’m going to sell my soul, or, rather, feet.
Five hundred dollars for the pair, you know.’

‘With you the feet have nearly been the soul;
And if you’re going to sell them to the devil,
I want to see you do it. When’s he coming?’

(CPPP 1-7)

with the presentation of only two characters on the scene. So far, the reader observes that the dialogue does not require the introduction of reported speech, since the exchange proceeds naturally, according to the rules of everyday conversation: the author is invisible and the narration is uttered by the two speakers. Their conversation revolves around the fact that one of the two characters will have to receive another person (l. 7 ‘When’s *he* coming?’, referring to the lawyer), whose arrival is, nonetheless, left to an undetermined time in the future. Nevertheless, when the third and fourth characters are introduced on the scene (l. 91 ‘There! there’s the bell. He’s rung.’), the presence of a heterodiegetic narrator becomes necessary to modulate a conversation that would otherwise remain disorganized and incomprehensible for the reader. The passage that follows is dominated by a certain degree of confusion, which reflects the sense of uneasiness caused by the lawyer on the narratological level:

Willis brought up besides the Boston lawyer
A little barefoot girl who in the noise
Of heavy footsteps in the old frame house,
And baritone importance of the lawyer,
Stood for a while unnoticed with her hands
Shyly behind her.

‘Well, and how is Mister – ’

The lawyer was already in his satchel
As if for papers that might bear the name
He hadn’t at command. ‘You must excuse me,
I dropped in at the mill and was detained.’

‘Looking round, I suppose,’ said Willis.

‘Yes,

Well, yes.’

(“The Self-Seeker,” CPPP 96, 94-107)

The interpretation of the passage and the attribution of the right line to the right character requires a certain effort on the part of the reader. In fact, l. 100 remains ambiguous, since it could be uttered by the lawyer entering the scene and addressing the ‘Broken One,’ the protagonist of the story and the most obvious interlocutor of the lawyer, but could equally well be pronounced by Willis himself in addressing the lawyer ironically. The introduction of the form of reported speech (l. 105 ‘said Willis’) tries to contain the confusion of the

passage and seems to suggest that it is Willis himself who utters the aforementioned ambiguous sentence together with his second line (l. 105).

The second category includes the poems characterized by internal focalizations, such as the poems dominated by a meditative mood, which reflects the inner monologue of the autodiegetic narrator. This is, for instance, the case of "A Servant to Servants," "After Apple-Picking," "The Wood-Pile," "Good Hours," where the effect of realism depends on the fact that the reader does not discuss the subjective account of the story, assuming the same attitude as the spectator listening to a monologue acted on the scene.

It is possible to observe this in lines like

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.

("After Apple-Picking," CPPP 70, 1-8)

where the experience reveals the perspective of an autodiegetic narrator, who makes use of simultaneous narration and internal focalization. The narrating character includes an objective presentation of the elements populating the surrounding space and immediately expresses the effect that the environment and his activity have on him, thus drawing the attention of the reader both on the external scene, the surrounding landscape, and on the

internal scene, represented by the action and experience of the character. As mentioned above, there are no elements that indicate a possible unreliability of his account of the experience.

In addition to this, it is necessary to devote some specific remarks to the few examples in which the internal monologue is embedded in the text, as in, for instance the example of the famous sentence of “The Black Cottage”

He fell at Gettysburg of Fredericksburg,
I ought to know – it makes a difference which:
Fredericksburg wasn’t Gettysburg, of course.

(CPPP 59, 31-34)

The reader will remark how, if at first the speaker is addressing his interlocutor, the dash introduces a shift in the telling, which is no longer addressed to an external someone but seems rather to be that of someone talking to himself, correcting an imprecise statement right after its pronunciation.

Some critics criticized this use of language, maintaining that it removes the attention from the consistent development of discourse. In particular, Doyle commented on these deviations from the dominant progression of language, treating the topic as if it implied a certain estrangement from the realistic portrayal of the scene, since its tone points towards the universal rather than to the contingent situation (39). The scholar points his finger against an example that is comparable to the previous one, referring especially to Amy’s considerations, in “Home Burial,” on the meaning of mortality while

accusing her husband of profaning the death of their child with unreasonable words. The text goes:

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!

(“Home Burial,” CPPP 58, 101-111)

Doyle argues that the reference to universal elements betrays the real subject of the poem, which, according to the scholar, is the ‘conflict between the husband and the wife over the way the loss should be taken’ (37).

On the contrary, it seems more correct to state that, through these repetitions, Frost realistically reproduces the working of speech acts. As Roman Jakobson points out in his essay “On Realism” (See Chapter I), spoken language does not always follow the structure and organization that would be expected from, for instance, a written text. Further information on the topic can be retraced in Wallace Chafe and Deborah Tannen’s article *The Relation between Written and Spoken Language* where the authors

emphasize how cognitive and social circumstances influence the form and the register of language (391). The text focuses on the parameters that shape the discourse (formal vs. informal, monologic vs. interactive, public vs. private) (305), and underlines a fundamental mode of American storytelling, which focuses on the realistic recalling of details and temporal sequences (394), unlike the traditional Greek mode of narration, which selects the details that are fundamental for the progress of the story or thematic consistency.

Although they might seem off topic, these considerations cover a role of a certain importance for the topic of the dissertation, proving that Frost's choice of inserting parts of text that openly diverge from the contingent situation is another manifestation of his understanding of the working of reality and the realistic representation of it. The scene represented in "Home Burial"²⁹ revolves around the crisis in the domestic privacy of a family traumatized by a tragic incident and portrays its consequent shift in family dynamics. The comparison of the passage with the rest of the poem shows how trauma shifts linguistic dynamics as well: the tone progresses from embarrassed silence (l. 1-9), to annoyance (l. 17, l. 20), to rage (l. 30, in which for the first time the tone assumes a heated connotation, as in 'she cried'), to inflamed desperation (l. 95-111). In addition to this, language, which does not assume the declamatory style of formal writing but loses the natural fragmentation of spoken language (as in another moment of psychological alteration, l. 38 'Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!'), remodels itself into a

²⁹ The same considerations can be applied to "The Death of the Hired Man," considering the few lines that Frost dedicates to the meaning of home in the final part of the poem, where Warren and Mary, the male and the female character, finally decide to welcome Silas back. The function of these meditative lines is fundamental for the progression of the story, since it is in the light of the husband and wife's agreement on the universal value of home that they make their decision.

fairly organic form, and passes from interactive, as in dialogue, to monologic. Therefore, both examples reveal Frost's masterly understanding and talent in the reproduction of the human psyche, with its doubts and hesitations, interweaving modes and forms of narration. It would not seem too forward to maintain that Frost makes the human psyche rise to the role of character, allowing the conscience to emerge to talk the same time, primarily to the self (notice the insistence on the 'I') and then to the interlocutor, coming back to the dialogic form.

The third and last category includes the compositions characterized by a mixed structure, such as "The Death of the Hired Man," "The Mountain," "A Hundred Collars," "Home Burial," "The Code," "The Generation of Men," "The Fear," which are clearly articulated in two parts. It is possible to remark that these poems begin with a narrative introduction presented by the external perspective of a heterodiegetic narrator, who sets the scene, which is abruptly interrupted by the presentation of the discourse of the characters, so that the poems deserve some particular attention. In fact, the sudden interruption of the narrative form and its replacement by dialogue creates a friction in the perception of the reader, who is tricked into thinking that the characters speak from an autodiegetic perspective, while, instead, their dialogues are reported by a heterodiegetic one.

Another narratological technique Frost uses frequently is the manipulation of the time and space of the telling, depending on the author's continuous references to portions of reality that are external to it.

In his volume *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*, Geoffrey N. Leech provides some interesting considerations on the double nature of the poem, which leads both an

internal and an external life. Leech points out that, in most cases, the world outside the poem is not reflected in the internal structure or content of the composition (189). Leech uses categories that are traditionally reserved to theatrical analysis to point out that, from time to time, the distance between these dimensions is reduced or eliminated, as in the case of direct addresses to the reader and eliminations of the fourth wall (191).

Frost's re-elaboration of the blurring of the boundaries between internal and external dimensions manifests itself through the continuous references of the narrating character to an external voice excluded from the telling, and in the recollection of events that precede or follow the narration. In fact, by providing an abrupt end for some of his poems, Frost leaves the reader with the impression that he is excluded from the telling of future events, which do not take place on the page. The first case can be observed in several points of poems such as "A Servant to Servants," as in

Our Willoughby! How did you hear of it?

I expect, though, everyone's heard of it.

In a book about ferns? Listen to that!

...

... And you like it here?

("A Servant to Servants," CPPP 66, 33-37)

or in the famous ending of the poem

I'd rather you'd not go unless you must.

("A Servant to Servants," CPPP 66, 177)

Not only does the interlocutor function as the receiver of the message sent by the narrator through questions (l. 33 ‘How did you hear of it?’, l. 37 ‘In a book about ferns?’), but it also covers the role of producer of the message, which is rendered indirectly by the astonished words of the narrator. The reader, challenged in the understanding of the several levels of dialogue, participates in only one part of the conversation but infers external elements, such as that the mysterious interlocutor is familiar with the space the narrator refers to (l. 33 ‘Our Willoughby!’). Similarly, the ending of the poem closes the scene on the inferred information that the obscure interlocutor has to leave the scene.

“Home Burial” represents the other type of reference to the outside context: the incidents causing the tragedy represented in the poem, the death of the child and, most importantly, the insensitive comment of Amy’s husband, refer to external time and space, which is communicated to the reader in order to let him participate in the situation.

In addition to this, it is also possible to maintain that the narratological reference to an external time and space is also reflected in Frost’s choice of cutting the telling abruptly, right after the conclusion of a fundamental phase, on an ordinary or apparently insignificant detail. It is necessary to specify that the structure of poems such as “A Servant to Servants,” “After Apple-Picking,” “The Wood-Pile,” and “Good Hours” is excluded from these considerations, since the telling of their monologic and introspective structure comes into existence and finds its conclusion within the lines of the poems, without abrupt narratological lacerations. The same considerations can be applied to “Blueberries” and “The Code,” which, although they present a dialogical rather than monologic structure, do not present this peculiar feature. On the other hand, poems such

as “A Hundred Collars,” “The Black Cottage,” and “The Self-Seeker” make use of this technique, as proven by the examples:

There now, you get some sleep.'

He shut the door.

The Doctor slid a little down the pillow.

(“A Hundred Collars,” CPPP 55, 191-193)

There are bees in this wall.’ He stuck the clapboards,

Fierce heads looked out; small bodies pivoted.

We rose to go. Sunset blazed on the windows.

(“The Black Cottage,” CPPP 62, 130-133)

You’ll miss your train.

Good-by.’ He flung his arms around his face.

(“The Self-Seeker,” CPPP 100, 237-238)

It is possible to develop the analysis of the closing image of “The Black Cottage,” with considerations that are equally valid for the other examples. The example shows how Frost ends the narration with a close-up on what might be considered an insignificant detail external to the dialogue that just ended, and collocated in the context in which the narration is set, creating a contrast with the discussion that precedes the moment, interrupted by the narrator’s urge to keep walking. This ending *à la Chekhov*³⁰ expresses

³⁰ Thus, as in any literary work beginning in medias res, the progressive unfolding of a story has an effect that is at once cumulative and also reflexive: earlier narrative strands are strengthened, the initial mimetic illusion is retroactively intensified, by later revelations. (Vogt 534).

the reference to the external environment, which, in all its banality, reminds the reader that the story does not end there, and that Frost allows him to participate in a small portion of a larger situation, an action that will progress outside the space and time allowed to the poem.

3.2 Language and realism

Frost's linguistic choices have been no less subject to critique than the rest of his poetic vision: the academic audience was as strict in the evaluation of his vocabulary as it was with the judgement imposed on his reproduction of the tone of conversation. Curiously enough, the first remark on Frost's use of language that is encountered in the reading of his *Selected Letters*, The 1913 review by Flint for Poetry and Drama, one of the first reviews of Frost's work³¹, expresses a fairly positive judgement on the author's style:

Their [of the poems] intrinsic merits are great ... It is this simplicity which is the great charm of the book and it is a simplicity that proceeds from a candid heart
(2410)

The first negative comments appear in the letters in 1914. If Pound's arguments mostly concerned the aspect of versification, other critics judged Frost's lexical choices poorly, undermining those aspects of language that allow the communication with the author's

³¹ The review refers to Frost's first work *A Boys' Will* (1913), nonetheless it is possible to maintain that, although the tone of *North of Boston* (1914) shifts from predominantly meditative to predominantly dialogical and dramatic, the dominant of the lexical characteristics remains the same, with the exception of the deliberate representations of colloquialism presented in the text.

broader audience. Frost responds to the accusations as follows, in the letter to Sidney Cox, January 19 1914:

The living part of a poem is the intonation entangled somehow in the syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence. ... Words exist in the mouth not in the books. You can't fix them and you don't want to fix them. You want them to adapt their sounds to persons and places and times. You want them to change and be different. (3327)

Bridges wants to fix the vocables here and now because he sees signs of their deteriorating. He thinks they exist in print for people. He thinks they are of the eye. Foolish old man is all I say. How much better that he should write good poetry if he hasn't passed his time. (3327)

In a literary world that seemed to have overcome the desire to preserve the bookish language that for centuries had dominated the educated circles, with the intention to present the reader with a product conceived to cause a feeling of decorous admiration for the text, Frost still had to justify himself for his desire to break with an antiquated tradition. The conversation still carries the remains of Champfleury's debate on Realism, in which Frost participates with his personal contribution: it is pointless to shape reality to conform it to an ideal *decorum*, since real life already deserves to be faithfully represented on the page.

Evidence from the text shows that, in fact, Bridges' critique verges on sterile, since *North of Boston* presents rather a neutral register, which respects the vocabulary of conversational language without particular exceptions³². Frost mainly reproduces the

³² See Reginald Cook's commentary in his article "Robert Frost's Asides on His Poetry.": 'Frost's voice is medium in pitch, rather low than high, but not guttural; and it registers sensitively shades of feeling –

contracted forms of the verb (“The Code,” l. 49 ‘I’d seen enough,’ “A Generation of Men,” l. 71 ‘It’s raining,’ and so on), typical of the dialogic conversation, and tends to avoid them in the meditative poems, where the extended form is predominant (“The Wood-Pile” l. 3, ‘No, I will go on further’ or in “Good-Hours” l. 3 ‘But I had the cottages in a row.’). Of course, the choice of the contracted form over the extended one and vice versa is also dictated by metrical constraints, but it does not seem inappropriate to attribute the decision to the respect of a specific mood of the poem as well as to rhythmic necessities.

It is possible to remark that the text presents few exceptions, which manifest themselves through old-fashioned dialectal forms, creative use of colloquial language, and contracted forms reproducing low colloquial speech or vulgarities.

The first case is, for instance, represented by this use [*italics not in the original text*]

There's a brook
That starts up on it somewhere – I've heard say
Right on the top, *tip-top* – a curious thing.

(“The Mountain,” CPPP 47, 50)

that the Macmillan Dictionary defines as an ‘informal old-fashioned’ synonym of ‘extremely good’ (1509). Even an apparently insignificant detail provides an insight into Frost’s realistic technique: apart from the evident use of alliteration, which recreates a sense of internal unity of the text, this particular use allows the author to convey

elation or scorn, exultance or sadness. It is the voice of a man whose ear is in key, reproducing at will Irish speech tones or nuances in colloquial idiom, or the blank-verse paragraph of Miltonic eloquence. It is a voice easy to listen to all day long, whether coming toward you, or heard as you move away, or “all the interval”.

information about both the character, who speaks with the spontaneity one can have with a peer. Another example of this sort is represented by

But there's *a dite* too many of them for comfort.

(“The Generation of Men,” CPPP 80, 200)

in which ‘a dite’ represent an old-fashioned and dialectal use of language. On the other hand, in “A Hundred Collars,” Frost stresses the creative nature of language rather than its ability to present relevant information. The attention of the reader is indeed captured by the neologism [*italics not in the original text*]

‘Professor *Square-the-circle-till-you’re-tired?*

(“A Hundred Collars,” CPPP 51, 50-51)

which has stimulated the attention of some scholars. In his volume *Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin*, Robert Faggen comments on the line concluding that the comment proves that Lafe, who utters the line, is to be contrasted to the professor, who is imprisoned ‘in the ethereal realm of teleology, rationalism, and form’ (145), lame in front of a man he considers ‘a brute’ (l. 57). Although it is possible to agree with Faggen on the fact that the sentence conveys a judgement on the professor, even though it seems more appropriate to move the focus from rationality to the inanity of the teacher’s profession, which teaches repetitive useless notions, it is necessary to point out that the function of the sentence is also metalinguistic. The difference between the two characters is filtered through their lexical choices, the former impertinent but creative, the latter (l. 57 ‘a brute’) formal and traditional.

In addition to this, Frost lowers the register of the conversation, though contracted forms that reproduce on the page the oral word or ungrammatical syntactic structures, as in [italics not in the original text]

Thinks I, D'ye mean it? “What was that you said?”

I asked out loud, so's there'd be no mistake,

(“The Code,” CPPP 73, 66-67)

or, along the same lines,

... “*Damn ye,*” *I says,*

“That gets *ye!*” ...

(“The Code,” CPPP 73, 79-80)

The examples exemplify all facets of colloquialism expressed in the text, from structural inversions of the traditional order (‘*Thinks I*’), mistakes in the morphologic flexion of the verb (‘*I says*’), vowel contraction (‘*ye*’), vulgar expressions (‘*Damn*’). The same use of contracted forms can be remarked in “The Generation of Men,”

Well then, it's Granny speaking: “*I dunnow!*

Mebbe I'm wrong to take it as I do.

There *ain't* no names quite like the old ones through,

Nor never will be to my way of thinking.

One mustn't bear too hard on the newcomers,

But there's a dite too many of them for comfort.

(“The Generation of Men,” CPPP 80, 192-200)

Nonetheless, it is necessary to specify that these examples of colloquialism remain a minority if compared to the language of the whole collection, which maintains a fairly standard level of informal, conversational speech, with no particular alterations overall.

Indeed, Frost's use of language also contributes to the recreation of 'the sound of sense.' Internal evidence from the letters shows how Frost's first references to 'the sound of sense'³³ appear around 1913 in the letter to John Bartlett, dated 4th July, where the poet uses these famous words:

Now it is possible to have sense without the sound of sense (as in much prose that is supposed to pass muster but makes very dull reading) and the sound of sense without sense (as in Alice in Wonderland which makes anything but dull reading). 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: audile imagination and they must be positive, strong, and definitely and unmistakably [sic] indicated by the context. The reader must be at no loss to give his voice the posture proper to the sentences. (2582-2594)

The fundamental elements of his theory, later addressed in 1914, had already been anticipated in the aforementioned review by Poetry and Drama, where 'direct observation of the object and immediate correlation with the emotion – spontaneity, subtlety in the evocation of moods, humor, and an ear for silences.' (SL 2410) were identified as the core of Frost's poetry.

³³ For a deeper insight into the topic see Marie Boroff's essay "Robert Frost's New Testament: Language and the Poem." and

In fact, Frost's realistic reproduction of the audible quality of language is also conveyed through some particular uses of punctuation, such as the use of the dash and of parenthesis, which shows Frost's accurate understanding of how language is not only composed of sounds but also of silences.

Internal evidence shows an abundant use of the dash, which William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White in their *Elements of Style* define as 'a mark of separation stronger than a comma, less formal than a colon, and more relaxed than parentheses' (20) are mainly used to introduce an abrupt interruption of discourse. The closing lines of "Home Burial," represent a good example of Frost's mastery of the dash:

'You – oh, you think the talk is all. I must go –

Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you – '

'If – you – do!' She was opening the door wider.

'Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.

I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!* – '

("Home Burial," CPPP 58, 116-120)

The role of the punctuation mark is here to stress the pauses in the violent fight of the couple, underlining on the page the abrupt pauses that in real life would be dedicated to the act of frenetic expiration or inspiration required to infer the words with the expected tone. The re-enactment of the pauses expressed by the dash also marks the difference of tone between the two characters: in fact, even if the reader had not been informed previously that the female character is crying (l. 113) it would still be possible to gather the information from the fragmented rising and lowering of the voice necessary to read

her lines. It is possible to remark that, while her voice undergoes the fluctuation of her sobbing, which prevents her from pronouncing the sentence in one emission of voice, the lines of the male character are fragmented to allow the inspiration of voice necessary to increase his tone of voice from aggressive to threatening. The same use can be retraced, in a variant that is softer and yet based on the same principle, at the beginning of the poem when Amy, irritated by her husband's insistence, confronts him with a certain degree of violence expressed by the words "What is it – what?" she said' ("Home Burial," CPPP 55, 18).

Frost's adoption of parentheses represents another distinguishing use of punctuation, which can be observed in "The Code." It is possible to maintain that, if the dash marks a pause in the pronunciation of the verse, the parentheses instead present the characteristics of an aside characterized by an accessory explicatory nuance. In fact, although the parenthesis contained in the text

I'd seen about enough of his bulling tricks
(We call that bulling).

("The Code," CPPP 72, 49-50)

does indicate a pause from the normal progression of the discourse, it is worth noticing that it presents a particular connotation that stresses the correct identification of the negative action of 'bulling'. Essentially, the reader perceives the tone of the aside and reads something similar to this rough paraphrase 'because, incidentally, we do call that bullying,' which implies a necessary pause of the telling, slowed down to introduce the consideration. The same observations are valuable for the parentheses reported in "A Servant to Servants" in the character's considerations:

But he works when he words as hard as I do –
Though there's small profit in comparison.
(Women and men will make them all the same.)

(“A Servant to Servants,” CPPP 67, 67-69)

3.3 Realism, versification, and rhyme

The quarrel with Pound on the use of free verse appears in the letters around 1913-1914, but some scholars continue to express their dissent in recent times. Frost's theory of ‘the sound of sense,’ explained extensively in his letter to John Bartlett, dated 22nd February 1914, in his letter to John Bartlett, dated 4th July 1914, and in his letter to Sidney Cox, dated 19th January 1914, has probably gained more scholarly attention than any other aspect of his poetry. Since they are widely known among the scholarly audience, it does not seem necessary to report their whole text.

On the other hand, it is important to contextualize the criticism addressed to the theory, which regarded Frost's choice of the traditional form of iambic pentameter over the metrical innovations of free verse. Many read this choice as a desire to identify his poetic choices with his reputation as a Yankee poet, representative of the *vox populi*, in what can be considered the great injustice of his forced exclusion from the movement of modernism due to formal arguments.

Nonetheless, Frost's struggle to achieve the modulation of everyday speech on such a traditional metrical form was understood by some other critics. Timothy Steele's essay “Across Spaces of the Footed Line”: the Meter and Versification of Robert Frost’

represents the most accurate presentation of the technical aspects of his verse, indirectly raising some interesting points on the aspect of realism as well.

Of course, Steele addresses the importance of Frost's theory of 'the sound of sense' as expressed in the famous letters to John Bartlett, 22 Feb 14, in which Frost lays the cardinal principle of his theory: recreation of the sound of the sentence as it exists in real life.

In particular, the text states:

I give you a new definition of a sentence: A sentence is a sound itself on which other sounds called words may be strung. ... The number of words you may string on one sentence-sound is not fixed but there is always the danger of overloading. The sentence-sounds are very definite entities. ... I think no writer invents them. The most original writers only catches them fresh from talk, where they grow spontaneously. A man is a writer if all his words are strong on definite recognizable sentence-sounds. The voice of imagination, the speaking voice must know certainly how to behave how to posture in every sentence he offers. A man is a marked writer if his words are largely strung on the more striking sentence sounds. A word about recognition: in literature it is our business to give people the thing that will make them say, "Oh yes I know what you mean." It is never to tell them something they don't know, but something they know and hadn't thought of saying. It must be something they recognize. (3425)

Steele maintains that Frost's desire to reproduce 'the rhythm of colloquial speech [...] with normative metrical structure' (124) required effort and concentration, due to the complexity of the task. Nonetheless, Frost managed to adapt his versification to the rhetorical inflection of the sentence, considering meter and rhythm as two indivisible

entities, as indivisible in the composition as in the act of reading, which does not allow their separation. Elaine Barry, in her *Robert Frost on Writing* reports the fragment of the interview with William Stanley Braithwaite, which, following some considerations on how the ‘sound of sense’ affects tone, goes:

W. S. B “[D]o you not come into conflict with metrical sounds to which the laws of poetry conform?”

R. F. “No, ... because you must understand this sound of which I speak has principally to do with tone. It is what Mr. Bridges, the Poet Laureate, characterized as speech-rhythm. Meter has to do with beat ... The two are one in creation but separate in analysis.”

(Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973, p. 153.)

The respect of the rhetorical quality of the word, as well as of the sentence, allows the poet to reproduce language realistically, in the respect of his metrical choices, avoiding the impression of uncomfortable affectation of the writer who imposes metrical patterns on rhythm to make it fit the verse (Steele 127)³⁴.

To do so, strong in the aforementioned belief that ‘words exist in the mouth not in books.’ (see p. 69) Frost takes advantage of the fortuitous imprecision of stress. In fact, thanks to its characteristics of autonomy from the stiff classifications of phonemics and

³⁴ For further remarks on Frost’s versification see Boynton, Percy H. “American Authors of Today: II. Robert Frost,” where the author concentrates on the metrical aspects of Frost’s poetry, observing how they changed from the writing of *A Boy’s Will* to the composition of *North of Boston* and *Mountain Interval*.

phonetics, which create the sense of the grave decorum of the classical hexameter or the French alexandrine, the stress adapts to the grammatical and rhetorical sense (127).

The difference is more remarkable in comparison with the most traditional of the classics, *Phèdre* by Racine, in which the rigidity of the verse is palpable. For instance in

Ariane, ma sœur ! de quel amour blessée

Vous mourûtes aux bords où vous fûtes laissée !

(Acte I, Scene III, 253-254)

the understanding of the text is subordinated to the visual structure of the verse, as proven by the clear division of the verse by the *caesura* after syllable number 6, marked by the presence of the exclamation (*ma sœur!*) and by the accented conjunction (*où*). The verse is composed by twelve syllables that were meant to be pronounced in clusters of six syllables in order to stress the pause on the *caesura*, which would confer the *gravitas* expected from the tragedy. The effectiveness of the *enjambment* connecting the lines is reduced by the necessity of the aforementioned pauses imposed to the rhythm. By no means is Racine's reality mistakable for Frost's: the form of the poem dominates its content, as the social structure dominates the characters.

Steele provide an in-depth analysis of Frost's use of monosyllabic words, since, as the scholar reports, they can be used both as metrical beats or off-beats (128). Indeed, their relevance is of primary importance within the framework of "sentence sounds," as expressed in the letter, in which the poet comments on how it is impossible to be mistaken in the reading of fragments from "Home Burial". Frost refers to Amy's

You, you!

(“Home Burial,” CPPP 58, 116)

pointing out that it would not be possible to pronounce both words with the same intonation. It would also be possible to apply the same considerations to the sentence that closes the poem

I’ll follow and bring you back by force. I *will* –’

(“Home Burial,” CPPP 58, 120)

where two forms of the same verb must clearly be read with different intonation. In addition to his previous example, Steele also proposes line 122 of “A Generation of Men,”

‘You poor, dear, great, great, great, great, Granny!

(“The Generation of Men,” CPPP 78, 122)

and line 32 of “Home Burial”:

‘Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t,’ she cried.³⁵

(“Home Burial,” CPPP 56, 32)

Apart from the examples of the influence of speech rhythm on the metrical structure, Steele also provides evidence for the opposite case, where meter provides the correct interpretation of the rhythm (130). The scholar uses these lines from “The Housekeeper”

Strange what set you off
To come to *his* house when he’s gone to *yours*.

³⁵ Steele reports that Frost proved to be fond of this last legerdemain, remarking of it to Cournos: “I also thing well of those four ‘don’ts’ in Home Burial. They would be good in prose and they gain something from the way they are placed in the verse” [SL, 130.]

(“The Housekeeper, CPPP 82, 15)

to show how the beat and the off-beats regulate the stresses, which are naturally pronounced with the right emphasis of the beat. The example proves that Frost’s poetry is more suited to be read aloud than to be silently read in the mind, in order to allow the voice to predict the correct intonation. In addition to this, the author adds the example of “Mending Wall,” where Frost repeats the same monosyllabic word in a line, stressing it in one place and subordinating it to a modifier later on

Where *they* have *left* not *one* stone *on* a stone,

(“Mending Wall,” CPPP 39, 7)

pointing out how the accent naturally falls on ‘they,’ ‘left,’ ‘one,’ and ‘on’ (131). The critic goes on by reporting the examples of a particularly creative and colorful use of language that has already been mentioned in the previous section of the analysis, the name that Lafayette reserves for the Professor,

Professor *Square-the-circle-till-you’re-tired?*

(“A Hundred Collars,” CPPP 51, 51)

This use of language shows how Frost occasionally inserts longer phrases in the line, which reproduce the flexibility of the line, able to contain words that are slightly too long in the same space. Logically, Steele also remarks on Frost’s use of *enjambment*, which is necessary when the metrical length of the line would not support the clause, as in

The hard snow held me, save where now and then

One foot went through.

(“The Wood Pile,” CPPP 100, 4-5)

The discussion of versification goes on by pointing out how Frost uses the two most common variants of the iambic pentameter, which are the trochaic inversion of the first foot and the feminine ending, the extra unaccented syllable at the end of a line. Thomas A. Sebeok reports in his *Style and Languages* that Jakobson suggested that these variants were criticized due to their scarce visibility within the line (363-364). This is the case of “The Generation of Men”

Making allowance, making due allowance

(CPPP 78, 122)

where Steele comments on the fact that while Frost merges the first ‘allowance’ into the iambic rhythm of the internal part of the line, the second time the word appears Frost chooses to arrange the word so that it presents a feminine ending (137).

In his doctoral thesis, Tyler Brent Hoffman provides a very well-structured counterargument to those critics who praised Frost’s theory of ‘the sound of sense’ as the perfect reproduction of language on meter, trying to expose what are defined as the ‘nagging inconsistencies and misunderstandings’ (121) of this transposition. The list of evidence from the letters the scholar provides in the text is too long to be reported extensively. Nonetheless, it seems worth summarizing the main concepts the discussion revolves around, which is the ‘blurring of the distinction between verse and prose, even though Frost almost exclusively writes verse,’ due to ‘Frost’s occasional disavowal of meter, coupled with his reticence on it’ (123).

It is evident that the accusations directed at Frost are more similar to a formalist *querelle* of a philosophical tone on what the form and content of poetry should be, than a real critique of the application of his theory in his work. In fact, Hoffman accuses the author of only defining his poetry in ‘vague, impressionistic terms’ (126) as in the description of the tones used in his “The Pasture” (CPPP 13), where the poet indicated five tones for the first stanza in his presentation of his work to the Browne and Nichols school (125):

I'm going out to clear the pasture spring; (light, informing tone)

I'll only stop to rake the leaves away (reservation)

(And wait to watch the water clear, I may) (supplementary, possibility)

I sha'n't be too long. – You come too. (free tone, assuring)

(after thought, inviting)

The opposition to the fact that one sentence only might present more than one inflection seems scarcely understandable, and is not justified in the text, which supports the idea by saying that these tone shifts would hardly be intelligible in real life (127). It is instead possible to say that Frost's poetry reflects the multi-faceted inflection of tone and voice in life and projects it onto the page, giving proof of a deep understanding of reality and its dynamics as well as of its faithful reproduction. Nevertheless, these two positions are impossible to reconcile, since they depend on two different *a priori*s and ideas of what reality is and how to represent it.

In addition to this, Hoffman addresses the role of rhyme in Frost's poetry, underlining its inconsistency of, which would be characterized by a certain degree of

simplicity that allows the doctoral candidate to dismiss it as *homoteleuton*, simple reproduction of similar suffixes at the end of the sentence.

It is possible to maintain that, even if this supposed phenomenon were to be considered true, it would still serve the case of this dissertation, entirely based on the assumption that less structure reproduces a better effect of realism.

A opening consideration on the fact that rhyme and a realistic representation of reality are not fundamentally incompatible is necessary: In his essay “Farinata and Cavalcante,” Auerbach spends pages commenting on Dante’s “Canto X” of *Inferno*, which, as is widely known, is written in *terza rima*, and he does not include the rhyme in the elements of diversion from Dante’s representation of reality. However, even if Frost’s verses were too unstructured and unsophisticated to conform to the academic definition of rhyme, their being closer to the form of *homoteleuton* would support the considerations of flexibility and malleability of the verse, which contribute to the impression of realistic reproduction of language.

Conclusions

This brief work is born from the curiosity caused by the *querelle* that surrounds Frost's poetry: some scholars manifest a tendency to privilege a metaphorical analysis of his poetry, underlining its figurative aspects, neglecting to consider the realistic aspects of his work, which nonetheless were discussed by Frost himself in his letters and several works. In fact, Frost remarked on more than one occasion that he considered himself a realist, underlining how the scholarly audience should come back to a direct, literal, reading, avoiding hermeneutic attempts based on speculation rather than a respect of the text.

First, it was necessary to provide a framework to collocate Frost's technique of representation in a specific context, correcting the assumption that realism is an exercise of perfect mimetic reproduction of reality in all its details. Frost's pleasure for 'ulteriority' does not have to be interpreted in the light of the definition of metaphor: Frost understands that the nature of language is metaphorical in itself and realistically reflects this aspect in his poetry, which focuses on the representation of a concrete reality rather than abstractions.

This brief study wants to represent a small contribution to the fundamental debate on the re-elaboration of the studies on realism, which dominated 20th century literary critique. The main source of inspiration for this work has been Erich Auerbach's study *Mimesis, The Representation of Society in the Western World*, which I discovered some years ago and has kept inspiring me ever since, not only for the relevance of its content, but for the depth of the mind that was able to conceive it.

The project is meant to be developed in a doctoral study on the same subject, which, in the attempt to provide an analysis of the realistic aspect of *North of Boston*, raises several questions. Since the dramatic aspect of Frost's poetry seems to have deserved more attention than, for instance, the visual one, it would be indeed interesting to develop this topic, among many. First, the subject needs developing in a comparative perspective, in relation with both the previous and the following collections, since, as already mentioned in the Foreword, Frost develops his use of the metaphor in his later works. In relation to this, it would be interesting to develop, within the framework of a diachronic study of Frost's metaphor and – perhaps – symbol, the visual aspects of his poetry. It would be compelling to compare the numerous collections with Barthes and Riffaterre's theory of the “effet de reel,” which depend on two fundamentally different conceptions of literature³⁶. In his famous article, published in *Communication* in 1968, Barthes determines that the realistic effect depends on ‘les détails inutiles [qui] semblent inévitables: tout récit occidentale du type courant, en possède quelques-uns’ (85)³⁷. On the other hand, Riffaterre, in his *La production du texte*, focuses on the intentionality of the author in the recreation of the details that produce the effect of realism (180). It is evident how the attempt to retrace the details according to both perspective would be interesting, even if, however, it would probably need two separate studies, due to the extent of the material to take into consideration.

³⁶ For further information on the consequences of the fundamentally different approach to the subject, see Raser, Timothy. “Barthes and Riffaterre: The Dilemmas of Realism in the Light of Baudelaire's ‘Le Soleil.’” *The French Review*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1985, pp. 58–64.

³⁷ [my translation] ‘the useless details [that] seem inevitable: every occidental tale, from present times, has some.’

The discourse on the visual aspects of Frost's poetry could also receive a valid contribution with a specific comparative study with the aesthetic categories of photography: the controversy over the 'photographic' characteristics of Frost's poetry have been discussed in Chapter 1, evidencing some confusion over the framework of reference. Indeed, the best contribution in this sense would be to find a valid proof of Frost's passion for the art of photography itself. Since biographical information reveal his passion for posing as the subject of the picture, it would not seem unrealistic to hope to stumble on the proof of Frost's interest in the technique of photography and analyze his work according to his personal perspective.

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I wanted to free my inner comedian and, apparently, for one day, I can't. I'll go for a traditional speech. My fellow Americans. No, No. Nothing like that. The deepest thoughts of my ghostwriters go to my psychologist for being with me all along this process of growth and to the pharmaceutic industry for producing anti-inflammatory drugs to cure my tendons, making me able to finish this thesis. No, not like that either. In fact, the deepest thoughts of my ghostwriters go to my friends, who have been close to me since I met them. *[Tear of joy]* The tenderness, the joy, and the perseverance you show every day gave me the confidence to accomplish this task. Therefore, I chose to dedicate my thoughts to you, because in your voices, in spite of my heart being resistant to encouragements, I heard such trust in me, in my intellect, in my abilities, that you won my insecurities and gave me the strength to be here. Not only today at my graduation, but at this point in my life. Your strength contributes to my strength. Therefore, it is with pleasure that I announce that the Oscar goes to Maria Emiliénova, who wakes up every day knowing that she will have to find a way to cope with my messages. If you say Nàbokov instead of Nabòkov she will scratch your eyes right out, even if sometimes we are very “Girls Interrupted” we always have loads of fun together. Then, I thank Lisa Chinellato: if they staged the Divine Comedy, you would be Beatrice. Together with them I thank Arianna Miglio, Beatrice Ceruti, Francesca Tini, and Valentina Frongillo, who, since we met in the holy corridors of the holy Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, really help me conform to what really matters in life: the standards of contemporary beauty. You thought me that an accomplished woman requires a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must

possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved. Call me Caroline. Can't wait to take a refreshing tour about the room with you ladies. And by this I'm being ironic, the world must know we are always engaged in topics of great magnitude. No frivolity. Almost. Last, but not least, I thank my friend Demetrio Antolini who would be glad, as always, to be swimming in a sea of female friends, and who refused to conform to the American system to walk with me the empty streets of a warm Los Angeles: no car means always fight the system. [*She concentrates and her tone changes.*] I thank Professor, Gregory Dowling for his help. I'll be brief here, because it is not in my character to be sentimental with serious material and I have just finished writing a thesis based on the assumption that synthesis is a virtue of realism. I conclude by saying that, as far as I am concerned, this thesis represents everything apart from the end of a path that, on the contrary, I intend to follow until the last day of my life. It might not turn out how I wanted it to be, but I will always be perseverant in my interest to find the truth behind first appearances. Curiosity is not just a part of the experience, it is the fire that makes life possible.

**Now and always: be curious, not judgmental,
God praise women with ambition,
think before you speak, read before you think.**

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