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THOUGHTS OCCASIONED BY TEACHING A FROST POEM

Walter Clark

A book of cartoons by Abner Dean has as its title and recurring motif, **What Am I Doing Here?** This has always struck me as a good motto for an English teacher in that it leads to questions about ends in view. "Why are my students here?" "What would I like them to take away?" A teaching life is marked by the periodic eruption of these or similar questions, giving one pause, and providing occasion for the fresh direction of teaching energies. I want to chronicle one such eruption. It does not begin in the classroom, but rather with some thoughts about a poem by Robert Frost. I will spend a little more than half my time here with that poem, of which I have grown quite fond, and then talk about my attempts to carry these thoughts over to the classroom. I do this because I am equally interested in the poem and in my attempts to teach it, but also because to do so may provide a practical test of the often-stated belief that teaching and scholarship reinforce one another.

I. Teaching Frost

Not too much attention has been paid to Frost's poem, **"The Gum Gatherer,"** which has rather a bland surface. The speaker, coming home from a walking trip in "mountain land" is overtaken by a man carrying a bag wrapped around his hand. The two of them go along together for five miles

And for my telling him where I'd
been... (9)
He told me a little about himself.
He came from higher up in the
pass... (12-13)
What this man brought in a cotton
sack
Was gum, the gum of the mountain
spruce.... (28-29)

This simple bucolic encounter is described in considerable detail:

He came from higher up in the pass
Where the grist of the new-beginning
brooks
Is blocks split off the mountain
mass— ... (13-15)
(The way it is will do for
moss.) ... (18)
He showed me lumps of the scented
stuff
Like uncut jewels, dull and
rough. (30-31)

The reader is at first lifted up by the abundance of things to see and by the rhythm, in which the swinging masculine vigor of the man with the bag mixes with the slightly different gait of the speaker:

There overtook me and drew me in
To his down-hill, early morning
stride,
And set me five miles on my road
Better than if he had had me ride,
A man with a swinging bag for load
And half the bag wound round his
hand. (1-6)

Gradually, however, some of the details coalesce to convey a picture of rural poverty. The gum gatherer lives in a shack illegally erected on timberland. He reminds the speaker of poor farmers who bring the sparest of cash crops to market, berries or a basket of eggs. He lives so high up in the mountains that the brooks there grind granite into moss instead of corn into flour, and the spruce gum that he gathers (to be chewed), though described in lavish terms, is in slight demand and brings him little return. A hunter-gatherer, he lives on the fringes of "agri-business,"—the wealthy farmers along the river bottoms and the big

commercial timber interests who close their lands for fear of fire. But in fact, what the gum gatherer collects does not harm tree or forest, which remain the same after he has passed. His economy is in another dimension.*

The speaker never comes right out and expresses the centrality of his concern with the power of the market, but the poem gives us enough to allow us to reach this conclusion on our own. Then we may recall one of Frost's favorite remarks to the effect that everything must come to market—and the fact that the long poem, **"New Hampshire,"** (written seven years later in 1922) which occupies a central position in his work, has as one of its main themes selling and the position of the poet in a market economy:

No wonder poets sometimes have to
seem
So much more businesslike than
businessmen.
Their wares are so much harder to
get rid of. (**"New Hampshire,"**
172-174)

Once we have made this connection it is but a step to see the gum gatherer as an archetype of the poet (bringing his uncut jewels to market). The gum gatherer comes from "higher up in the pass," closest to the sources of things ("toward heaven" as **"After Apple Picking,"** and **"Birches"** have it). Solitude and purity are the conditions of his life. What he brings is unprocessed, but is meant to be "chewed over." He lives farthest from "Rome," to which he must nevertheless bring his goods in trade. One is reminded of Thoreau's remark that the books come up (to the city), but the wit that writes them goes down (to the country). There is a poetics condensed into this encounter with the gum gatherer, and when we come to the final six lines of the poem, beginning "I told him this is a pleasant life..." we can read the speaker as addressing not only the

gum gatherer's condition of life, but also his own as poet. The poem as a whole appears in this light as a species of meditation in which the poet takes a pastoral encounter as the occasion for musing upon serious and sophisticated concerns, namely the market and his relation to it as a poet.

Frost's references to market are matched by the state of mind induced in Wordsworth by his contemplation of the fates of Chatterton and Burns:

We poets in our youth begin in
gladness;
But thereof come in the end of
despondency and madness. (**"Resolution and Independence,"** 148-149)

Each poem is structured about the encounter of the poet with a problem which he works through in terms of a pastoral figure treated symbolically. The difference is that Wordsworth deals with the problem in an unambiguously expository manner, whereas Frost's statement is embedded in allusion to the earlier poem.

In each poem one must ask about the relation of the speaker to the figure he encounters. We see that Wordsworth's speaker encounters the leech-gatherer in a condition of readiness ("peculiar grace" he calls it) brought about by his contemplation of the fate of Chatterton, and of his own mortality. It is the condition of the poet in the everyday world that Wordsworth contemplates, and especially the world in which time brings on the diminishments of age. If Wordsworth devotes all to his poetic gift, what will become of him when that gift has deserted him? In the case of Frost, the metaphor of the market fills a function similar to that of madness and death in Wordsworth's poem. It represents that aspect of the everyday world which threatens the poet's absorption with his gift. If the waters Frost walks along are those of the Pierian Spring (described in **"Directive"** as "Too lofty and original to rage" (52), they nevertheless suffer under the threat of utility—for what now grinds granite into moss will grind corn into flour when it has further descended. One comes down to the market.

*Richard Wilbur has written well on this poem. See "On Robert Frost's 'The Gum Gatherer'" in **Gone Into If Not Explained**, ed. Greg Kuzma, **Pebble**, vols. 14-15 (1976), pp. 141-143.

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Once we begin to look beneath the sheer beauty of description in Frost's narrative, we are struck by how talkative the speaker is, and how little of the gum gatherer's account of himself comes through unadorned by the speaker's explanations and additions.

He came from higher up in the
pass... (13)

There he had built his stolen
shack. (19)

We learn, in contrast, that the speaker no sooner meets the gum gatherer than he must be

...telling him where I'd been
And where I lived in mountain land
To be coming home the way I was
(9-11, my italics)

Much of the scene is imagined by the speaker, except for the lines about coming from higher up in the pass, and the display of the gum itself. Even this is embroidered by Frost in typical pastoral fashion— "...scented stuff / Like uncut jewels, dull and rough." The concluding stanza commences, "I told him" (my italics).

I told him this is a pleasant life,
To set your breast to the bark of
trees
That all your days are dim beneath,
And reaching up with a little knife,
To loose the resin and take it down
And bring it to market when you
please. (34-39)

We note the speaker's garrulity, and also a certain condescension in tone ("your days") that serves to distance the reader's sympathies from him. (This is not without precedent in the Frost lyric.) It is as if the effect Wordsworth achieves with "I could have laughed myself to scorn," is achieved in this poem by dramatic objectification. The speaker is shown to be out of touch with the gum gatherer, just as Wordsworth comes to realize that the reality of the leech-gatherer is different from the role of messenger which he had at first projected onto him. To realize this more fully, we can formulate versions not

employed by Frost. Consider, for instance: "I **thought** that this was a pleasant life," or, more strongly, "I **saw** that this was a worthy life." The effect would be to provide a much stronger judgment about the viability of the poetic life (the buried subject of the poem). It would be as if Frost were to say to himself, "I can pursue the muse, and keep body and soul together by marketing my poems." Not to put things so strongly is to leave the question still at issue and to show the poet's conclusion as somewhat tentative. "This is what I told him, but do I really believe it, or am I perhaps whistling in the dark?" The effect is far more subtle and tentative in the actual formulation of the poem than in the versions I have suggested. And the reliance on Wordsworth's poem is far greater than would have at first appeared. Frost places his tentative conclusion against the certainty of Wordsworth's. He expects the reader to be aware of the doubleness of Wordsworth's apprehensions of the leech-gatherer's significance, and at the same time he picks up on what sounds to modern ears like a certain gabbiness in Wordsworth to throw further doubt on the reliability of his own conclusion.

In each poem, then, there is a misapprehension of a pastoral figure, which is then corrected by the poet. In the case of Wordsworth the correction is overt. In the case of Frost the correction is embedded in the dramatic form of the poem. In the case of Wordsworth the misapprehension is an integral part of the thought structure and leads up to the "Aha!" of the concluding stanza. In the case of Frost the reader is made aware of the poet's misapprehension by the combination of the dramatic form, "I told him," which leaves in doubt what the speaker actually **thinks**, and the reader's awareness of the relevance of "**Resolution and Independence**" to "**The Gum Gatherer**." The best that Frost gives us is the **hope** that a solution to the problem may be possible.

Reuben Brower remarks of Frost's relation to tradition that his "poetry of nature rides on the older poetry, and finds its character by 'straining in the embrace' of another form and vision." This certainly applies to "**The Gum Gatherer**," which stands in relation to "**Resolution**

and Independence" as parody, bouquet and companion. As companion, it moves more briskly than the Wordsworth poem, just as the gum gatherer moves more briskly than Frost himself. It is useful to contrast the complexity of **"The Gum Gatherer's"** relation to Wordsworth's poem with Lewis Carroll's rude burlesque, "I saw an aged aged man, / A-sitting on a gate." Both Frost and Carroll make fun of Wordsworth's wordiness and his attempts to impose an objective significance on the old man, but where Carroll belabors Wordsworth with a pig's bladder, mistaking awe for fatuousness, Frost's poem dances with Wordsworth's, yet accomplishes its own business.

In Frost and Wordsworth poems the gatherer is taken as an emblem of the poet. The poet-speaker encounters himself in the guise of hunter-gatherer, struggling to survive in a more sophisticated economic world. (See also, Vergil's first *Idyll*, subject to Frostian emendation in **"Build Soil."**) These gatherers exist at the wilder end of the pastoral landscape, furthest from the city. We may compare Wordsworth's awe in the presence of the leech-gatherer with the altitude of Frost's encounter with the gum gatherer. Even more than Wordsworth, Frost implicitly acknowledges the existence of a pastoral tradition which goes back as far as Theocritus, whose description of the bowl awarded by one shepherd to another stands between the realities of rustic life and the work of Homer in the same way that Frost's description of spruce gum stands between the rather bad-tasting reality and the artifice of the pastoral tradition.

II. Classroom Application

When I had come about this far with the foregoing thoughts, I wished to test them in the classroom. Since I happened to be teaching introductory poetry at the time, I decided to assign the two poems, along with the Carroll parody, for a final paper. Our main focus for the course had been the sonnet, and I had pointed out that a sonnet comes into being in the society of its forbears, likening the situation of the poet to that of an adolescent *vis a vis* his parents, wishing to inherit what is good, but not at the sacrifice of individuality.

Hoping that these remarks about the sonnet might be suggestive, I asked the class to compare and contrast the Frost and Wordsworth poems. I hinted that both were concerned with the situation of the poet and asked whether there were any signs that Frost had **"Resolution and Independence"** in mind when writing **"The Gum Gatherer."**

I would like to report that the results were stunning, but in fact they were not particularly good. The following fragment is from one of the better papers:

Wordsworth's angst shines clearly, but Frost's poem, though similar in format, does not share that personal quality. Indeed, he writes as one comfortable with his artistic niche. Instead of seeking out this mysterious man, the man overtakes Frost on the road. He and Frost walk and talk together as equals. They live on the same terrain, but the man comes from "higher up in the pass," and so is not placed on an ethereal level.

The man, however, has no advice to dispense, but artistic commiseration to share. He lives "where the grist of the new-beginning brooks / Is blocks split off the mountain mass." In essence, the man comes from the source—where the water is purest. Consequently, as is later evident, the man's outlook is aligned with Frost's. It is up in the pass that the man has built a "stolen shack." The rest of the stanza is ambiguous. It would seem that these "lumber folk" are middle class Philistines who are threatened by independent existence and are hostile to him.

Although this is from quite a good paper, other papers did not come up to it, and many student evaluations at the end of the semester questioned the value of the assignment.

The experience led me to ask myself questions about what I thought I was doing and why. I started from the premise that it was worth trying to say the sorts of things I have written about in the first part of this paper—leaving aside the question of their validity. But I asked myself whether I should be trying to convey

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them to an introductory class. I asked myself about economy of means and ends in view and especially about generalizability. I had thought that our discussions of the role of tradition (though I had not used that term) with respect to the sonnet would prepare the class to see Frost's dealings with Wordsworth as a case of an individual poet making use of a forbear. But, in fact, no student writer dealt with this. I realized that what I had thought of as generalizable learning about how tradition operates had not been assimilated as usable knowledge. The students might be able to deal with specific questions about relations between sonnets on a test, but as a teacher I had not succeeded in altering their way of seeing poetry with respect to tradition.

This perception led me to ask myself how important I thought it was that their perceptions should be altered in this respect. How important is it to see a poem as partaking of, and in part shaped by, tradition? It occurred to me that the enjoyments yielded by this kind of apprehension are rather sophisticated, and furthermore call for a literary background which these students had not yet got. I further asked myself whether the concept of literary tradition was not itself but a single instance of some more general understanding of tradition and its uses important for a student to encounter in the course of a liberal education. In other words, even the successful conveyance of a sense of literary tradition might be no more than a way point on the student's desired progress toward some broader understanding of the uses of the past.

Leaving these issues for the time being, I tried to list some of the things I would like to have shown these students about the Frost poem had I had time and means. It occurred to me that there were a number of **physical** things about the poem that I had only been able to talk about in class, but which would have made a much more powerful impression had there been a way for the students to experience them. I was struck by the importance of early morning in both Frost and Wordsworth poems and the impossibility of conveying the power of a spring/summer morning to a yawning, a two p.m. assemblage in a concrete basement room in late winter.

What does it feel like to swing down hill on a dirt road on a cool morning when you are in good health and spirits? What is the effect of matching your gait to someone taller and faster. Above all, what does spruce gum taste like? When I thought about this I brought some spruce gum to class. Only a couple of students were able to tolerate it for more than a few seconds. Thinking about this gave me a further insight into a poem. The realities that underlie the pastoral are often, in Hobbes' words, nasty and brutish. Pastoral artifice consists in covering these over with a gloss of beautiful decorative detail. The discerning reader appreciates the realities, the decoration, and the uses to which the form is put in dealing with issues of a more sophisticated sort than a rustic world affords. (See Vergil's first **Idyll**, for instance.) I had been expecting my students to see further into the poem than I had any right to, and that I had indeed seen myself. Spruce gum is bitter. It is an acquired taste. There will never be a big market for it. All this was waiting for my students to understand **after** they had tried spruce gum for themselves. Actually chewing it made the poem come alive in a way no amount of lecturing could bring about. When Frost tells the gum gatherer that "this is a pleasant life," there is a certain amount of irony, conscious or unconscious, waiting to be perceived. Is it a pleasant life to spend your time gathering something for which there is only a tiny market because most people regard it as too unpleasant to chew on?

In mediating on the experience the class and I had shared with respect to the gum, I realized that to a far greater extent than I would like, my role as teacher consists in responding to verbal representations with yet other verbal representations. I might say, "Think about what it is like to walk down hill in the early morning," or "Spruce gum is very bitter." I might draw people's attention to certain aspects of the poem, saying, "There is something odd about Frost's use of the qualifier, "pleasant" in "...this is a pleasant life." It would be a good thing if I could reduce this reliance on verbal representation in my classes. I don't want students to get the idea that poems are

caused by verbal representations and that their function is to give rise to yet other verbal representations. Somehow I need to find ways to temper the role of assertion. How? Handing out spruce gum is a case in point, and surely this must have its analogue in other poems. The case of "pleasant," seemingly more difficult to turn into experiential terms, is perhaps easier. All I have to do is to give the students the text with a blank where the word would be and ask them to supply the missing word. The student who fills in such a blank, however cavalierly, has committed himself. He is in a position similar than that in which we often find ourselves at times as moral agents where, having acted without much forethought, we reconstruct the motives of the action. In the same way a student who fills in such a blank will go to some lengths to find an interpretation of the poem that will justify his choice of word. This prepares the class for a consideration of the role of a word like "pleasant" without a teacher having to make assertions about its function. The resulting interpretation will have more life in the student's mind than one presented in a lecture.

Of course, it is not only the physical aspects of the poem that I would like to convey to my students. If possible I should like them to **feel** the emotional concern that propels this poem. This raises quite a few difficulties. I did not myself begin to become aware of the power of this poem until I realized the use that Frost was making of **"Resolution and Independence."** I might have dismissed the connection had it not been for my awareness of the importance of "market" in other Frost poems, in his conversation and in his life (the fact, for instance, that during his ten years in Derry, arguably the most productive period of his poetic life, he was unable to support himself and his family by the practice of his art). If I want my class to feel the concern behind these two poems, I need to talk at length about the Wordsworth poem, to show that Frost is making deliberate use of it, and to provide a biographical sketch of a significant part of the poet's life. This, of course, sends me back to the representational mode and also raises questions about the most efficient use of time.

Leaving these difficulties aside, there remains the fact that the questions facing Frost and Wordsworth came in mid-life and were of quite a different nature from those facing the students in my class. Is it even possible for college students to empathize with the mid-career crises of confidence faced by poets? My own feeling is that this difficulty is more susceptible of solution than the previous one. The problems Frost and Wordsworth were facing fall under a broader heading shared by college students, that is, crises associated with a change of state in life, and with the awareness of outside demands upon the self. Rather than asking students to imagine themselves in a mid-life crisis, I would ask them to see Frost and Wordsworth as finding themselves in predicaments similar to those faced in later adolescence. Unfortunately, the assignment I gave my class offered them no assistance whatever in reaching an understanding of this nature.

Let me return now to my own discussion of **"The Gum Gatherer"** as considered in the light of the foregoing remarks. I have just been arguing for greater experiential involvement in the learning process for the student, and questioning the value of too great a reliance on verbal representation on the part of the teacher. Yet this paper is itself a verbal representation, and the first part of it is a fairly representative example of professional academic prose. It seems to me as I write this that there is a certain disjunction between what I am trying to do in writing about **"The Gum Gatherer,"** and what I am trying to do in teaching **"The Gum Gatherer."** In writing about the poem I am spinning a web of assertions, hoping to achieve an interpretation or "theory," which the mind (my own and others) will find consistent and suggestive. That is to say, I hope that those who read what I have to say will find the parts of the poem in greater harmony with one another after reading what I have to say. And I hope that they will see things that they had not seen before, and/or see the poem as having greater intensity than before.

III. Teaching Implications

When I think about my reasons for

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being in class, and the students' reasons for being in class, I am not at all sure that what I have said about my essay applies to the class, or at least, applies in the same way. If it did, however, might it not make sense for me to write essays for my students instead of lecturing to them? The question of what it is to "teach a class" is being raised indirectly here.

When I try to consider in the most basic terms what it is that I want my students to take away with them (what I am trying to convey in class), the term that comes to mind is "competence." I am less concerned about the transmission of information, or even the stimulation of specific new perceptions. I would like my students to have learned how to look at things so as to increase the possibility of their seeing literary texts in ways that will give them aesthetic pleasure. From this perspective whatever remarks I may have to make about **"The Gum Gatherer"** are of interest or use chiefly as they increase the likelihood of my students' being able to do such things for themselves with texts we have not read in class. Given this aim, it strikes me that assertion may be of less value than interrogation. In order to acquire competence one must have opportunities to practice. It strikes me as less important for the students to get the inside dope on Frost than that they be given opportunities to work out interpretations of Frost poems on their own, and that their attempts be met with friendly criticism, which nevertheless focuses on the connection between their interpretation and the poem itself. It strikes me that for an introductory class poems that present relatively straightforward difficulties are indicated, as well as a teaching style that emphasizes student activity. This would seem to suggest that the aims of good scholarship and good criticism are not

necessarily those of good teaching. This is surely a matter that bears further looking into.

I should like to conclude by offering three general principles, by no means exhaustive or unassailable, which I believe my discussion thus far has earned me the right to at least place before the reader's eye. 1) The need for economy in teaching (because of limited time) means that the value of what is learned is to be judged partly in terms of its generalizability and partly in terms of its plurisignificance. The more birds one can kill with one stone the better. 2) The job of the teacher should be to provide the student with opportunities to learn **actively**, since what is taught actively is retained better. A corollary to this is that the best learning activities are those that are intrinsically rewarding. Teachers differ from scholars and critics in the following respect. The latter two invent and play games of a very high order. The job of the former is to invent games for others to play. 3) The roles of criticism and critical theory should be ancillary to teaching. The teacher who restricts his teaching to lectures on the interpretation of texts risks losing the attention of the class, and at the same time deprives the students of the very enjoyments which likely attracted him to the study of literature in the first place. If the class should be inexperienced in interpretation it is perhaps better to proceed slowly, but in such a way that the students are active, than it is to cover more ground by means of lecture. If critical theory is ancillary as far as teaching is concerned, it follows that teachers should judge theories of criticism (the "New Criticism" would be a revealing instance) in terms of what such theories have to offer the teaching process that will make more competent readers of the students.

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