Poetry, Politics, and Robert Frost

In memoriam Peter J. Stanlis

R. V. Young

Shortly before the death of Robert Frost, the editor of a selection of critical essays on the poet summarized the case for his prosecution as politically retrograde: “When, during the Thirties, poetry discovered a whole new reality in the political liberalism of the time, Frost became even more removed from the intellectual center of things. He seemed stubbornly—even querulously—conservative, going so far as to raise a dissenting voice against Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, sounding in ‘Build Soil’ (1932) like member of the Republican Party, and directing more and more Yankee wit against socialism in government.”¹

Malcolm Cowley, who once enjoyed something like magisterial status in American letters, reveals even more shock with Frost’s outlook:

Unlike the great Yankees of an earlier age, he is opposed to innovations in art, ethics, science, industry or politics. Thus, in one of his longer blank-verse monologues, he bridles when he hears a “New York alec” discussing Freudian psychology, which Frost dismisses as “the new school of the pseudo-phallic.” Elsewhere he objects to researches in animal behavior (which he calls “instituting downward comparisons”), to new inventions (saying ingenuity should be held in check) and even to the theory of evolution—or at least he ridicules one farmer who speaks of it admiringly, whereas he sympathizes with another who stops him on the road to say: “The trouble with the Mid-Victorians / Seems to have been a man named John L. Darwin.”²

It is difficult to maintain equanimity in the face of such blasphemy: a poet who raises objections to the New Deal, Freud, and even the theory of evolution!

The generally accepted account of Frost has hardly been improved by the passing of half a century. His work has hardly been noticed by postmodernists, and there has been surprisingly little academic discussion of his

R. V. Young is editor of Modern Age.
work over the past few decades. Younger scholars who have sought to show that Frost is “an infinitely more subtle and nuanced poet than one had previously supposed” have, unsurprisingly, interpreted these favorable terms to imply an agenda “essentially progressivist” in intent.3

Nevertheless, the late Peter Stanlis left us the means to understand Frost’s thought and its relationship to his poetry with considerably more intellectual sophistication and interpretive tact than is exemplified by Cowley. The key to Stanlis’s powerful reading is suggested by the subtitle of his profound and comprehensive final book, Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher. The lasting significance of poetry does not rely upon the poet’s engagement with the dominant trends of the moment—the “whole new reality” of “the political liberalism” of the thirties, for example. He need not—probably should not—be a philosopher in an academic sense; nevertheless, the poet does require a philosophy insofar as the term implies a considered vision of human nature and the human condition that provides a framework for ordering and making sense of human experience.

Peter Stanlis maintains that “dualism provides the whole basis of [Frost’s] total but unsystematic view of reality.” Dualism, Stanlis continues, “indicates the belief that reality consists of two distinct, absolute, and all-inclusive elements, most commonly identified as matter and mind, or as Frost preferred, matter and spirit.” As a philosophical concept, dualism opens a rich, broad repertoire of possible meanings and aids to reflection. Applied to poetry as such, dualism provides a way of thinking about the essential nature of poetry and imaginative literature in general as well as offering a grasp of the means by which poetry can be fruitfully political without compromising its specifically poetic integrity. Thus understood, it becomes clear why imaginative literature is characteristically conservative in its political implications, and Robert Frost emerges as an exemplary figure.

When Frost is considered in political terms, it is poems like “Build Soil—A Political Pastoral” and “The Lesson for Today” that come to mind. Apparently it is “Build Soil” that makes the poet sound like “a member of the Republican Party,” presumably for verses such as these:

Is socialism needed, do you think?

We have it now. For socialism is
An element in any government.
There’s no such thing as socialism
pure—
Except as an abstraction of the mind.
There’s only democratic socialism,
Monarchic socialism,
oligarchic—
The last being what they seem to
have in Russia.
You often get it most in monarchy,
Least in democracy. In practice,
pure,
I don’t know what it would be.
No one knows.3 (67–77)

This hardly seems to be an attack of great ferocity on the New Deal, nor yet an unqualified endorsement of big business and laissez-faire capitalism. A recognition that there is an “element” of “socialism” in every government, but that it is never “pure,” seems an unexceptionable observation of developing political realities and far more perspicacious than the revolutionary enthusiasms of poets “closer to the intellectual center of things” in 1932.

The liberal attack on Frost as “stubbornly—even querulously—conservative” seems odd coming from those who stridently—not to
say “querulously”—demand that the poet serve as a proponent of the approved opinions of the day. Such commentators are first mistaken in their assessment of the man Robert Frost’s actual political opinions, demonstrable from various letters and occasional prose pieces; worse, they are wrong in the assumption that the business of interpretation is to ferret out the personal views of the poet and judge the poems according to the political standards currently espoused by the critic and (of course!) all right-thinking persons. Liberal, more properly progressive, critics are correct, however, in a possibly unintended sense: Robert Frost’s poetry is irremediably conservative in the deepest sense of the term, simply because it is genuine poetry.6

The condemnation of “Build Soil” provides a clear example. In their eagerness to extract the scandalously unfashionable political opinions uttered by “Robert Frost,” the poet’s critics seem reluctant to acknowledge that “Build Soil” is a dialogue between “Tityrus” and “Meliboeus,” figures borrowed from the first of Virgil’s Eclogues. Tityrus has been traditionally identified with Virgil’s own pastoral voice, and the character with this name dominates Frost’s eclogue; hence the retort might be made that Tityrus is merely a spokesman for the poet. Granting in some measure the truth of this assumption, it must be noted that Tityrus hardly gets all the good lines. Here is Meliboeus reminding him (and thus Frost) of his actual status:

The Muse takes care of you. You live by writing
Your poems on a farm and call that farming.
Oh, I don’t blame you. I say take life easy.
I should myself, only I don’t know how.

But have some pity on those of us who have to work. (17–21)

If Tityrus simply is Frost, then the poet is offering a rather self-effacing, not to say sardonic, observation about the “Frost myth”: like Tityrus in Virgil, Frost’s Tityrus is also insulated to some extent from the political and economic dislocations of his time by his role as a poet. In contrast, Meliboeus is bound for foreign exile in Virgil’s poem because his land has been expropriated to pay off Octavian’s demobilized barbarian soldiers. In Frost’s pastoral, Meliboeus has been compelled to sell his property because of falling potato prices and contemplates subsistence farming in a more remote location.7

But in fact Tityrus, in both Frost and Virgil, is a persona, a mask put on by the poet in order to play a rôle; no matter how deeply the events of a poem are rooted in the actual life of the poet, no matter what his particular views of the public issues of the day, the poem is a fiction, a representation of experience that transcends both the personal concerns of the poet and the headlines of the time when it was written.

It is no mere whim that leads Frost to name his speakers Tityrus and Meliboeus: Virgil wrote when a succession of civil wars in conjunction with imperial expansion had brought the Roman Republic to the verge of extinction. There is in his first eclogue both praise for Octavian’s masterful handling of a national crisis and also lament for the human cost—with no small element of implicit blame for the chief political agents of the time. By placing the controversies of the early Depression years in the context of the Roman turmoil of two millennia earlier, Frost impels his readers to reflect upon the timelessness of the most timely and urgent matters of the present. It is a reminder that many of his critics have long chosen to ignore.
The advice that Frost’s Tityrus gives to Meliboeus is, to be sure, not calculated to please the progressive with his notion of social planning and government supervision of most economic activity. After dismissing the “five-year plans / That Soviet Russia has made fashionable,” Tityrus admonishes his friend to pursue his own scheme of withdrawal and self-sufficiency:

You will go to your run-out
mountain farm
And do what I command you. I take care
To command only what you meant
to do
Anyway. That is my style of dictator.
Build soil. Turn the farm in upon itself
Until it can contain itself no more,
But sweating-full, drips wine and oil a little. (230–36)

He commends “the beauty of his proposal,” which he calls a “one-man revolution,” because it does not require waiting on the “general revolution” (264–266). This is certainly conservative, but it hardly sounds Republican after the fashion of Herbert Hoover and the 1930s.

“Shepherd Meliboeus” only says that he will “probably” go along with his friend’s exhortations, and it is Meliboeus who utters the closing lines of the poem that strike many as excessively individualistic and even antisocial: “We’re too unseparate. And going home / From company means coming to our senses” (284, 291–292). In context, however, the grumpy Meliboeus is largely responding to his sense of being swept along by Tityrus’s rhetoric: “you’re going too fast and strong / For my mind to keep working in your presence” (284–285). In the figure of Meliboeus, “the potato man,” Frost seems to sympathize with the ordinary citizen who even in 1932 faced an overwhelming tidal wave of news, comment, and opinion on public affairs, urging him to join a movement, a party, or a faction and become politically active. Things have hardly improved in the age of nonstop news channels and the Internet.

“A Lesson for Today” includes a “political” passage that has escaped its context and become a favorite quip among conservatives: “A liberal is a man who won’t take his own side in a quarrel.” The speaker of this poem begins by voicing a certain skepticism about the doomsayers of his own time, who regard their own age as hopelessly “dark.” If he did believe them (and “was convinced that they were really sages”), he would seek the counsel of those who truly knew about the Dark Ages:

I should betake me back ten thousand pages
To the world’s undebatably dark ages,
And getting up my medieval Latin,
Seek converse common cause and brotherhood
(By all that’s liberal—I should, I should)
With poets who could calmly take the fate
Of being born at once too early and too late,
And for these reasons kept from being great. (6–13)

The attitude toward “all that’s liberal” is ambiguous or even ambivalent; and the political perspective of the speaker’s sly dismissal of poets who blame their own failures on the backwardness of the era is hardly straightforward: “We have today and I could call their name / Who know exactly what is out of joint / To make their verse and their excuses lame” (31–33).
As Frost ties his rural New England political dialogue to a classical “political pastoral,” so here he establishes “The Lesson for Today” offered by a modern academic on a consideration of the situation of a medieval “pedagogue” (21). He is sufficiently in earnest about evoking “undebatably dark ages” to work a bit of authentic medieval Latin into his own iambic pentameter:

Yet singing but Dione in the wood
And ver aspergit terram floribus
They slowly led old Latin verse to rhyme
And to forget the ancient lengths of time,
And so began the modern world for us.9 (14–18)

The medieval transition from classical quantitative verse (“ancient lengths of time”) to accentual verse as a minute synecdoche for the transition from classical to modern culture by way of the Middle Ages is a witty reminder that modern times and modern problems are not unique and unprecedented—a principal element in the particular “lesson” required by “today.”

Much of the poem consists of an apostrophe to the “Master of the Palace School”—presumably Alcuin, since he serves “King Charles”—with whose plight the speaker sympathizes: “The age may very well have been to blame / For your not having won to Virgil’s fame. / But no one ever heard you make the claim” (26–28). The purveyors of “lame” verses and excuses ought to reflect upon the conditions in eighth-century Aachen. Charlemagne bound his imported schoolmaster to as rigorous an educational progress agenda as any modern political reformer, and early medieval Christianity offered a view of humanity quite as skeptical as any modern existentialist. As Robert Faggen observes, “In ‘The Lesson for Today’ Frost linked science and religion in the way they both serve to humiliate man.”10 If modern man is intimidated by the vast reaches of “space,” which reduce us to “a brief epidemic of microbes,” the doctrine of original sin portrays us as “vilest worms” at the feet of God (68–83).

The apparently pungent political thrust comes late in the poem, when the speaker concludes, “One age is like another for the soul,” and then admits that Alcuin—the “Master of the Palace School”—has nothing to say, save what the modern poet ascribes to him. Yet despite the essential similarity among men in all ages, there are distinctions:

I’m liberal. You, you aristocrat,
Won’t know exactly what I mean by that.
I mean so altruistically moral
I never take my own side in a quarrel. (120–123)

“Liberal” in this context is not unlike “socialism” in “Build Soil”: it is part of the modern condition. Compared to the denizens of Charlemagne’s court in the Dark Ages, everyone in the twentieth century, liberal and conservative alike, is liberal insofar as he is not feudal; that is, he acknowledges a system of laws and political arrangements that supersede merely personal loyalties in the disposition of state power.

On the other hand, this speaker can certainly not be identified with Frost, who would deprecate the degeneration of liberality into liberalism’s lack of principle. In Stanlis’s words, “Frost believed that one of the practical consequences of the indecisiveness of political liberalism is that it encourages convinced revolutionaries imbued with totalitarian ideology that nations infused with a liberal credo will not resist their aggression.”11
And yet the poem is, finally, profoundly conservative, but not on account of a shrewd quip at the expense of New Deal liberals. It is conservative because it embodies the dualism (expounded by Peter Stanlis) that acknowledges the tension running through human experience of the world. Conservatism is not a political ideology set opposite to liberal or progressive ideology; conservatism is rather the realization that no ideology—no rationalized administrative system, no political program, no governmental template—can solve every problem or anticipate every contingency arising in the life of man in history.

Frost’s Alcuin cannot be a democrat, cannot be “liberal” in the modern sense of the word, because that simply was not a possibility in the historical situation in which he found himself. But if the age was “dark,” it is the essence of conservatism to accept what Providence offers and make the best of it without repining for a better set of circumstances: “You would not think you knew enough to judge / The age when full upon you,” Frost’s persona says to the Master of the Palace School. “That’s my point” (29–30). Nevertheless, if Alcuin cannot be liberal, he can demand liberality of the barbarous Frankish warriors in his charge:

O paladins, the lesson for today
Is how to be unhappy and yet polite.
And the summons of Roland,
Olivier,
And every sheepish paladin and peer,
Being already more than proved in fight,
Sits down in school to try if he can write
Like Horace in the true Horatian vein,
Yet like a Christian disciplined to bend
His mind to thinking on the end.
(87–95)

While the age of Charlemagne is divided from the modern era by an unbridgeable historical chasm, so that their social and political arrangements inevitably differ; in the most important ways men and woman remain the same, and the gravest political error is the presumption that the profoundest realities of human nature and experience are mere “issues” subject to systematic interventions of government bureaucracy:

Earth’s a hard place to save the soul,
And if it could be brought under state control,
So automatically we all were saved,
Its separateness from Heaven could be waived;
It might as well at once be kingdom-come.
(Perhaps it will be next millennium.)

But these are universals, not confined
To any one time, place, or human kind.
We’re either nothing or a God’s regret. (98–106)

These lines undoubtedly bespeak a sardonic dissent from the progressive political agenda, but not because of this or that particular program, much less on account of the liberal disposition to alleviate poverty and suffering.

The target of Frost’s disdain is the utopian notion that personal sorrows all result from social conditions and all are amenable to elimination by the deliberations of experts turned into policy executed by governmental agencies. Such an unrealistic expectation results from a failure to recognize the fundamental dualism of matter and spirit that makes us both at home in the world and pilgrims passing through it, both in love with the earth’s delights and perpetually frustrated by her harshness and her limitations.
The most prudent and profound political insight in “The Lesson for Today” emerges in the last line. The speaker is still addressing a dramatized Alcuin:

I hold your doctrine of Memento Mori.
And were an epitaph to be my story
I’d have a short one ready for my own.
I would have written of me on my stone:
I had a lover’s quarrel with the world.
(157–161)

The singularity asserted by the persona, his ambivalent relation with the world, is driven home by the singularity of this last line, one of the few lines in a long poem that doesn’t rhyme, a fact made aurally prominent by its position at the very end.

Men love the world and cherish it, but the affection is only partially returned, and it is never enough. Hence the “quarrel.” Worldly political platforms and economic systems cannot assuage our most intimate disappointments or alleviate our deepest sorrows; much less can they deliver us from death or save our souls. “The Lesson for Today” is conservative because it recalls this simple but crucial truth; liberalism degenerates into mere ideology by forgetting it.

But it is often the case that Frost dramatizes political realities most shrewdly and profoundly in poems that never mention politics in the conventional sense. In his introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson’s King Jasper, Frost mocks the use of “poetry as a vehicle for grievances against the un-Utopian state.” “Grievances,” he goes on to say, “are a form of impatience. Grievances are a form of patience.” His plea that Robinson might be allowed to devote his poetry to griefs rather than grievances was surely made on behalf of Frost’s own work as well. For many critics since the 1930s and into the twenty-first century have either dismissed some of his finest poetry as an insufficient “vehicle” for advancing the cause of utopia or have subjected it to reductive interpretations in order to advance the poet’s progressive bona fides.

Robert Faggen, for example, seems to regard the fundamental point of “The Death of the Hired Man” as biological: Silas having “outlived his usefulness . . . becomes a creature on the verge of extinction.” Warren is indistinguishable from Silas’s brother insofar as neither man’s “needs and interests . . . include charity toward those who cannot survive.” Mark Richardson complains that it is an instance of “poems . . . touched by an evident desire to codify gender rather than scrutinize it.” Richardson then proceeds to treat as serious criticism Frost’s impish remarks in a Paris Review interview conducted years after the composition of the poem that identify the wife’s feminine sympathy with the New Deal and the husband’s severity with the Republican view.

Karen L. Kilcup accepts basically the same “gender” dichotomy as Richardson, only with a far more favorable assessment. Adverting also to the Paris Review interview, Kilcup concludes that the poet’s intention is fully embodied by the wife, Mary: “Her most important task in the poem is to teach Warren and, by extension, the reader, especially the masculine reader, the value of sustaining relationships.” Poetic subtlety in our highly sophisticated era thus gives way to blatant didacticism: “Warren’s transformation mirrors the reader’s own, as the dialogue of the poem teaches us to value relationships over autonomy, compassion over economics, and feeling over thinking.”

Tyler Hoffman’s critique of Frost is provoked by the poet’s confidence in his control over the meaning of his verse: “Frost’s certainty that tones of voice in his poetry are unmistakably rendered illuminates his view of ‘authority’ in
writing—a view that contradicts the findings of poststructuralist theorists such as Foucault and Derrida, who pronounce on the absence of the author in print.  

Hoffman rebukes Frost’s unhappiness over a theatrical production of “The Death of the Hired Man” because the voice of the actor portraying Warren made the husband seem too “hard”.

As these remarks indicate, Frost believes that there is only one way to “hear” Warren in the poem, and that to hear him otherwise constitutes an “error.” However, there is nothing on the page that mandates the degree or quality of the husband’s hardness.

This critic’s insistence on the ambiguity of the poem is surely preferable to efforts to approve or condemn it on the basis of its compatibility with the feminist agenda or some version of social Darwinism, but his reliance on postmodern theory mistakes the nature of the intrinsic ambiguity in imaginative literature.

In their diverse ways, Derrida, Foucault, and their epigones assume that all “texts” are inherently unstable as a result of the inescapable uncertainty of language itself and its problematic relationship to “reality”—a merely hypothetical construct known only by means of necessarily unreliable discourse. Literature is equivocal because language and other means of representation provide no real access to a world whose actuality—even should it truly exist—forever eludes our grasp. We can never escape Plato’s Cave, and politics can be only the imposition of an arbitrary regime by the most powerful.

Once again, Peter Stanlis’s exposition of Frost’s dualism offers a persuasive and more plausible alternative:

Even the creation of form in poetry, one of the sustained passions in Frost’s life, cannot resolve dualistic opposites into a monistic unity. To Frost, a poem is only “a momentary stay against confusion,” not a permanent solution to any things “ordained to everlasting opposition.” The unity created by form in a poem does not result in a final or permanent unity in content or theme.

Although our knowledge is imperfect, it is not therefore negligible; and human reality is not merely a social construct. The ambiguity or equivocation runs through the heart of the individual, not in the world that exists independently of our perceptions, precisely because each of us is a convergence of matter and spirit. With our aspirations to ultimate fulfillment, tension and uncertainty are inevitable aspects of such a composite creature living in space and time. The ambiguity in poetry is less a matter of the poet’s losing control of his meaning than of his recognizing and representing the ambiguity inherent in human life.

Frost’s objections to the excessively harsh portrayal of the husband, Warren, in “The Death of the Hired Hand” may be seen to arise not from a resistance to any ambiguity or flexibility in the text but rather from the actor’s failure to represent the diverse elements in Warren’s character and his mingled response to the return of the hired man, Silas. One need only contrast this husband with his counterpart in another brilliant blank-verse marital dialogue, also published in North of Boston, “Home Burial.” In that grim depiction of a failing marriage, the husband clings as stubbornly to his stoical practicality as his distraught wife does to her obsessively inconsolable grief. He is not an evil man, nor even intentionally callous; but he is incapable of winning his wife’s emotional trust.
Tyler Hoffman insists that “The Death of the Hired Hand” provides insufficient verbal cues for us to determine Warren’s tone of voice in his initial response to the news of Silas’s return: “‘When was I ever anything but kind to him? / But I’ll not have the fellow back,’ he said” (11–12). “With the minimal marker, ‘he said,’ we are left with much to imagine,” Hoffman observes. “His question could be heard as indignant, peremptory, or beseeching, while still satisfying metrical conditions.”19 Certainly it is true that these words could plausibly be uttered in more than one vocal tone; but both “peremptory” and “indignant” seem unlikely, and “beseeching” is out of the question. The last is the tone of the husband in “Home Burial” trying to talk his wife out of her grief simply by asserting that it must be so.

We know that Warren is not like him, because of the interaction between husband and wife in “The Death of the Hired Man.” To be sure, his initial response is vexed, even exasperated; but an actor who has carefully considered the brief poetic drama in its entirety will also express rueful resignation in his voice as well. When the wife, Mary, hears her husband returning from the market, she hurries out to meet him lest he be surprised to find Silas in the house. Mary knows that her husband can be impulsive, that he might say something hurtful to the old man if taken off guard—something that he would regret as much as she. But she also knows that there is more to him, and to their relationship. If “he said” is a “minimal marker,” the lines that precede Warren’s initial words tell us all that we need to know:

She pushed him outward with her through the door
And shut it after her. “Be kind,” she said.

She took the market things from Warren’s arms
And set them on the porch, then
drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps. (6–10)

It is difficult to imagine an image that contrasts more sharply with the wife in “Home Burial,” shrinking away from the husband looming above her at the top of the stairs. The description is spare, but the intimacy of Mary’s gestures, bespeaking a full confidence in her husband’s fundamental decency and trust of her, is unmistakable. She knows that he can be impatient and gruff, but she also knows that he is a good man, responsible and charitable. Her confidence in him is vindicated at the end of the poem in the tenderness of his treatment of her when he must impart grievous news: “Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her—/ Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited” (164–165).

This is not a man who has been slyly brought around to a grudging “conversion” by the deployment of feminine power. This is a marriage that has lasted and thrived because the husband and wife love and respect one another and can talk through their inevitable differences, some of them matters of individual personality, some of them resulting from the varied emotional responses associated with the “codification” of “gender roles,” which are so obvious and unexceptionable to most men and women, while provoking a frenzy of indignation among the academic elite. The conversation of Mary and Warren that occurs between his return at the opening of the poem and his report of Silas’s death at the end is a mature discussion of what they must do in regard not to a social problem but to another human being, a morally and spiritually wounded man whom fate has flung in their path.
This discussion embodies the political substance of the poem and reveals that Frost’s remark about Warren being an embodiment of the Republican Party, Mary of the New Deal, was a jocular analogy rather than an identification. There is some discussion of the “rich” brother, “A somebody—director in the bank” (129), and how and how much he ought to help. Both husband and wife concede something to the other’s immediate response to Silas: Mary admits that he is “worthless” (144), but Warren observes, “I can’t think Si ever hurt anyone” (146). Neither “Republican” husband nor “Democratic” wife ever suggests, however, that there ought to be a government program to deal with the “problem.”

Their answer comes before these meandering reflections in an oblique acknowledgment—on Warren’s part as well as Mary’s—that the responsibility for Si lies with them for no better reason than his being there, needing them:

“Well,” she said, “he has come home to die:
You needn’t be afraid he’ll leave you this time.”

“Home,” he mocked gently.
“Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course, he’s nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came
a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.”
“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.”
“I should have called it
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.” (111–120)

I am loath to add my own sticky handprints to this splendid passage, which has surely been handled far too often and with too little delicacy, and yet remains one of the glories of American letters. Regrettably, my argument requires a few observations.

First, the finely turned oxymoron “mocked gently”: the reader (or actor) who fails to put the emphasis on gently has surely missed the point not only of this speech but of the whole poem. Second, it is the “sentimental” wife, Mary the “New Dealer,” who unflinchingly compares Silas with a stray hound. Of course no one can doubt that they took the hound in and fed him. Finally, and most important, critics have commonly emphasized the difference between the two “definitions” of home, but they are in essence the same definition. Warren is simply drawing out the implications of what Mary has said about the hound; far from correcting his words, Mary is affirming them from her own perspective. What is the place “you somehow haven’t to deserve,” but “the place where . . . They have to take you in”? Without ever saying so explicitly, it is clear that a husband and wife, in their comfortable familiarity and intimate trust of long-standing, have thus agreed that Silas must be cared for, and that it is “somehow” their responsibility to do so.

“A well-based and balanced tragic vision of life,” writes Peter Stanlis, “is of great practical value in politics, [Frost] believed, because it prevents men from having delusions about reality; it dissipates their unrealistic faith in miracles achieved through social systems, political programs, and politicians.” As a consequence, “Poetry was for truth about human nature: it was not a vehicle to be utilized in making propaganda for the advocacy of political solutions of social problems such as poverty.”20 “The Death of the Hired Man” is thus a profoundly political poem that never mentions politics as such. Rather,
by dramatizing the reality confronted by actual human beings in a concrete, compelling fashion, it reminds us of the limits of politics.

There are no statistics about unemployment and poverty levels “north of Boston.” Silas’s poverty and unemployment are not the result of an economic downturn or systemic social inequality, and they cannot be solved by government initiative or bureaucratic agency. Silas is a victim of human weakness and sin, of his own and most probably of others as well. The answer can only be individual and human: a man and a woman trying to exercise both common sense and patience, to blend justice and mercy as well as they can muster.

Robert Frost’s poetry is conservative not because of his voting record or party affiliation but because it offers an honest vision of the reality of human experience that all politics must respect.

2 “The Case Against Mr. Frost,” Cox, 39–40. The reference to “John L. Darwin” and the “New York alec” come from the poem, “New Hampshire,” 299 and 358, respectively. This charily rambling poem is designed to be, among other things, a humorous sketch of various New England Yankee characters, including the speaker. A sense of humor is what Cowley, who finds a reference to a man who thinks Darwin’s first name was “John” unequivocally favorable, seems to lack. For Frost’s serious engagement with the thought of Darwin, see Robert Faggen, Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997); and Stanlis in the work cited in n. 4, esp. 27–56.
3 Jay Parini applies these phrases to the work of Tyler Hoffman in the foreword to Hoffman’s Robert Frost and the Politics of Poetry (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), x.
6 See Stanlis, 277, on Frost’s conception of the purpose of poetry: “Poetry was for truth about human nature: it was not a vehicle to be utilized in making propaganda for the advocacy of political solutions of social problems such as poverty.”
7 Meliboeus goes on to suggest that Tityrus “use your talents as a writer / To advertise our farms to city buyers, / Or else write something to improve food prices. / Get in a poem toward the next election.” Evidently, Frost had arrived at a wry awareness of how superficially he was sometimes read that preempted Cowley’s snide attempt at condescension: “he is rather a poet who celebrates the diminished but prosperous and self-respecting New England of the tourist home and the antique shop in the abandoned gristmill” (Cox 45).
8 In the poem, Tityrus says he was “brought up / A states-rights free-trade Democrat” (429), and Stanlis points out, “Throughout his long life, Frost frequently stated that he was born a Democrat, that he always remained a Democrat, and that he would probably die a Democrat” (269).
9 The Latin phrase seems to have been distilled from two lines of “Levis exsurgit zephyrus,” Die Cambridge Lieder, ed. Karl Strecker (Berlin: MGH, 1926), 116–17, no. 40. It is also available in Helen Waddell, Medieval Latin Lyrics (London: Constable and Company, 1929), 156–57. Both editions include an English translation.
10 Faggen, Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin, 250.
11 Stanlis, Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher, 264.
16 Hoffman, Robert Frost and the Politics of Poetry, 88.
17 Ibid., 103.
18 Stanlis, Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher, 6–7. Stanlis adds further on, “Frost believed that the great mysteries of life have no permanent or final answers in the temporal life of man, that something must always be left to God.”
19 Hoffman, Robert Frost and the Politics of Poetry, 103.
20 Stanlis, Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher, 253, 277.