FROST'S "THE FEAR": UNFINISHED SENTENCES, UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

by Laurence Perrine

I

Amy Lowell's notorious misinterpretation of Robert Frost's poem "The Fear,"[1] in which (she tells us) the protagonist comes face to face with her first husband at the end of the poem and is possibly killed by him,[2] had always seemed to me simply a bizarre critical aberration until I assigned the poem for study in a graduate seminar and found my brightest students as confused about its ending as Lowell. This led me to review the criticism of the poem, where I found that, although Lowell had been firmly put in her place (most particularly by Louis Untermeyer),[3] there remained sufficient disagreement among commentators about various aspects of the poem as to justify a fuller examination than has previously been given it.

Of all Frost's "New England eclogues," none probes more deeply or renders more sharply a single human emotion than "The Fear." The poem's sharp emotional definition is derived, however, from a syntax of mystery. From a single briefly presented incident, the reader must infer a large set of relationships: psychological, emotional, and factual.

The mystery of the poem arises principally from four sources. First, the poem concerns a woman's relationship with two men—Joel, with whom she is currently living, and an unnamed man with whom she had been earlier involved. The exact nature of neither relationship is ever spelled out. Second, the poem has a quadruple *in medias res* beginning. The woman's entrance into her relationship with each of the two men, the specific incident that gives rise to the dialogue and action of the poem, and the beginning of the

dialogue itself, all occur before the beginning of the poem. Third, "The Fear" is notably a poem of uncompleted sentences. In the sixty-nine lines of the poem devoted to dialogue, eleven sentences are cut off or left unfinished. In no other poem by Frost, of whatever length, is the reader left so many times to infer what a character would have said had he been allowed or able to finish his thought. Fourth, the ending of the poem, though vividly rendered, calls again upon the reader to infer exactly what has happened.

My procedure will be, first, simply to go through the poem making those inferences which for me best explain the data presented, then to discuss the poem more generally, concentrating on those issues about which there has been critical disagreement.

For ease of discussion I must state a major inference at the onset. The unnamed man in the woman's life, whose vengeance she so fears, is the husband she has deserted; she is not married to Joel. I shall try to justify this inference later.

II

The action of the poem begins with a restive horse in a barn and the lurching shadows of a man and woman thrown larger than life on a nearby farmhouse. The scene at once establishes a mood of nervous tension which will increase until the poem's climax. We do not learn the reason for the horse's uneasiness until line 73, three-quarters deep into the poem. The woman, driving herself and Joel home in their gig, frightened by something seen by the road, had whipped the horse up just before turning into the barnyard.

The woman's first words to Joel—as shown by their unreferenced "it"—continue a dialogue already begun. "I saw it just as plain as a white plate . . . Along the bushes by the roadside." Joel had asked why she whipped up the horses, and this continues her reply. Her tenseness is betrayed when she interrupts Joel's next question, "Are you sure—[it was a face?"] before he has finished it. Her reply to the completed question reveals a lack of sureness. "I can't [go in], and leave a thing like that unsettled." Unless she settles the matter now, irrational fears will control her life. Her remarks about returning to the dark house after an absence betray a similar conflict between rationality and irrationality. Previously she had rejected as fancy her feeling that their loudly rattled key "Seemed to warn someone to be getting out / At one door" as they entered at another, but this new terror seems suddenly to validate it. In the poem's first unfinished sentence, she asks, "What if I'm right, and someone all the time—" "Someone all the time" has been doing what? Spying on them? Watching

them? Yes; but for what purpose? And why so often? And how had "someone" gained entrance? She breaks off without posing such unanswerable questions to protest Joel's having taken her arm to hold her back. She is determined to settle the matter.

Joel says reasonably, "I say it's someone passing." She is unpersuaded. Why would anyone be out on foot on this lonely road at such an hour of night, and "What was he standing still for in the bushes?" This last circumstance seems especially sinister to her, though a foot traveler on a narrow unlit road with a horse-and-gig bearing down on him would have little place else to go. Joel, now fully aware that her fear is extraordinary, observes, "There's more in it than you're inclined to say. / Did he look like—" Joel is about to name the husband, but she cuts him short. "He looked like anyone. / I'll never rest tonight until I know. / Give me the lantern."

Terror makes her bold. Unless she settles the matter now, she will begin seeing her husband's face everywhere, looking out of trees and bushes. She gets the lantern for herself. She is determined, moreover, to face her husband alone, and orders Joel inside. "This is my business. / If the time's come to face it, I'm the one / To put it the right way." Put what the right way?—her reasons for having run off with Joel. She can place them in a more favorable light, she thinks, than Joel—and can do so more effectively without the embodiment of her betrayal standing by her side. (In both assumptions she is probably correct.) "He'd never dare—" she resumes, but leaves her thought unfinished on hearing a sound from the road. "He'd never dare attack me" is her meaning, but she is saying so more to reassure herself than Joel, for she clearly believes he might. Joel tries to reason with her: "In the first place you can't make me believe it's—" Again she cuts him short before he can name the dreaded name. "It is—or someone else he's sent to watch." The extraordinary swiftness with which uncertainty about *what* she saw has towered into conviction about *whom* she saw is the measure of her panic. Her comparison of what she saw to a white plate is striking in that a white plate suggests something entirely featureless; yet her imagination has already put features into it—and not only the features of a man's face, but of her husband's face. Yet her response to Joel's asking whether she was sure it was a face—"I can't leave a thing like that unsettled"—betrays a lingering uncertainty, and her response to his first query as to whether it looked like her husband is "He might have been anyone." But now her conviction is complete; even her reservation that it might be "someone else he's sent to watch" is immediately abandoned, for she no longer thinks of her expedition into the dark as one to settle what or whom

she saw, but only as one to "have it out with him / While we know definitely where he is."

Joel's next words, "But it's nonsense to think he'd care enough," are meant to be reassuring. But he phrases the remark badly, and the woman's sharp reply indicates that her relationship with Joel has not been all she'd hoped for. "You mean you couldn't understand his caring." But the outburst is momentary. She follows it quickly with an attempt at explanation and then with an urgent plea. The explanation contains two unfinished sentences. Her husband, she says, "hadn't had enough—" Enough of what? Enough of her. And then, "Joel, I won't—I won't—I promise you." Won't what? Won't let him take her back. She wants her relationship with Joel to be stable. "We mustn't say hard things," she says, indirectly apologizing for her angry outburst, and adds, "You mustn't either," showing she is nevertheless still provoked by his remark.

Joel attempts to play the man's rôle—that of protector. "I'll be the one, if anybody goes." But he still sees no reason for either of them to go. Caught up now himself in the intensity of her conviction, he rationally points out that the lantern makes them an easy target, and that, if the husband only wants confirmation of their being together, he's already had it. The woman ignores his logic and advances, Joel following half-heartedly.

Confronting the night boldly, she cries out—*not* "Who's there?"—but "What do you want?" Her terror is betrayed by her unawareness of the hot lantern against her skirt. Still convinced that someone is there, though no answer comes, she cries out a second time, and is startled when answered. Reaching a hand to Joel for support, made faint by the smell of her scorching skirt, she challenges the voice. It offers to come forward into the lantern light. She bids it do so, once more commanding Joel to "go back!"—a command he once more ignores. The steps advance; she "stands her ground," but her body rocks with fear. She is now so utterly obsessed with the idea that the man advancing is her husband that she cannot accept the meaning of what she sees when a stranger appears with a small boy. "What's a child doing at this time of night—" She cannot finish the sentence, but her meaning is "up and out on the open road." The stranger explains. She still cannot adjust to the reality. "Then I should think you'd try to find / Somewhere to walk—" "Somewhere more suitable" is what she means. The stranger gently reminds her that this country road, lonely as it is, is still the "highway"—the main road between two villages.

"But if that's all—" The "if" implies a lingering inability to admit that this *is* all, but the conclusion dawning in her mind is, "then I've made a

spectacular fool of myself." But she can't say that aloud. Leaving her thought unfinished, covered with confusion, she tries to justify herself to both men at once. She first calls on Joel, says, "you realize"—which could be addressed to either man or both—then provides the stranger with a rationalization of her behavior. Again she calls on Joel, this time for support. Her legs suddenly watery, she is unable to turn around. With the sudden release of tension, her bravado whistles out of her like air from a punctured balloon. She faints. The lantern goes out simultaneously with her loss of consciousness.

III

A few words about the woman. She is not a coward, not a weakling. She faces her fear with resolute determination. Her most characteristic mode of speech is the imperative—whether addressing the horse, Joel, or the stranger. In her relationship with Joel she is the dominant partner. It is she who drives the gig, she who gives commands. Joel may stubbornly or gallantly refuse to obey those commands, but it is nevertheless she who leads and he who follows. She is not paranoid. Unlike the protagonist in "The Hill Wife" or the speaker in "Bereft," she does not think that nature or people in general are in conspiracy against her; her fear is sharply focussed on one man: her husband. Nevertheless, her fear far exceeds the bounds of reason. It amounts to hysterical terror, unjustified by the facts of the situation. It breaks out too suddenly, grows too rapidly. She remains only rational enough to foresee that, unless she achieves some resolution, her fear will grow utterly uncontrollable.

How do we explain this excessive fear? First, it may have had some real justification in the character of her husband. A dominating person herself, she would hardly experience such terror had her husband been a man like Joel. We can imagine the husband as a man capable of physical violence. Second, she has left him without explanation, without having had it "out" with him, and yet believing that he still desired her. To the burden of fear she has added the burden of guilt. Her guilt and fear have rubbed up against each other for so long that they are ready to blaze forth in near-panic when provided with the slightest bit of tinder. The face glimpsed by the road is the tinder.

It should now be apparent why I believe the earlier man, not Joel, to be her husband. Though she cannot be proved to have married either, her extreme fear of retaliation is more explicable under the supposition that the first man has a legal claim upon her, and the extreme burden of her guilt is

more explicable under the supposition that she has broken marriage vows.[4]

There *may* be one additional element in this combustible combination of emotions—a lingering physical passion for her husband. This suggestion rests on slender evidence, and I will not push it. But her insistence that she can best deal with the husband alone, plus her repeated commands to Joel to "Go back" may indicate an unrecognized *desire* to be alone with him. Her "promise" to Joel that she will not go back to her husband, shows that the possibility of doing so has at least crossed her mind. Her conviction that her husband "hadn't had enough" of her *may* be taken as an unconscious confession that *she* has not "had enough" of him. We may hypothesize a stormy marriage, characterized by continuous conflict, but punctuated by bouts of passion gratifying to both. The grounds for such a conjecture are tenuous. Yet such a combination of fear, guilt, and unrecognized desire would indeed explain the explosion of irrational terror so vividly depicted in Frost's poem.

There are four reasons for thinking that the woman faints at the end of the poem.[5] First, line 69—"The smell of scorching woolen made her faint"—is anticipatory. Though "faint" is here an adjective, not a verb, the line predicts the conclusion both in its account of her mental state and in its language. Second, the lantern does not fall vertically and crash, as it would had she dropped it. It swings (from the rocking of her body); it lengthens (as her body crumples); then touches; then strikes, clatters, and goes out. She has been gripping it tightly. Were she still standing upright, it would not reach the ground. Third, a common human response to danger is to feel suddenly weak and trembly *after* the danger has passed. The woman's more intense response corresponds to the extraordinary pitch of terror she has wrought herself up to. Fourth, the extinction of the lantern simultaneous with her loss of consciousness provides the lantern with the symbolic function that its prominence in the poem seems to demand. First mentioned in the first two words of the poem, it is extinguished in the last two.[6]

Three critics (two of whom believe the woman married to Joel) read the poem as focusing on a deteriorating relationship between the woman and Joel, and find great significance in the failure of Joel to respond to her final cry.[7] But Joel fails to respond simply because the poem is over. She calls out to him.—She faints.—End of poem. Frost could, of course, have told us the reactions of all three males—the stranger, his son, and Joel—as the woman's body crumpled to the ground. No doubt each made motions and uttered exclamations of surprise or dismay; but Frost knew better than to spoil a good ending. One critic, commenting on her unanswered call, writes,

"Possibly, though we cannot know, he has impatiently turned round and gone home."[8] This would be inconsistent with Joel's previous behavior throughout the poem. He has stayed by her—loyally, gallantly, or out of male pride—throughout, even though his judgment does not endorse her action.[9] If we want to speculate about what Joel is up to after her final cry, he is probably stepping forward to break her fall. But Frost knew when his poem was over.

Joel, emotionally low-keyed, is a foil to the woman throughout the poem. Where she is quick to see offense in his well-meant remark about the husband's not caring enough, he simply ignores her stinging rebuke, "You mean you couldn't understand his caring." His next words are that he'll be the one to go out to face the intruder if anyone goes. His behavior nowhere in the poem suggests that this episode will cause a rupture in their relationship.

Except for the brief moments when the woman's conviction almost persuades him that her husband might be out there, Joel is the embodiment of common sense. His rationality contrasts with her irrationality. Even his remark about the husband that "it's nonsense to think he'd care enough," except for his unfortunate choice of words, is logical enough. Though technically not an unfinished sentence (for it ends with a period), its sense needs completion. "Care enough" for what? Care enough, after all this time, to spend the time, effort, and expense which would be required to search for her, perhaps through several states. —How long have the woman and Joel lived together? Long enough for them to have become accustomed to each other and for the initial glow of their romance to have worn off; not long enough for him to have outgrown a certain gallant protectiveness toward her nor long enough for her not to feel a real need of him. How long is that? Three months? Three years? Somewhere between these extremes would be my guess, but to pretend to any exactitude would be foolhardy. Where do she and Joel live? In a remote rural district of New England, far enough from her husband's place of residence as to render negligible any risk that they might meet him or a mutual acquaintance on a day's journey into town. (We do not know whether Joel has ever met the husband. What we do know is that she insists it's *her* business to have it out with the husband.)

Is it still necessary to refute Amy Lowell's interpretation? Perhaps one should leave no base untouched. The principal objection to it is that it transforms a psychodrama into a melodrama, and Frost was always interested in the former rather than the latter. He is interested in the psychology of guilt and irrational fear that begins with the woman's feeling that whenever she

and Joel return home after a long absence, the rattle of their key warns someone inside to leave at one door while they enter at another, and develops into an intense conviction that a vague blur she has seen by the side of the road is, out of the thousands of possibilities, the face of her estranged husband. But the details of the poem conclusively disprove Lowell's interpretation. If it *were* her husband, he would not be lurking in the dark beside the road but would be awaiting their return in the barn or on the front steps of the house. When the woman cries out, "What do you want?" the husband, presumably seeking this encounter, would not first remain silent and then reply "Nothing" from a point "well along the road," and then return. This behavior fits a stranger walking along the road who, after stepping aside to let the carriage pass, has resumed his walk and then, recognizing the full terror in the woman's voice, returns to reassure her. If it were the husband, she would recognize him when he steps into the light. If it were the husband, he would not have brought a child along (whom she also does not recognize) to witness his act of revenge. Nor would the husband produce the child, as the stranger does (not knowing the cause of her fear), as proof that he is not a "robber." The woman, were it her husband, would not say, "But if that's all—" and then attempt to explain away her fright. In brief, Lowell's interpretation has more holes in it than a colander.

In the first volume of his biography of Frost, Lawrance Thompson gives a full account of the incident which provided the materials for this poem. Though I would not advance this account as "proof" of my interpretation (I did not discover it, in fact, until after I had formed my conclusions and written the first draft of this paper; and Frost, in any case, often changed his "materials" considerably when transforming them into poetry), the account does generally confirm the interpretation I have given. The woman was a New Hampshire girl who "trained as a nurse in Boston, married there, later fell in love with one of her patients, and ran away from her Boston husband to live in hiding with her lover on a small farm" back in New Hampshire. The stranger and the boy in the poem were Frost himself and his son Carol, then five years old.[10]

NOTES

1 *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, 1969), pp. 89-92. All references are to this edition.

2 Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 122.

3 Louis Untermeyer, *The New Era in American Poetry* (New York: Holt, 1919), pp. 26-28.

4 Reuben A. Brower, *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p.165; Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 119-123; James K. Bowen, "Propositional and Emotional Language in Robert Frost's 'The Death of the Hired Man,' 'The Fear,' and 'Home Burial,' " *CLA Journal*, 12 (Dec. 1968), 157-158; and Eben Bass, "Frost's Poetry of Fear," *American Literature*, 43 (Jan. 1972), 611-612, all assume that the protagonist is married to Joel. —Amy Lowell; Louis Untermeyer; George W. Nitche, *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1960), p. 167; Frank Lentricchia, *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscape of Self* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1975), p. 70; Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), pp. 71-75; and Floyd C. Watkins, "The Poetry of the Unsaid—Robert Frost's Narrative and Dramatic Poems," *Texas Quarterly*, 15 (Winter 1972), 90, agree with me in seeing the earlier man as the husband.

5 Frank Lentricchia, p. 73, says, "The lantern accidentally hits the ground and goes out. The woman is left alone with darkness, frozen with objectless fear"; Eben Bass says, "She drops the lantern"; Lawrance Thompson, *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1942), p. 110, says that "the relieved woman almost faints, while the lantern drops from her hand to the ground"; Amy Lowell writes, "She comes face to face with her first husband . . . . Does he kill her, or does she merely think that he is going to do so? Which one is crazed, he or she? Either way, Nature has taken her toll." —Louis Untermeyer and Elaine Barry agree with me that she faints.

6 Frost first intended to call the poem "The Lantern" but was apparently dissuaded by Mrs. Frost, who thought the title not "a fit." *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, 1964), p. 89.

7 Richard Poirier; Eben Bass; Floyd Watkins.

8 Richard Poirier.

9 Amy Lowell and Lawrance Thompson, *Fire and Ice*, state or imply that the woman goes out to face the unknown man "alone"—an obvious misunderstanding.

10 Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years* (New York: Holt, 1966), pp. 344-345.