

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

Edward Thomas, Robert Frost and  
the Uses of Negation

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Edward Thomas and Negation

EDWARD THOMAS'S 'RAIN' ends on a line which tries to stare death full in the face. Lying awake, listening to the rain, hoping that none whom once he loved 'Is dying tonight or lying still awake/Solitary, listening to the rain', he focuses upon his own state of lovelessness, as one who has 'no love which this wild rain/Has not dissolved', this double negative giving way, in the poem's penultimate line, to a conditional positive, 'except the love of death,/If love it be towards what is perfect and'.<sup>1</sup> He ends the line on 'and,' an unusual thing for a poet to do, even in blank verse. Then the poem's final line delivers one more double negative: 'and/Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint', the doubling of the negative all the more emphatic because of the clause about the tempest being inserted between the auxiliary and the verb.

'Disappoint' is a negative because of its negating prefix, but it is one of those negatives which has got away. While 'disobey' means only not to obey, and 'distrust' means not to trust, 'disappoint' has long since unhitched itself from its positive. If death cannot disappoint, this means, in some remote etymological sense, that it can appoint. We can make good poetic sense of this. After all, each of us knows that we have an

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Thomas's poems are from R. G. Thomas (ed), *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas* (Oxford, 1981).

appointed time to meet our maker; but Thomas's poem is doing more than asking us to think more precisely about the word 'appoint'. Its double negatives, 'no love which this wild rain/Has not dissolved' and 'cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint', embody a power and control comparable with the rain's, whose saturation of everything generates this unflinching stare into death. Only by negation is it possible for Thomas to do this, to utter his own 'Nocturnal Upon St Lucy's Day'.

'Negation in judgment,' writes Julia Kristeva, 'like strictly linguistic (morphological or lexical) negation, puts the subject in a position of *mastery* over the statement as a structured whole, and in a position to generate language, which in turn implies . . . competence in selection and an ability to grasp infinity through a recursive movement. Negation is a symptom of syntactic capacity.'<sup>2</sup> And she goes on to revise Mallarmé's statement that 'a guarantee is needed: syntax' to read 'a guarantee is needed: negation'. The two are paralleled because, she says, 'Negation serves, along with syntax, as the strongest breakwater for protecting the unity of the subject and offers the most tenacious resistance to the shattering of the verbal function in the psychotic process.'

Edward Thomas repeatedly finds the kind of mastery which Kristeva identifies in order to enter and control the unknown and unfathomable. The forest in 'Lights Out', towering 'shelf above shelf' and completely 'silent,' he steels himself to enter through a stanza of negatives:

There is not any book  
Or face of dearest look  
That I would not turn from now  
To go into the unknown  
I must enter, and leave, alone,  
I know not how.

No psychotic, but a poet, Thomas exemplifies the parallel between the two which Kristeva describes as being bound up with 'the process of rejection which pulsates through the drives in a body that is caught within the network of nature and society.' The model is Freud's. In his paper on negation, *Die Verneinung*, written in 1925, Freud identified the centrality of rejection and expulsion to the emergence of identity:

Judging is a continuation, along lines of expediency, of the original process by which the ego took things into itself or expelled them from itself,

<sup>2</sup> J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York, 1984), pp. 124–5.

according to the pleasure principle . . . . But the performance of the function of judgment is not made possible until the creation of the symbol of negation has endowed thinking with a first measure of freedom from the consequences of repression and, with it, from the compulsion of the pleasure principle.<sup>3</sup>

In Thomas's poetry striking examples of negatives clustering in rejection occur in poems addressed to his father and to his son. The poem to his father, [P.H.T.], is short, just seventy-four words, and seven of these are negatives (*italics added*):

I may come near loving you  
When you are dead  
And there is *nothing* to do  
And much to be said.

To repent that day will be  
*Impossible*  
For you, and vain for me  
The truth to tell.

I shall be sorry for  
Your *impotence*:  
You can do and *undo no more*  
When you go hence,

*Cannot* even forgive  
The funeral.  
But *not* so long as you live  
Can I love you at all.

Thomas's editor notes of this poem that it presents a bleaker view of the father-son relationship than the facts merit, calling for support on the direct evidence that many of the father's grandchildren 'and one grand-nephew have told me that they regard this picture as a partial and incomplete one'.<sup>4</sup> To which one can only say that it is necessary for sons to regard fathers in a partial and incomplete way: which is how Edward Thomas sees his own son's angry relationship with him in the poem 'Parting'. The poem's occasion is the departure for the United States of Thomas's son Merfyn with the Frost family in February 1915. Thomas begins by defining the past as a landscape of negation:

The Past is a strange land, most strange.  
Wind blows not there, nor does rain fall:

<sup>3</sup> S. Freud, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, transl. James Strachey, Pelican Freud Library, vol. II (Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 441.

<sup>4</sup> *Collected Poems*, p. 160.

If they do, they cannot hurt at all.  
Men of all kinds as equals range

The soundless fields and streets of it.  
Pleasure and pain there have no sting,  
The perished self not suffering  
That lacks all blood and nerve and wit,

And is in shadow land a shade . . .

This vision is what we instinctively think of as deepest negation, the absence of all distinction and distinctiveness. At the moment of parting from his son, Thomas finds himself racked by a double pain. The first 'because it was parting', the second derived from the history of trouble between the two which is already, and will be ever more, part of that landscape of the past which has neither wind nor rain, and to describe which the negatives cluster:

First because it was parting; next  
Because the ill it ended vexed  
And mocked me from the Past again,

Not as what had been remedied  
Had I gone on — not that, oh no!  
But as itself no longer woe;  
Sighs, angry word and look and deed

Being faded: rather a kind of bliss,  
For there spiritualized it lay  
In the perpetual yesterday  
That naught can stir or stain, like this.

Thomas's editor is as interesting here as he is dull about the poem to his father, commenting that the last phrase 'like this' refers to the poem: 'Stir or stain' may refer to the actual manuscript (as well as the act of memory): the page in *BM* is blotted in a few places'.<sup>5</sup> When a poet blots out a word in his manuscript he rejects it, an even stronger act of negation than the syntactic or affixal ones bound up in 'no' and 'not' and 'un-' and '-less'.

Although both are expressions of negation we ought to distinguish between the two. Negation by blotting out is different from negating by grammar or syntax. Blotting out is annihilating rather than distinguishing between things. It was an inability to make such a distinction, the consequence of a bad dream, which led Andrei Bumblowski ('formerly

<sup>5</sup> *Collected Poems*, p. 139.

professor of philosophy in a now extinct university of Central Europe'), to develop a peculiar personal trait, described by Bertrand Russell in his *Nightmares of Eminent Persons*.<sup>6</sup> Bumbowski dreamt one night of Hell, presided over by a Satan who was *der Geist der stets verneint*, 'the Spirit of Negation', and who enlarges himself and his empire every time there is a rejection, a denial, or a prohibition.

He is surrounded by a chorus of sycophantic philosophers who have substituted pandiabolism for pantheism. These men maintain that existence is only apparent; non-existence is the only true reality. They hope in time to make the non-existence of appearance appear, for in that moment what we now take to be existence will be seen to be in truth only an outlying portion of the diabolic essence.

Awoken from his nightmare, Bumbowski realises that all Satan really is is 'a bad linguistic habit'. All one has to do is 'avoid the word "not" and His empire is at an end.' And he proceeds to put this realisation into action by avoiding all negation in his speech:

He would not say 'this egg is not fresh,' but 'chemical changes have occurred in this egg since it was laid.' He would not say 'I cannot find that book,' but 'the books I have found are other than that book.' He would not say 'thou shalt not kill,' but 'thou shalt cherish life.'

It may be possible to describe the world without negation but it is a primitive thing to attempt, and ultimately laughable, as the fate of the noble professor demonstrates. That negation is actually the most powerful tool which we possess was argued first by Francis Bacon, in his *Novum Organum*. Only God and his angels, wrote Bacon, are able 'at once to recognise forms affirmatively from the first glance of contemplation'. Man, in contrast, 'is unable to do so, and is only allowed to proceed first by negatives, and then to conclude with affirmatives, after every species of exclusion'.<sup>7</sup> Here Bacon is describing the process of reasoning whereby the road to yes runs through many nos. Milton's dictum that 'reason is but choosing' means, in Baconian terms at least, that Reason is choosing to reject and deny, knowledge being derived from a series of negations rather than affirmations. While George

<sup>6</sup> B. Russell, 'The Metaphysician's Nightmare', in *Nightmares of Eminent Persons* (Harmondsworth, 1954), pp. 38–43.

<sup>7</sup> *Francis Bacon: Works*, ed. James Spedding, *et al.* vol. 4, (London, 1853), p. 474. Cp. also Bacon's argument that 'the induction which is to be available for the discovery and demonstration of sciences and arts must analyse nature by proper rejections and exclusions; and then after a sufficient number of negatives, come to a conclusion on the affirmative instances' (p. 98).

Herbert praised the English language for its homophones *sun* and *son*, we, less pious, and more attracted by the dialectic process, might praise it more for its homophones *know* and *no*, a pair which poets have long played on, from Milton's 'know to know no more,' to, say, Robert Frost, in 'The Times Table', who clusters negatives together round the verb:

Nor I, nor nobody else may say,  
 Unless our purpose is doing harm,  
 And then I know of no better way . . . <sup>8</sup>

## Negation and Knowledge

To identify negation with knowledge is instinctively difficult for us to do, for negation, defined either as rejection or denial, seems to imply a kind of inferiority or posteriority. First comes the positive, 'to be happy', and then follows the negation, 'to be unhappy'. To be unhappy is a lesser state than being happy, perhaps even a later state: first we are happy, then we are 'unhappy' from this state. But whereas being unhappy depends upon the possibility of being happy, being happy does not depend upon the possibility of being unhappy. As linguistics scholars have long pointed out, negating affixes attach themselves only to affirmative, or positive, words, not to negative words. You can only describe yourself as 'unhappy' if you are a poet. If you are sane you can go insane, but if you are mad you can not, except from a psychotic's point of view, go unmad. However, the matter is not so simple for, as 'unhappy' or 'disappoint' indicate, the negation of a word reveals not the bleak and blank universe of indistinction which Professor Bumbowski's Satan embodies, but a universe of many more distinctions and complexities than the simple affirmative from which it derives. Here Tolstoy's epigram is useful. All happy marriages are essentially the same as each other; all unhappy marriages are different. Happy is a monolith, unhappy a range of possibilities.

When a negation moves from the level of word to sentence, the complexities multiply. 'I am happy' is a simple, single statement, essentially conclusive. 'I am not happy' has a boundless set of possibilities inherent in it, not merely from 'I am not happy, I am sad', to 'I

<sup>8</sup> All references to Frost's poems are from Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson, eds, *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays* (New York, 1995).

am not happy, I am ecstatic', but also 'I am not happy, I support Arsenal' or 'I am not happy, I am dopey.' Take a sentence much used in linguistics: 'Maxwell killed the judge with a silver hammer'. This is a monolith, a statement of total, detailed certainty which allows no rejection or denial of any of its elements: Maxwell did it; the deed was killing; the judge was the victim; he did it with a hammer; the hammer was a silver one. Now negate the sentence and enter the world of complex experience: 'Maxwell did not kill the judge with a silver hammer'. In speech, or in a written form which allows the use of italics, the negation opens up all kinds of possibilities: it was not Maxwell, it was someone else; he did not kill him, he only injured him; it was not the judge he killed, but the judge's wife; it was not a hammer but a gavel; it was not silver but stainless steel. Strangely enough, the one thing which the negation will not easily allow is the negation of the whole sentence. To utter it without any stress, or stresses, would be near nonsense; and if it were a line in a poem we would have to decide how to stress it to give it meaning—just as in the opening line of Robert Frost's poem 'The Self-Seeker', 'Willis, I didn't want you here today,' we need to think about the stresses: *I didn't*; *I didn't want you*; *I didn't want you here*; *I didn't want you here today*.<sup>9</sup> True, if the line were affirmative, 'Willis, I wanted you here today', it would still be possible to stress it in various ways, but in the opening line of a poem we would be unlikely to do this, accepting rather the affirmation as a totality. Syntactic negation worries us into trying to work out which elements are being negated, as in the second stanza of Edward Thomas's poem 'The Wasp Trap,' which uses negation to puzzle and confuse. The first stanza we can all accept, in its pure affirmation of the moonlight's effect:

This moonlight makes  
The lovely lovelier  
Than ever before lakes  
And meadows were.

Then Thomas moves into a negating syntax and the vision becomes a perplexing one:

And yet they are not,  
Though this their hour is, more

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Kearns discusses the problems inherent in the speaking of Frost's poems, in relation to his theory of 'sentence sounds,' in *Robert Frost and a Poetics of Appetite* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 68–9.

Lovely than things that were not  
Lovely before.

This means, I think, that moonlight transforms everything, negating all distinction, making the lovely and unlovely equally radiant, but the double negative makes the brain reel, trying to comprehend the complexity of the vision.

These are, then, two uses of negation which makes it attractive for poets. It gives them mastery and it gives their visions complexity. In these ways, at least, negation is superior to affirmation; not, as we might assume without thinking much about the matter, inferior and dependent. The assumption that negation is inferior, or secondary, is described by linguistic philosophers as the asymmetricalist position. Whereas 'I am happy'/'I am sad' are symmetrical constructions, along the lines of 'I am black'/'I am white', neither 'I am happy'/'I am not happy' nor 'I am happy'/'I am unhappy' are symmetrical. Laurence Horn lists the theses which underpin the asymmetricalist position:

- a Affirmation is logically prior, negation secondary.
- b Affirmation is ontologically prior, negation secondary.
- c Affirmation is epistemologically prior, negation secondary.
- d Affirmation is psychologically prior, negation secondary.
- e Affirmation is basic and simplex, negation complex.
- f Affirmation is essential, negation eliminable.
- g Affirmation is objective, negation subjective.
- h The affirmative sentence describes a fact about the world, the negative sentence a fact about the affirmative.
- i In terms of information, the affirmative sentence is worth more, the negative less (if not worthless).<sup>10</sup>

Horn's book, *A Natural History of Negation*, offers a constantly enchanting survey of attitudes to negation from Aristotle and the early Indian philosophers to the present day and is, in part, an attempt to mediate between the two camps, taking in, on the way, such extremists of the asymmetricalist position as the philosopher Bergson, who argues that negation 'is only an attitude taken by the mind toward an eventual affirmation' or those other philosophers, Arlen and Mercer, whose call was for us to 'Accentuate the positive,/Eliminate the negative,/Latch on to the affirmative,/Don't mess with Mr. In-Between'.<sup>11</sup> In the symmetricalist camp there are fewer forces. One might seem to be Bacon, with

<sup>10</sup> L. R. Horn, *A Natural History of Negation* (Chicago, 1989), pp. 45–6.

<sup>11</sup> Horn, pp. 62 and 45.

his call to proceed through negatives, but this, of course, is a procession towards the superior affirmation known only to God and His angels. More actually a symmetricalist is Austin, who argues that 'Affirmation and negation are exactly on a level, in this sense, that no language can exist which does not contain conventions for both and that both refer to the world equally directly, not to statements about the world.'<sup>12</sup> Freud incidentally, belongs to the asymmetricalists. His assertion, repeated over and over again in her various books by Kristeva, 'that in analysis we never discover a "no" in the unconscious', points obviously to negation's secondary nature.<sup>13</sup> The extreme asymmetricalist view, shared by Professor Bumbrowski and the unconscious of all of us, according to Freud, is that it is possible to describe the world without negation — that it is just a bad linguistic trick.

The practice of many poets reveals them to be instinctively symmetricalists, at least in the sense that they believe in negation's claim to have an absolutely equal status with affirmation. Indeed, some go further and are even asymmetricalists on the other side, as it were, their poetry seeming to embody a position in which the negation is primary and superior. It is not difficult to see how this philosophy should attract anyone who thinks about words for negation, as denial, is implicit in many of the words we use. This is obviously so in words with negative affixes; and almost as obvious in the case of those words, described by Gunnell Tottie as 'fuzzy negatives', in which we feel, as we use them, a sense of absence, loss, limitation, or decline.<sup>14</sup> Those very words, *absence* and *loss*, have such a connotation, as do such words as *short*, *bad*, and *sad*. It is arguable too that all words have comparable connotations. *Short* carries a negative loading because we think of it as meaning not tall or not long. So, most words have their meanings defined through their not meaning something else. *Long*, which is not a

<sup>12</sup> Horn, p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> *On Metapsychology*, p. 442; repeated by Kristeva, pp. 163–4. Freud's statement, coming at the end of his essay on negation is, in some ways, a logical consequence of his statement, in the essay's opening, about psychoanalytic practice, in which negation is absolutely ignored: 'The manner in which our patients bring forward their associations during the work of analysis gives us an opportunity for making some interesting observations, "Now you think I mean to say something insulting, but really I've no such intention." We realize that this is a repudiation, by projection, of an idea that has just come up. Or: "You ask who this person in the dream can be. It's *not* my mother." We amend this to: "So it *is* his mother." In our interpretation, we take the liberty of disregarding the negation and of picking out the subject-matter alone of the association' (p. 437).

<sup>14</sup> G. Tottie, 'Fuzzy Negation in English and Swedish', *Stockholm Studies in English*, 39, 1977.

fuzzy negative, is still a negative insofar as it means not short. Sometimes the negation is a simple binary one, as in *alive*, which means not dead; but often the negation is of many other possibilities. *It is raining* means it is not sunny, not hailing, not foggy, and so on. For certain poets the instinct is to distrust the affirmation as something too simple and to prefer to describe through negation. Edward Thomas's poem 'For These' is a fine model for such poetry. Begun the day he was passed medically fit for enlistment and finished the next day, he originally started it with a negation:

I don't wish for an acre of land  
But for content and something to be contented with . . . <sup>15</sup>

In its final version, however, it opens with three stanzas of affirmation, seemingly describing the heart's desire, or at least the heart's desire of a true Briton:

An acre of land between the shore and the hills,  
Upon a ledge that shows my kingdoms three,  
The lovely visible earth and sky and sea,  
Where what the curlew needs not, the farmer tills:

A house that shall love me as I love it,  
Well-hedged, and honoured by a few ash-trees  
That linnets, greenfinches, and goldfinches  
Shall often visit and make love in and flit:

A garden I need never go beyond,  
Broken but neat, whose sunflowers every one  
Are fit to be the sign of the Rising Sun:  
A spring, a brook's head, or at least a pond:

Then, in the final stanza, undercutting all of this, comes the true desire, now expressed through negation:

For these I ask not, but, neither too late  
Nor yet too early, for what men call content,  
And also that something may be sent  
To be contented with, I ask of fate.

'Old Man', although early, is one of Thomas's deepest explorations of negation's superiority. This herb of paradoxical names, 'Old Man or Lad's love', has a meaning which other, more apparently fragrant herbs do not, but the meaning is only reachable through negations which promise to stretch into infinity (infinity, too, is a negation):

<sup>15</sup> For the earlier draft, see *Collected Poems*, p. 152.

I cannot like the scent,  
 Yet I would rather give up others more sweet,  
 With no meaning, than this bitter one

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray  
 And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;  
 Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait  
 For what I should, yet never can, remember:  
 No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush  
 Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,  
 Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate:  
 Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.

## Negation and Repetition

According to some, Edward Thomas's negations actually reveal him to be an asymmetricalist along Baconian lines. He is, after all, an affirmer, one who uses 'litotes . . . words beginning un-, im-, or dis-' as part of a 'battery of understatement . . . by which he establishes a kind of affirmation'. He has the 'ability to affirm by means of negatives'.<sup>16</sup> These are Andrew Motion's words, but I could equally well be quoting a variety of commentators on Thomas's poetry. I quote Motion, however, because it seems clear to me that one major purpose of his book on Thomas is to disentangle him from Robert Frost: not that Frost is not also a denier who affirms. We have the word of one of Frost's best critics, Richard Poirier, for that: he identifies in Frost's poetry the use of negatives in order to affirm by an 'act of denial'.<sup>17</sup> But, Motion argues, the two poets achieve their denial-affirmations through different means. Edward Thomas 'whispers' while Robert Frost 'speaks aloud', to paraphrase Motion's discussion of 'Aspens', the poem of Thomas's which Frost prized above all others. While Frost 'habitually rationalises his experience in order to extract a moral from it', he writes, 'Thomas prefers to suggest and qualify, avoiding round conclusions'; but the multiple qualifications add up to 'completeness'.<sup>18</sup> 'Aspens' seems to present a fine example of this. It proceeds by negations, qualifying the sound of the aspens, which 'is not drowned . . . not ceasing . . . nor fails . . . And it would be the same were no house near'. Aspens cannot help but make the sound they do, 'and men may hear/But need not

<sup>16</sup> A. Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (London, 1980), p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> R. Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (New York, 1977), p. 84.

<sup>18</sup> Motion, pp. 73–4.

listen, more than to my rhymes'. All of these negatives lead into a final stanza in which Thomas pushes home the equation of his poetry to the aspen's leaves:

Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves  
 We cannot other than an aspen be  
 That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,  
 Or so men think who like a different tree.

'Ceaselessly' and 'unreasonably' are two more negations which help make the kind of complete statement which Motion praises in Thomas's poetry, a completeness which seems to be supported by the final stoical shrug of a line, in which all who have no taste for aspens are, if not dismissed, then put in their marginal place.<sup>19</sup> But the verb is 'grieves', a fuzzy negative if ever there was one, so if there is a completeness of statement here, it is a completely negative one. To gloss the poem as Motion does, as Thomas's affirmation of the Keatsian idea that poetry comes as naturally to Thomas as do leaves to a tree is to miss the point of that fuzzily negative verb. It is grieving which comes as naturally to Thomas as the losing of its leaves does to the aspen. Like many of his poems, and Frost's as well, the aim is towards silence. Just as the opening stanza looks forward to the last leaves dropping, so the body of the poem itself looks forward to the inevitable silencing of the smithy and the inn. At their height they could not, with their 'ringing/Of hammer, shoe, and anvil' and 'The clink, the hum, the roar, the random singing', drown out the 'whisper of the aspens', any more than Thomas's noise can drown out the whisper of a ceaseless, unreasonable grieving.

Freud's brief, powerful essay on negation, emerging from his exploration of the pleasure principle, picks up one element in particular which marks obsessive neurotic behaviour, but which is sublimated in 'normal' behaviour, namely the 'compulsion to repeat.'<sup>20</sup> Expelling objects, the origin of rejection and denial, introduces reality testing, whose aim is 'not to *find* an object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to *refind* such an object, to convince oneself

<sup>19</sup> 'Stoical shrug' is close to a phrase used by Ian Hamilton about Frost's poetry, quoted by Motion (p. 74).

<sup>20</sup> In 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Freud writes of the neurotic patient as one who 'is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past' (*On Metapsychology*, p. 288). This is the "'compulsion to repeat", which emerges during the psychoanalytic treatment of neurotics' (p. 289), which he develops in the essay on negation

that it is still there.’<sup>21</sup> Refinding is bound up with repetition, the compulsion to reassure oneself that one is real by locating ‘once more’ the world outside oneself.<sup>22</sup> When repetition is involuntary, out of one’s control, then the effect is disturbing, to be described by a negative in another of Freud’s essays, the *unheimlich*, or ‘uncanny’.<sup>23</sup> In his discussion of this phenomenon, incidentally, Freud makes the significant observation that ‘the prefix “un” is the token of repression’.<sup>24</sup> This integral connection between negation and repetition is a feature of Edward Thomas’s poem ‘The Long Small Room’, one of the many of his poems which explore an idea bordering on the uncanny. In this case it is the memory of something apparently disturbing which he was fascinated by, the shape of a room with a window at one end and a fireplace at the other, described in the first two stanzas:

The long small room that showed willows to the west  
Narrowed up to the end the fireplace filled,  
Although not wide. I liked it. No one guessed  
What need or accident made them so build.

Only the moon, the mouse and sparrow peeped  
In from the ivy round the casement thick.  
Of all they saw and heard there they shall keep  
The tale for the old ivy and older brick.

The last two stanzas set up an absolute negative, ‘never’, against an apparent affirmation, that ‘one thing’ is constant:

When I look back I am like moon, sparrow and mouse  
That witnessed what they could never understand  
Or alter or prevent in the dark house.  
One thing remains the same — this my right hand

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in describing the function of judgment as one ‘not made possible until the creation of the symbol of negation has endowed thinking with a first measure of freedom from the consequences of repression and, with it, from the compulsion of the pleasure principle’ (p. 441).

<sup>21</sup> *On Metapsychology*, p. 440.

<sup>22</sup> ‘The antithesis between subjective and objective does not exist from the first. It only comes into being from the fact that thinking possesses the capacity to bring before the mind once more something that has once been perceived, by reproducing it as a presentation without the external object having still to be there’ (*On Metapsychology*, p. 440).

<sup>23</sup> See S. Freud, *Art and Literature*, transl. James Strachey, Pelican Freud Library, 14 (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp. 335–76; especially the comment (p. 361) that ‘whatever reminds us of this inner “compulsion to repeat” is perceived as uncanny’.

<sup>24</sup> *Art and Literature*, p. 368.

Crawling crab-like over the clean white page,  
 Resting awhile each morning on the pillow,  
 Then once more starting to crawl on towards age.  
 The hundred last leaves stream upon the willow.

Again the negation is primary, the affirmation secondary. Never being able to understand, alter, or prevent is the one thing which the right hand can affirm, hence the peculiar final line which only avoids the narrowing down to the fireplace by looking plainly at the hundred last leaves streaming from the willow. Thomas himself recognised the oddness of the line, wondering, in a letter to Eleanor Farjeon, whether it had too much of a 'japanesy suddenness of ending'. But he kept it in partly because, as he boldly states, 'it is true'.<sup>25</sup> The real, if denied, focus of the poem is not the window or the tree, but the fireplace towards which the room narrows. The house is a dark house, so the memory is not of a roaring fire, but of a dark grate.

Thomas's impulse towards negation points to a profound entanglement with Frost's poetry, and a nearly equivalent entanglement of Frost's with Thomas's. I can understand why critics of these two should want to detach them from each other, arguing in various ways for the superior toughness of the one or the other, and there are many ways in which they are quite distinct.<sup>26</sup> My argument, however, is that this overriding force of negation pulls them more closely together than any of the finer distinctions which may separate them. What they share, through negation, is a modern grasp of the process of repetition. Kristeva, glossing Freud's account of negation, explains it this way: 'Rejection rejects origin since it is always already the repetition of an impulse that is itself a rejection. Its law is one of returning, as opposed to one of becoming; it returns only to separate again immediately and thus appear as an impossible forward movement.'<sup>27</sup> Something like this impossible forward movement occurs in the Thomas poem which I have just examined, 'The Long Small Room', in the crab-like act of writing. Thomas presents the clean white page as the equivalent of a life, with one line written a day, then a rest, then 'once more' the 'crawl on towards age'. There is a progress down the page, just as there is progress towards age, but the movement is neither forward nor back but sideways across the page. 'Once more' in this poem links the

<sup>25</sup> *Collected Poems*, p. 170.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, J. C. Squire's early contrast of Thomas's 'Celtic melancholy' with Frost's 'harder and soberer' nature; quoted by Motion, p. 76.

<sup>27</sup> Kristeva, p. 147.

movement of writing to the movement of ploughing in 'As the Team's Head Brass', in which Thomas watches the team plough and talks to the ploughman one minute in every ten as they reach the end of the furrow:

Every time the horses turned  
 Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned  
 Upon the handles to say or ask a word,  
 About the weather, next about the war.  
 Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,  
 And screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed  
 Once more.

But ploughing is not exactly analogous, for its sideways movements are more easily interpreted as a form of progress, from left to right, right to left, left to right. A better parallel would be the one drawn by Robert Frost with hoeing, in his dialogue poem 'From Plane to Plane', where Pike, the man who has 'hoed and mowed for fifty years' asserts his absolute refusal to hoe from left to right and right to left: 'I wouldn't hoe both ways for anybody!' and gets this reply from Dick, the college boy:

'And right you are. You do the way we do  
 In reading, don't you, Bill? — at every line end  
 Pick up our eyes and carry them back idle  
 Across the page to where we started from.  
 The other way of reading back and forth,  
 Known as boustrophedon, was found too awkward.'

## Robert Frost and Negation

Reading *North of Boston*, the volume of Frost's which he so admired, and *Mountain Interval*, issued in 1916, Thomas is likely to have been impressed most of all by the dialogue poems, and, more narrowly, by how much of these dialogues is underpinned by negation. There is something of this in the first volume's opening poem, 'Mending Wall', where the dialogue is ostensibly between the superior, if only because more articulate and thinking, view of the poet and the inferior, because of its smug traditionalism, view of his neighbour. The situation is a repeated one: 'on a day we meet to walk the line/And set the wall between us once again'. The neighbour is an affirmer, who gets to repeat his affirmation 'good fences make good neighbors'. Frost's counter view is an affirmation of a negation, 'Something there is that

doesn't love a wall', also repeated in the poem; and although the neighbour gets the last word in the last line, Frost gets the first in the first line. And the more intimate dialogue, the one with himself which runs through the poem, uses negation both for repetitive purposes and to give the poem the skewed, awkward syntax which negation frequently accompanies. In Kristeva's words, rejection is 'inscribed in an abundance of negative statements . . . or in syntactic distortions'.<sup>28</sup> So, the awkwardness of the poem's opening negative, 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall', is picked up again, in 'The gaps I mean,/No one has seen them made or heard them made' (ll. 9–11); 'There where it is we do not need the wall' (l. 23); 'Isn't it/Where there are cows? But here there are no cows' (ll. 30–1); and in the nearly clear vision which he gets of his neighbour's essential ignorance, 'He moves in darkness as it seems to me,/Not of woods only and the shade of trees' (ll. 41–2).

In Frost's purer dialogues, especially those between married couples, negation is seen to operate at the heart of human relationships. This is equally the case in happy and unhappy marriages. In the terrible doomed dialogue around the dead and buried child in 'Home Burial', we see first the husband moving awkwardly in syntax and sentiment until he says the wrong thing. The whole journey is one of negatives:

'My words are nearly always an offense.  
 I don't know how to speak of anything  
 So as to please you. But I might be taught  
 I should suppose. I can't say I see how.  
 A man must partly give up being a man  
 With women-folk. We could have some arrangement  
 By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off  
 Anything special you're a-mind to name.  
 Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.  
 Two that don't love can't live together without them.  
 But two that do can't live together with them.'  
 She moved the latch a little. 'Don't—don't go.  
 Don't carry it to someone else this time.  
 Tell me about it if it's something human.  
 Let me into your grief. I'm not so much  
 Unlike other folks as your standing there  
 Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.  
 I do think, though, you overdo it a little.  
 What was it brought you up to think it the thing  
 To take your mother-loss of a first child  
 So inconsolably—in the face of love.  
 You'd think his memory might be satisfied—'

<sup>28</sup> Kristeva, p. 126.

When his wife Amy protests that this is a sneer, he argues back that 'it's come to this,/A man can't speak of his own child that's dead', only to be answered by her double negative: 'you can't because you don't know how to speak'. The hollowest thing in the whole dialogue is the husband's final affirmation of the action he will take:

'Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.  
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!* —'

In complete contrast with this couple are the husband and wife, long married, who have just moved house, in 'In The Home Stretch'. Yet, at their most intimate, summarising years of shared experience, they too exchange negations with each other:

'It's all so much what I have always wanted,  
I can't believe it's what you wanted, too.'  
'Shouldn't you like to know?'

'I'd like to know  
If it is what you wanted, then how much  
You wanted it for me.'

'A troubled conscience!  
You don't want me to tell if *I* don't know.'  
'I don't want to find out what can't be known.  
But who first said the word to come?'

'My dear,  
It's who first thought the thought. You're searching, Joe,  
For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.  
Ends and beginnings — there are no such things.  
There are only middles.'

'What is this?'  
'This life?  
Our sitting here by lantern-light together  
Amid the wreckage of a former home?  
You won't deny the lantern isn't new.  
The stove is not, and you are not to me,  
Nor I to you.'

'Perhaps you never were?'  
'It would take me forever to recite  
All that's not new in where we find ourselves . . .'

These two poems show that conversation is less movement forward than it is movement sideways, repetition rather than development, negation rather than affirmation. Gunnel Tottie, in her study of the variety of syntactic forms which negation attracts, makes the basis of her study the observation that negation is twice as common in spoken English as it is in the written form. Her frequency count is 27.6 items of negation per

thousand words in spoken texts against 12.8 per thousand in written texts. Fortunately for her figures she does not consider poems, otherwise her sample would have been alarmingly disturbed.<sup>29</sup> To take extreme, but not untypical examples, Frost's poem 'The Census Taker', which has c.550 words, has twenty-five negations; and Thomas's poem to his mother matches the one to his father with its frequency count: twelve negations in 173 words.

Frost wrote 'The Census Taker' after Thomas's death, but it merely continues and intensifies the use of negation which he developed in his first three volumes. The third poem in *New Hampshire*, it follows the title poem, whose best known line is 'Nothing not built with hands of course is sacred' and 'A Star in the Stone Boat', whose opening line is 'Never tell me that not one star of all'. That second poem demonstrates how repetitive negation can become. It is not enough to negate once, but the poet keeps negating: 'He noticed nothing . . . He was not used . . . He did not recognize . . . He did not see . . . Nor know . . .'. So, 'The Census Taker's' twenty-five negations are no surprise. Frank Lentricchia calls the poem 'as explicit a confrontation with nothingness as anything in modern American poetry', and he includes 'The Waste Land' in that category.<sup>30</sup> Set against the nothingness is the lone individual, the 'I' of the poem, its other great repetition. 'I' occurs fifteen times in the poem to set itself repeatedly against the negatives:

I came as census-taker to the waste  
To count the people in it and found none,  
None in the hundred miles, none in the house,  
Where I came last with some hope, but not much,  
After hours' overlooking from the cliffs  
An emptiness flayed to the very stone.  
I found no people that dared show themselves,  
None not in hiding from the outward eye.

There is a similar pattern in the coda to a poem which occurs a little later in this volume, 'Wild Grapes', in which the speaker is a girl, out playing with her older, heavier brother. She comes near death when the birch tree which he bends right down so that she may pick its fruit suddenly swings upright carrying her with it. Her brother saves her by

<sup>29</sup> G. Tottie, *Negation in English Speech and Writing: A Study in Variation* (San Diego, 1991), p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> F. Lentricchia, *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* (Durham, 1975), p. 80.



## Frost and Thomas

*North of Boston* was the volume of Frost's which impressed Thomas so keenly. In their walking and talking together the very sound of each other's sentences was mutually registered — indeed, it is worth reminding ourselves that Frost was in the process of developing his theory of the sound of the sentence during this period. The key letter in which he identifies himself as the one poet, 'alone of English writers' who has 'consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense', was written to John Bartlett in July 1913; and Thomas, we know, was intent upon writing the work of literary criticism which would justify Frost's theory.<sup>32</sup>

The Frost voice was one particularly characterised by negation, not least because it gave him, in his talk as much as in his poetry, the possibility of achieving that ironic distance which critic after critic of his work has, at one point or other, come to focus on. Frank Lentricchia, early in one of his studies, identifies the 'characteristic movement of the imaginative man in Frost's poetry' as one of 'advance and retreat', a dialectic which bespeaks 'implicitly of an ironic consciousness', and Margaret Kearns, recuperating Frost for a feminist criticism, sees not so much the imaginative man as the imaginative being whose irony lies in the sense that 'what is most important must remain unsaid'.<sup>33</sup> One can hear just that leaving unsaid in Frost's letters, as when he writes to his son Carol a letter of ironic puzzlement at the ease with which the Carol Frost family can drive across the United States, transforming distance into miles easily clocked up on the speedometer, making America itself one continuous experience: 'It was melancholy to see you start rolling down the hill, but there is an excitement in all this travel in the family that I can't say it is in my nature to dislike'.<sup>34</sup> And this is Frost some years earlier, writing to Louis Untermeyer a letter pledging and defining friendship, in September 1915, shortly after his return to America from England. After a paragraph asking for a relationship which is built on 'emotional terms where there is no more controversy neither is there any danger of crediting one or the other with more or less than we

<sup>32</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 79. Frost refers to Thomas's wish 'to write a book on what my definition of a sentence means to literary criticism' in a letter to Sidney Cox in December 1914 (*Selected Letters*, p. 140).

<sup>33</sup> Lentricchia, pp. 24–5; Kearns, pp. 35–6.

<sup>34</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 397.

mean', Frost suddenly becomes ironic, distancing himself slightly from the potential embarrassment of writing to a man so intimately: 'Even here I am only fooling my way along as I was in the poems in the Atlantic (particularly in *The Road Not Taken*) . . . I trust my meaning is not too hidden in any of these places. I can't help my way of coming at things'.<sup>35</sup> Frost's way of coming at things, certainly from *North of Boston* onwards, was characteristically through the methods of negation.

'The Road Not Taken', the poem he ironically distances himself from in that phrase 'fooling my way along', is probably the one which troubled him most of all, hence his frequent warning to audiences at his readings to guard themselves against any interpretation of it—'You have to be careful of that one; it's a tricky poem—very tricky'.<sup>36</sup> It certainly worries American critics, who either savage it, as Yvor Winters notoriously did, or praise it excessively, as 'the wolf in sheep's clothing', and who know, and keep telling us that it is the outstanding example of Frost's irony, the one poem above all where he speaks in someone else's voice, and not really his own.<sup>37</sup> The someone else is Edward Thomas, the poem being built around Thomas's frequently expressed regret, when out walking with Frost, for the road which they did not take over the one which they did:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

<sup>35</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 189.

<sup>36</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> 'Wolf in sheep's clothing' is Frank Lentricchia's phrase, in 'Lyric in the Culture of Capitalism,' *American Literary History*, 1 (1989), p. 84. Yvor Winters included this poem in his general attack on Frost, in 'Robert Frost: or, the Spiritual Drifter as Poet', in *The Function of Criticism* (1957), reprinted in J. M. Cox, *Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, 1962) pp. 58–82. Katherine Kearns is one example of an American critic who senses that this poem's ironies are neither simple nor easily stated: 'It might be argued that in becoming Thomas in 'The Road Not Taken', Frost momentarily loses his defensive preoccupation with disguising lyric involvement to the extent that ironic weapons fail him. A rare instance in Frost's poetry in which there is a loved and reciprocal figure, the poem is divested of the need to keep the intended reader at bay . . . 'The Road Not Taken', far from being merely a failure of poetic intent, may be seen as a touchstone for the complexities of analyzing Frost's ironic voices' (pp. 73–4).

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,

And both that morning equally lay  
 In leaves no step had trodden black.  
 Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
 I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
 I took the one less traveled by,  
 And that has made all the difference.

Lawrance Thompson puts the American case emphatically:

More than once . . . the New Englander had teased his Welsh-English friend for those wasted regrets. Disciplined by the austere biblical notion that a man, having put his hand to the plow, should not look back, Frost found something quaintly romantic in sighing over what might have been. Such a course of action was a road never taken by Frost, a road he had been taught to avoid. In a reminiscent mood, not very long after his return to America as a successful, newly discovered poet, Frost pretended to 'carry himself' in the manner of Edward Thomas just long enough to write 'The Road Not Taken.' Immediately, he sent a manuscript copy of the poem to Thomas, without comment, and yet with the expectation that his friend would notice how the poem pivots ironically on the un-Frostian phrase, 'I shall be telling this with a sigh.' As it turned out Frost's expectations were disappointed. Thomas missed the gentle jest because the irony had been handled too slyly, too subtly.<sup>38</sup>

I suppose it is unfair to quote a letter which a man wrote nearly twenty-five years later as evidence of how to read his poem, but I do so mainly to argue that irony is always a dangerous assumption, especially when it is the poet himself who argues for it. This is Frost, writing to Untermeyer in October 1940, shortly after the news of Carol's suicide:

Dear Louis:

I took the wrong way with him. I tried many ways and every single one of them was wrong. Something in me is still asking for the chance to try one more. That's where the greatest pain is located. . . .<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Selected Letters*, pp. xiv–xv.

<sup>39</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 491.

It may be that Winters is more right than the other American critics, including Frost himself, in his dogged refusal to read this poem ironically. It is not that the negation of the title, the road not taken, is an ironic means of describing the road which Frost has taken, or, more simply, that the very negation itself is a form of syntactic affectation, typical of the effete British consciousness of an Edward Thomas, which Frost is merely mimicking; but that Thomas's negation is also Frost's. Both men take the road not taken by others and describe it to the rest of us who take the other one.

This is not to say that Frost's negation is not an ironic one, only that it goes deeper than we suspect and, more to the point, it is one which he intimately shares with Thomas. Certainly, both poets delight in double and multiple negations, and particularly in the odd, slightly distorted syntax which such constructions generate. This is Edward Thomas, in his poem 'The Mountain Chapel', telling us of poets' attempts to describe and define what they have only glimpsed and not seen clearly:

And yet somewhere  
Near or far off there's some man could  
Live happy here,  
Or one of the gods perhaps, were they  
Not of inhuman stature dire  
As poets say  
Who have not seen thee clearly, if  
At sound of any wind of the world  
In grass-blades stiff  
They would not startle and shudder cold  
Under the sun.

And this is Thomas remembering the mystery of 'The Unknown Bird', unknown to naturalists and never properly seen by Thomas, but whose notes he keenly recalls:

But I cannot tell  
If truly never anything but fair  
The days were when he sang, as now they seem.

At the heart of such syntactic knots is the most canny of rhetorical forms, that of litotes, 'in which a thing is affirmed by stating the negation of its opposite', a trope defined by the Elizabethan theorists as 'the moderator' because it gives a paradoxical emphasis to a statement 'by seeming to understate, moderate, or diminish its case by

negating its contrary'.<sup>40</sup> Frost, as good a rhetorician as any Elizabethan poet, uses this weapon frequently, as in 'The Fear of Man', which ends in the litotic request to his readers, 'May I in my brief bolt across the scene/Not be misunderstood in what I mean', or, to return to the *North of Boston* volume, in the husband's protest to his wife in 'Home Burial', that 'I'm not so much/Unlike other folks as your standing there/Apart would make me out', or in the slightly sinister room-mate's description of his job to his nervous companion in 'A Hundred Collars', 'It's business, but I can't say it's not fun'.

This form of negation always allows in irony. Elizabeth McCutcheon gives a nice example in her paper on litotes in More's *Utopia*: a *New Yorker* cartoon which shows a couple at a front door, whose mat reads 'Not Unwelcome', eliciting the comment from the wife, 'See what I mean? You're never sure just where you stand with them'.<sup>41</sup> From litotes to double and multiple negation is a short step, if, indeed, one can trace a line between them at all, at least insofar as the giving of emphasis is concerned. Early in this century, around the time Frost was compiling *North of Boston*, Otto Jespersen speculated that double and multiple negation occurs because 'under the influence of a strong feeling the two tendencies . . . to attract the negative to the verb as a nexal negative and the other to prefix it to some other word capable of receiving this element, may both be gratified in the same sentence'.<sup>42</sup> And a later linguist, Labov, offers an example from a modern American source, 'it ain't no cat can't get in no coop'.<sup>43</sup> Frost, again, is repeatedly in touch with such conversational emphases, as in the grandmother's quoted words in 'The Generations of Men', 'There ain't no names quite like the old ones, though,/Nor never will be to my way of thinking'; or, the crucial articulation of the code which governs behaviour between men and their employers in 'The Code', 'Never you say a thing like that to a man,/Not if he values what he is', or, moving from *North of Boston* to *Mountain Interval*, in the exchange between husband and wife in 'In The Home Stretch', 'You don't want me to tell if I don't know./I don't want to find out what can't be known'.

Something very like such double negation occurs in a poem in the

<sup>40</sup> E. McCutcheon, 'Denying the Contrary: More's Use of Litotes in the *Utopia*', *Moreana*, nos 31-2 (1971), 107-21. I am indebted to Ward Allen for reference to this essay.

<sup>41</sup> McCutcheon, p. 118.

<sup>42</sup> O. Jespersen, *Negation in English and Other Languages* (Copenhagen, 1917), p. 71.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted by Tottie, *Negation in English Speech and Writing*, p. 5. Labov's paper is 'Negative Attraction and Negative Command', *Language*, 48 (1972), 773-818.

volume *New Hampshire*, another dialogue, except that here there is only one speaker, for the other one is dead: 'I meant, you meant, that nothing should remain/Unsaid between us, brother . . .'. It must be this poem which Margaret Kearns is thinking of when she says of Frost's irony, that what is most important must remain unsaid. Here Frost laments 'the chance I missed in life'. His 'Lycidas', the poem 'To E.T.', is a memorial to what he and Thomas did and a lament for what they would have done had Thomas survived the war:

I slumbered with your poems on my breast,  
Spread open as I dropped them half-read through  
Like dove wings on a figure on a tomb,  
To see if in a dream they brought of you

I might not have the chance I missed in life  
Through some delay, and call you to your face  
First soldier, and then poet, and then both,  
Who died a soldier-poet of your race.

I meant, you meant, that nothing should remain  
Unsaid between us, brother, and this remained—  
And one thing more that was not then to say:  
The Victory for what it lost and gained.

You went to meet the shell's embrace of fire  
On Vimy Ridge; and when you fell that day  
The war seemed over more for you than me,  
But now for me than you—the other way.

How over, though, for even me who knew  
The foe thrust back unsafe beyond the Rhine,  
If I was not to speak of it to you  
And see you pleased once more with words of mine?

'One thing more' and 'see you pleased once more' articulates Frost's desire to see Edward Thomas one more time, as he expressed it in his letter to Helen Thomas on news of her husband's death:

Of the three ways out of here, by death where there is no choice, by death where there is a noble choice, and by death where there is a choice not so noble, he found the greatest way. There is no regret—nothing that I will call regret. Only I can't help wishing he could have saved his life without so wholly losing it and come back from France not too much hurt to enjoy our pride in him. I want to see him to tell him something. I want to tell him, what I think he liked to hear from me, that he was a poet. I want to tell him that I love those he loved and hate those he hated . . . I had meant to talk endlessly with him still, either here in our mountains as we had said or, as I

found my longing was more and more, there at Leddington where we first talked of war.<sup>44</sup>

Here are three ways rather than the two of ‘The Road Not Taken’, and, as we have seen in the letter on his son’s suicide, three ways could be multiplied to many, but the idea is the same, that the positive, affirmative paths leave a landscape of negatives to become overgrown and abandoned. It was all there in ‘The Road Not Taken’, the realisation that for all of our intentions to explore what we leave behind, the choice never will be repeated: ‘Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back’. There is no ‘one more’ and no ‘once more’, only the most uncanny of English negations, *no more*.

## No More

My own road not taken in this paper was to explore the phrase *no more* in English poetry. I gave it up very early when I realised that to do so would involve the whole of English poetry, from Chaucer and Wyatt onwards, good and bad poets alike. William Shenstone, the very minor eighteenth-century poet, is a good example of a bad poet who uses the phrase virtually *ad infinitum*, as in:

No more, ye warbling birds, rejoice  
Of all that cheer’d the plain,  
Echo alone preserves her voice,  
And she — repeats my pain.

Or,

Come then, DIONE, let us range the grove,  
The science of the feather’d choirs explore;  
Hear linnets argue, larks descant of love,  
And blame the gloom of solitude no more.<sup>45</sup>

For all of his pallid verse, however, Shenstone was the man who identified and described the peculiar force of the phrase, in his *Essays on Men, Manners and Things*: ‘The words “no more” have a singular pathos; reminding us at once of past pleasure, and the future exclusion of it’.<sup>46</sup> F. W. Bateson first noted Shenstone’s analysis, followed by

<sup>44</sup> *Selected Letters*, p. 216.

<sup>45</sup> W. Shenstone, *Works in Verse and Prose*, vol. 1 (London, 1764), pp. 166; 25.

<sup>46</sup> *Works*, vol. 2, p. 187.



express non-existence, 'no more noise', 'no more light', 'no more juice'.<sup>50</sup> What is striking about Eric is that he fell completely in love with *no more*. At twenty-two months, out of thirty-five negative sentences which he uttered, thirty of them expressed non-existence, the great majority with the phrase *no more*. At twenty-three months *no more* had taken over completely, to express non-existence and rejection; but by twenty-six months it had retreated to occasional usage.<sup>51</sup> Lois Bloom quotes, at this age, under the category of rejection, the sad sentence, 'I think no more'.<sup>52</sup> As for Sigmund, he is a case of special pleading on my part because he spoke and wrote in German: but his English translator ends that remarkable, haunting, near final essay of his, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis', when his whole family life seems to get replayed in relation to his and his brother's visit to Athens a generation earlier, with the sentence: 'And now you will no longer wonder that the recollection of this incident on the Acropolis should have troubled me so often since I myself have grown old and stand in need of forbearance and can travel no more'.<sup>53</sup>

That Robert Frost was open to the attractions of this form of ultimate negation is borne out by the poem 'Out, Out—', in the volume *Mountain Interval*. Here the brief candle is the boy who dies the night his hand is taken off by the buzz-saw, Macbeth's final soliloquy, with its poor player who is heard no more being echoed in the final lines:

No one believed. They listened at his heart.  
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.  
No more to build on there. And they, since they  
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

As for Edward Thomas, *no more* comes to dominate his poetry from the time that he begins to be a soldier. 'October', written after his first week's training with the Artists' Rifles at High Beech, is ostensibly a

<sup>50</sup> Bloom, p. 178; compare Kristeva's comment (p. 154), 'The oral cavity is the first organ of perception to develop and maintains the nursing infant's first contact with the outside but also with the *other*. His initial "burrowing" movement, which is meant to establish contact—indeed biologically indispensable fusion—with the mother's body, takes on a *negative* value by the age of six months. The rotating movement of the head at that age indicates refusal even before the "semantic" abstract word "no" appears at fifteen months'.

<sup>51</sup> Bloom, p. 202.

<sup>52</sup> Bloom, p. 207.

<sup>53</sup> *On Metapsychology*, p. 456. Freud wrote the essay in 1936.

poem about autumn, although he clearly wanted it to relate to his own situation, commenting in a letter to Eleanor Farjeon, 'I suppose the influence of High Beech and the Artists ought to be clearer.'<sup>54</sup> The poem embraces negations in its second (and last) stanza, as Thomas wishes to be 'as happy . . . as earth is beautiful,/Were I some other or with earth could turn', in alternation with seasonal flowers and 'gorse that has no time not to be gay'. This double negative sets the context for the final reflection on his state of mind:

But if this be not happiness, who knows?  
Some day I shall think this a happy day,  
And this mood by name of melancholy  
Shall no more blackened and obscured be.

His next poem, 'There's Nothing Like the Sun', develops its strange adaptation of Shakespeare's words, pushing them firmly into a new, entirely negative context in its last two lines:

'There's nothing like the sun that shines today.'  
There's nothing like the sun till we are dead.

Then 'The Thrush', still in November 1915, plays off November against April, in stanzas three and four, 'know' and 'more' in stanza three becoming 'no more' in stanza four:

Is it more that you know  
Than that, even as in April,  
So in November,  
Winter is gone that must go?

Or is all your lore  
Not to call November November,  
And April April,  
And Winter Winter — no more?

And so the phrase runs like a refrain through succeeding poems. 'This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong' has:

Dinned  
With war and argument I read no more  
Than in the storm smoking along the wind  
Athwart the wood.

The poem to his father has 'You can do and undo no more/When you go hence'. The poem to his mother has:

<sup>54</sup> *Collected Poems*, p. 193.

Till sometimes it did seem  
 Better it were  
 Never to see you more  
 Than linger here

which modulates in the next poem, 'The Unknown', to *no more* in its opening stanza:

She is most fair,  
 And when they see her pass  
 The poets' ladies  
 Look no more in the glass  
 But after her.

'Celandine', which follows, has this in its final stanza:

But this was a dream: the flowers were not true,  
 Until I stooped to pluck from the grass there  
 One of five petals and I melt the juice  
 Which made me sigh, remembering she was no more,  
 Gone like a never perfectly recalled air.

Then comes 'Home', very much a war poem, which ends like this:

Never a word was spoken, not a thought  
 Was thought, of what the look meant with the word  
 'Home' as we walked and watched the sunset blurred.  
 And then to me the word, only the word,  
 'Homesick,' as if it were playfully occurred:  
 No more. If I should ever more admit  
 Than the mere word I could not endure it  
 For a day longer: this captivity  
 Must somehow come to an end, else I should be  
 Another man, as often now I seem,  
 Or this life be only an evil dream.

And there are further *no mores*: two in the poem to Merfyn, his son who had gone to America with the Frosts, and one in the poem to his daughter Myfanwy.

Of course, I do all of these poems an injustice simply to plunder them for a phrase; but I sacrifice them to my main point, to describe the compulsive repetition of negation, the force through which, according to Kristeva, in the form of denial or rejection, or even, to take Lois Bloom's category of assertion of non-existence, we find 'the very mechanism of reactivation, tension, life; aiming towards the equalization of tension, toward a state of inertia and death, it *perpetuates* tension and life.'<sup>55</sup> *No more*, as Lear's desperate repetition of 'never' embodies,

<sup>55</sup> Kristeva, p. 150.

refuses to deliver its promised silence, requiring us, instead, to keep on talking and writing. In some poems we can see Thomas playing on the very edge of the phrase, repeatedly swerving round it—lightly, in ‘Bugle Call’, in the lines

Only the bugles *know*  
What the bugles say in the *morning*

And sombrely, in ‘As the Team’s Head Brass’, which has ‘once more’, ‘a minute more’ and ‘nothing more’ neatly spaced into it. And on the last page of his diary, one of the four single lines written probably as material for future poems is ‘And no more singing for the bird.’<sup>56</sup> Enlisting because he wanted, like Eric, to think no more, Thomas found himself repeating and repeating the phrase, just like Ivor Gurney in ‘The Not Returning’ — ‘No more they come. No more’ — or as Ford Madox Ford does in *Parade’s End* to epitomise the yearning of the whole British nation in the First World War — ‘No more Hope, no more Glory, no more parades for you and me any more. Nor for the country . . . nor for the world, I dare say . . . None . . . Gone . . . Na poo, finny! No . . . more . . . parades!’<sup>57</sup>

That Robert Frost became so enamoured of *no more* is not something I can necessarily pin to his close reading of Thomas. As ‘Out, Out—’ demonstrates, he used it lovingly before he knew Thomas’s verse well and, anyway, any reader of Shakespeare or Milton, leave alone Tennyson or Longfellow, is likely to have fallen for the phrase’s seduction.<sup>58</sup> What I would emphasise, however, is how creatively American is Frost’s use of it, leaping one step further than even Thomas did, making this ultimate poignant negation the very conscious means of creation. Out of many which could be cited, I shall finish with two quite distinct examples. One is the four-line poem ‘Immigrants’, possibly the most condensed of all of the articulations of the American dream. This is Thomas’s English dream of oblivion transformed into an American vision of constant battling against the odds to create something:

<sup>56</sup> *Collected Poems*, p. 194.

<sup>57</sup> I. Gurney, *Selected Poems* (Oxford, 1990), p. 87; Ford Madox Ford, *Parade’s End* (Harmondsworth, 1982), p. 307 (the elision marks are in the original). The title of the second novel in Ford’s tetralogy, from which this quotation is taken, is *No More Parades*.

<sup>58</sup> Added to that list should, of course, be Poe, who uses the phrase repeatedly, and its intensification, *nevermore*, he identifies as the key element in his composition of ‘The Raven’. Slightly elongated, as *Never More*, the phrase became the motto of all who mourned the dead of the First World War.

No ship of all that under sail or steam  
 Have gathered people to us more and more  
 But Pilgrim-manned the *Mayflower* in a dream  
 Has been her anxious convoy in to shore.

*No* and *more* are split by the clause which contains all of the successive waves of immigration; and the old 'Lycidas' rhyme of *no more* and *shore* is used to convey the same idea of a presiding genius, safe-guarding and piloting to safety.

My second example is more substantial, the Frost poem which makes his American critics feel that here they are in touch with absolute American greatness, whether Randall Jarrell, in the 1950s, simply celebrating Frost's qualities, or Frank Lentricchia, in the 1970s, making a case for Frost's modernism. The poem is 'Directive', from the 1947 volume *Steeple Bush*. Jarrell says of 'Directive' that it is 'one of the strangest and most characteristic, most dismaying and most gratifying, poems any poet has ever written . . . the coalescence of three of Frost's obsessive themes . . . isolation . . . extinction, and . . . the final limitations of man . . . Frost's last word about all three', and Lentricchia calls it 'probably his greatest poem . . . Frost's *summa*, his most compelling and encompassing meditation on the possibilities of redemption through the imagination, the one poem that a critic of Frost must sooner or later confront if he hopes to grasp the poet's commitment to his art as a way of saving himself.'<sup>59</sup> The poem opens like this:

Back out of all this now too much for us,  
 Back in a time made simple by the loss  
 Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off  
 Like graveyard sculpture in the weather,  
 There is a house that is no more a house  
 Upon a farm that is no more a farm  
 And in a town that is no more a town

The repeated *no mores* take us back through time to our childhood and ultimately to the future, possible redemption of 'Lycidas', when Frost leads us to discover the children's broken playhouse:

Weep for what little things could make them glad.  
 Then for the house that is no more a house.

The poem ends with some kind of consolation for our growing up and growing old. Like Freud at the Acropolis, we may discover, if we

<sup>59</sup> From R. Jarrell, 'To the Laodiceans', in Cox, p. 91; Lentricchia, *Robert Frost*, pp. 112 and 184.

follow Frost through his *no mores*, what Edward Thomas finds in his narrow room and in the rain, and what one critic who enjoys such journeys has called the genesis of secrecy, hidden in the negations of the poem's ending:

I have kept hidden in the instep arch  
Of an old cedar at the waterside  
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail  
Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,  
So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.  
(I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)  
Here are your waters and your watering place.  
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Frank Kermode uses these lines to introduce *The Genesis of Secrecy: On The Interpretation of Narratives* (Cambridge, Mass, 1980).