"Strained Relation": Strict Stress-Meter and the Sound of Sense in the Poetry of Robert Frost

Robert Frost has always been an enigma. From the appearance in England of his first book, *A Boy's Will*, to the Library of America's 1995 edition of his *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, Frost's reputation as man and poet has repeatedly swung between the extremes on the spectrum of critical opinion and has, at different times, occupied almost every point in between.

With the recent publication of *The Notebooks of Robert Frost* and a carefully rendered edition of his *Collected Prose*, Frost has been granted the improbable opportunity to contribute to the debate on his merits and status in the American literary canon from beyond the grave. Read in conjunction with the bits and pieces of his previously published epistolary prose, the *Notebooks* and *Collected Prose* offer innumerable insights into Frost's attitudes toward and ideas about a wide array of subjects, many of which bear directly—implicitly or explicitly—on Frost's own verse practice.

Despite scholarly readiness to debate the literary value of Frost's poetry, relatively little attention has been paid to its prosodic substance. Critics are more likely to simply allude to Frost's oft-repeated declaration that "[he] should be as satisfied to play tennis with the net down as to write verse with no verse form set to stay [him]" ("To Lesley Frost Francis" 735) than to examine the specific rules of Frost's complex game. This reality is undoubtedly due in part to the blank verse tradition in which Frost is typically contextualized. Abstractly speaking, it would seem that little more need be said about the alternation of weak and strong syllables in a line of iambic pentameter. Frost himself is partly to blame for the limited consideration of his prosodic feats; he was a competitive and cagey craftsman, intent both on keeping his cards close to his vest and on maintaining his persona as, to use Donald Hall's phrase, America's great "rustic bard" (Hall 14). As such, Frost generally resisted explicit discussions of his poetic practices, only occasionally articulating his metrical ideas, and often doing so only by way of analogy or as a brief aside in an otherwise unrelated article or lecture. Nevertheless, Frost's prose works, taken as a whole, document his competence, development, and intentions as a metrist, presenting to the careful reader an instructive and coherent portrait of the poet's overall prosodic approach. What emerges from these texts is a prosodic agenda that is strikingly consistent with that of the "dolnik" or "strict stress-meter" described by Marina Tarlinskaja in her seminal study *Strict Stress-Meter in English Poetry Compared with German and Russian* (2).

Although not a Frost scholar per se, Tarlinskaja has gone to great lengths to identify and define a metrical tradition that is of enormous significance both to the understanding of Frost's prosody and to his writings concerning his own prosodic preoccupations. Although his frequent use of strict stress-meter is overlooked by Western scholars—who typically treat it as a manifestation of either "mixed meter" or a "loose" iambic meter rife with trisyllabic substitutions, dismissively attributing it to a pre-existing metrical framework—Tarlinskaja recognizes that this meter is legitimate and distinct in and of itself. Specifically, it is an "intermediary verse form [that lies] between syllabo-tonic and purely accentual" meters:

> [T]he number of non-ictic syllables (usually unstressed or, less often, bearing lighter stresses) between adjacent ictuses may vary between one and two, and the number of syllables in the anacrusis, that is, all syllables preceding the first ictus, may be either constant or vary from 0 to 2. (12)

Despite the flexibility in the number of unstressed syllables between ictuses, the alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables is, as with other distinct meters, regular enough to render the ictus positions predictable (12).[1]

Of course, deviation from a strict metrical grid is often a matter of degree, and the extent of acceptable deviation historically varies according to the predominating tastes of a given period's literary community. For example, permissible and therefore common variations in the iambic meter of eighteenth-century English poets are notably fewer than those of nineteenth-century poets (Tarlinskaja 19), rendering the boundaries of viable iambic meter somewhat fluid and period-dependent. As Tarlinskaja notes, "the English iamb is what English poets [of a given time] accept as iambic" (37). Taking this into account, Tarlinskaja groups instances of strict stress-meter by decades in a given period, but she also provides useful general guidelines for identifying the "thresholds" that distinguish instances of strict stress-meter from more deviant strains of traditional meters. These thresholds relate to the presence of disyllabic intervals between ictus points.

Based on her intensive statistical analysis of the occurrence of such intervals in English-language texts, Tarlinskaja finds a "frequency gap" between the rates of 10 and 20 percent. In view of this data, she concludes: "English [language] poets felt that verse texts with less than 10 percent of disyllabic intervals were still iambic, and texts with over 20 percent of disyllabic intervals were definitely 'something else.' This 'something else' is the strict stress-meter, the dolnik" (39). While there are instances of English poetry—folk ballads, mostly—that contain disyllabic intervals at a rate higher than 10 percent and lower than 20 percent, Tarlinskaja considers such instances distinct from true strict stress-meter (39). According to her calculations, true strict stress-meter has between a 20 and an 80 percent occurrence rate of disyllabic intervals (40). It is important to note that the boundaries uncovered by Tarlinskaja's analysis are not purely arbitrary; they derive from a series of poetic (and metrical) choices and thus "are really set by the poets themselves," whose "instinctive choice of rhythm[s] . . . helps to separate the strict stress-meter from the iamb" (36).

Understanding the distinctions between "loose iambic" and true strict stress-meter is important and useful in evaluating Frost's prosody, for, as Tarlinskaja observes, "the English and German poets who used the strict stress-meter are best known as the authors of syllabo-tonic, mostly iambic, poetry" (25). Indeed, this is the case with Frost; he wrote poems of the three-, four-, and five-beat varieties in both loose iambic meter and strict stress-meter.[2] Unfortunately, the exact portions of Frost's oeuvre that were composed in each meter are at this time unknown. Tarlinskaja's study uses a total of 43 of his poems (all written in strict stress-meter)—a figure that constitutes approximately 14 percent of the poems included in the 1969 edition of *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete*

and Unabridged, the scholarly standard at the time Tarlinskaja drew her sample.[3] Those numbers are all the more impressive in the context of the individual books contained in the aforementioned volume: only three of the eight books of poems Frost published in his lifetime contained more than 43 poems, and those volumes contained only a few more than that (*New Hampshire* and *A Witness Tree* have 44 each; *A Further Range* has 50). In other words, the limited number of strict stress-meter poems that have been identified in Frost's canon to date already account for the equivalent of a full book of poems. Certainly, further exploration of Frost's work in strict stress-meter is warranted. Since the time of Tarlinskaja's study, moreover, a total of 94 previously unpublished or uncollected poems have been brought together in the Library of America's edition of Frost's *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*. Deeper analysis of Frost's corpus would doubtless reveal that an even greater portion of his poems were composed in strict stress-meter.

It is to be expected that a poet so disciplined in strict stress-meter would be cognizant of his participation in this tradition, and Frost's prose writings certainly satisfy that expectation. Indeed, Frost's ruminations on meter, however infrequent, indicate that he was highly aware of his practice, although he was by no means scientific in his explanations of it; he was, of course, without the vocabulary made available to us by Tarlinskaja's study.[4] Instead, adding to possible confusion, Frost on more than one occasion distinguished between "strict iambic" and "loose iambic" meters. In his essay "The Constant Symbol," for example, he declares that, when writing a poem:

> [t]he poet goes in like a rope skipper to make the most of his opportunities. If he trips himself he stops the rope. He is of our stock and has been brought up by ear to choice of two metres, strict iambic and loose iambic (not to count varieties of the latter). He may have any length of line up to six feet. He may use an assortment of line lengths for any shape of stanza. (149)

From this quotation alone, it is clear that Frost distinguished between traditional iambic meter and a more flexible metrical alternative. It is equally apparent that he viewed this alternative, his "loose iambic," as one that could take a variety of forms. While he never explicitly states that this loose iambic meter entailed regular trisyllabic substitutions in otherwise iambic lines—or variability with regard to the number of unstressed syllables between ictus positions—it is safe to infer from other writings that Frost intentionally stretched what he perceived as the limits of blank verse. In fact, he pressed those limits so far as to break into strict stress-meter.

Although the details surrounding the circumstances of its composition are regrettably lost, one of Frost's letters provides particularly compelling evidence of his utterly calculated departures from the conventions of iambic meter. Further, it illustrates that Frost was entirely aware of his participation in a historically common form of deviation from strict

iambic meter (and that others had similarly "sinned against" the abstract syllabo-tonic metrical grid). Elaine Barry estimates that Frost wrote the letter containing the following excerpt to John Erskine in 1923 while at the University of Michigan:

> I'm often crossed with just such doubts myself. Why will I perform such tricks on the honest old blank verse with my eyes open? It must be because I'm tempted beyond my strength. It is my way of wickedly sinning. The more I resolve not to do it the more inevitably I seem to do it when my blood is up. I suppose I'm a self-shocker. I used to get all the excitement I craved out of making lines like this:
>
> x x / / x / x x x /
> On the white wall presented to the road.
>
> I think you can probably find lines as extravagant as that in almost anybody's blank verse. It's but the next step beyond / x x / x / x x x / which is to be found ever[y]where and which is responsible for Charlie Cobb's theory of tettrameters [sic]. The hanker of my sophisticated ear is always luring me further. (98)

Frost's scansions confirm the total and unabashed intent with which he departed from the iambic metrical tradition. But Frost was not, as his modest tone in the passage above suggests, the simple victim of compulsive bad behavior. Rather, it was the very "hanker of [his] sophisticated ear" that led him to what he viewed as perhaps his crowning poetic achievement: the capture of "the sound of sense." Indeed, in July of 1913, he wrote a letter to John T. Bartlett in which he claimed to be "one of the most notable craftsmen of [his] time . . . possibly the only person going who work[ed] on any but a worn out theory of versification" (664). Secure in the importance of his distinctive theoretical foundation and related poetic achievement, he described the nature and scope of his prosodic endeavor:

> I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense. . . . An ear and an appetite for these sounds of sense is the first qualification of a writer, be it of prose or verse. But if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre. Verse in which there is nothing but the beat of the metre furnished by the accents of the polysyllabic words we call doggerel. . . . There are only two or three metres that are worth anything. We depend for variety on the infinite play of accents in the sound of sense. (664–65)

For Frost, the "sound of sense" encompassed several interrelated yet discrete entities—chiefly, perhaps, the sounds of actual speech, the dramatic pitches and tones of conflict and conversation ("sentence-tones" ["To John T. Bartlett," 22 Feb. 1914, 675])—but it also directly entailed an absolute departure from true iambic meter. "It's as simple as this," Frost wrote to John Cournos a year later:

> [T]here are the very regular preestablished accent and measure of blank verse; and there are the very irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation. I

> am never more pleased than when I can get these into strained relation. I like to drag and break intonation across the metre as waves first comb and then break stumbling on shingle. (680)

Poet that he was, Frost favored the well-turned phrase. Whether he was "skipping rope" or dragging things into "strained relation," however, he also favored strict stress-meter.

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NOTES

1. This is a matter of no small importance; as Tarlinskaja acknowledges, in order for a text to be considered "metrical" or identifiably "based on an abstract metrical scheme, there must be enough regularity in stress placement to create expectation" (37). When "there is little or no expectation, the metrical principle is too vague [to be identified] and the meter begins to be effaced" (37).

2. Notably, Frost's poetry contains a considerable number of examples of the two rarest strict stress-meter forms. He is one of only three poets Tarlinskaja has found whose work contains "homogeneous three-ictic" dolnik poems (i.e., poems of invariable three-beat lines), and his contribution to that category accounts for more than half of the sample she analyzed in her study (27). Further, Frost appears to be one of a very few strict stress-meter poets, if not the only one, to have used the five-beat line. Indeed, he is the only five-ictic dolnik poet cited by Tarlinskaja, who remarks that such poems "are truly exceptional" (40). He is thus a major figure in the history of strict stress-meter, and he should perhaps be regarded as one of its primary innovators.

3. Tarlinskaja does not indicate how thoroughly she evaluated Frost's corpus before deciding upon her sample, but the poems she chose span the entirety of his career (only Frost's second and shortest book, *North of Boston*, which contains only 16 poems, is unrepresented in her selection).

4. While Tarlinskaja has imported the term "dolnik" from the Russian, where it is well known among metrists, she credits the American critic James Bailey for introducing the concept of "strict stress-meter" in his 1975 essay on Yeats, "The Cap and Bells" (Tarlinskaja 2).

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