

## ☞ The Poetry of Experience

*John Elder*

### Entering the Field

“Go to grass. You have eaten hay long enough. The spring has come with its green crop.” So Henry David Thoreau exhorts us in “Walking” (127). Both our institutions and we ourselves always require the refreshment of nature’s present moment. Revelation subsides into theology and insight ossifies into a curriculum as surely as the newly gathered grass turns into hay. High time, once more, to walk back out into the mysterious, unmown field.

✓ Over the past decade, many teachers and scholars have been trying to reconnect the study of literature with the living earth. The evolution of this project may be tracked by looking at certain terms that have dominated the conversation at different stages. “Nature writing” identified a lineage that ran from Gilbert White and Thoreau up through contemporary authors like Edward Abbey, Barry Lopez, and Terry Tempest Williams. By calling attention to the deeply rooted history as well as the continuing power of the genre, this term has helped literary studies to go beyond the conventional categories of poetry, fiction, and drama. It has celebrated a rich American tradition of reflective nonfiction, grounded in appreciation of the natural world yet also open to the creation’s spiritual significance. The example of nature writing has also established a firmer connection between literature and the natural sciences, bridging the “two cultures” and fostering the development of interdisciplinary environmental studies programs in our colleges.

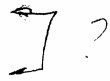
NB | Nature writing continues to flourish, both as a form of writing and as a rewarding field of study. It has become clear, though, that this is not as comprehensive a genre as the name might suggest. It refers to just one variety of the

personal essay rather than to the whole range of imaginative writing about the earth. In addition, for reasons the social history within Lawrence Buell's book *The Environmental Imagination* suggests, nature writing is a form that has been practiced largely by white writers. By using the more inclusive term "environmental literature," a number of scholars have sought to broaden the conversation. This has allowed for connections between Thoreauvian nature writing and treatments of nature in other genres. It has also called attention to many authors of color—including Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Rudolfo Anaya, and Leslie Marmon Silko—who powerfully depict and reflect on nature in their novels and poems.

Another reward of this greater inclusiveness has been a fresh look at canonical literature in English. Increasingly, critics are investigating the place of landscape and natural history within mainstays of English literature such as Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Woolf as well as in the work of Americans like Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, and Fitzgerald. The term "ecocriticism" has recently been adopted by some of these scholars, in preference to "environmental literature." It avoids any implication that "environmentalism," in the current American sense, was a concern for writers before the twentieth century. It also initiates a dialogue between literature and the science of ecology that offers critics a fresh perspective on topics such as metaphor and narrative form.

This progression in our language reflects both the ambition and the healthy self-criticism of this burgeoning scholarly field. It does leave out something crucial, though: the role of natural experience in the study of literature. However, such experience has not been lacking. Many of us who teach nature writing delight in outings with our classes, in order to ground our discussions in observations like those the writers themselves made. We have arrived at a point, however, where we need to begin integrating this experiential dimension of teaching and scholarship in a more strategic way. The increasing refinement of our critical terminology can be complemented now by an equally deliberate pedagogy. It may well be that the study of poetry, as the most distilled form of literature, will provide the best context for this next stage of development.

An emphasis on experience may protect against one danger in ecocriticism's emergence as a form of literary theory. Contemporary theory has certainly proven to be a valuable source of insight into literature. But it can also suffer



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from jargon, self-referentiality, and a narrow professionalism that are the opposite of nature writing's original, liberating impulse. This is why scholars and teachers must now undertake a determined, unceasing effort to ground criticism and teaching alike in the natural experience from which so much of the world's great literature has emerged. Authors such as Thoreau or Mary Oliver can inspire us to ventilate and invigorate the merely academic world. Carrying our reading, reflection, teaching, and writing out under the sky can remind us that this scholarly adventure is not about competing with other academic specialties and critical schools. Our central purpose should be renewing literary education and enhancing the vitality of our culture.

### Scything

We gather just after sunrise on a morning in July, beside a dewy field of timothy in Craftsbury, Vermont. This introduction to handmowing is the opening session of Sterling College's Robert Frost Day. It has been organized by Sterling faculty member Ross Morgan, in order to offer participants a personal experience of this traditional mode of labor that figures in several of Frost's poems. Our instructors are Roger Shattuck, a noted literary scholar and critic from Lincoln, Vermont, and his son Marc, a welder from Richmond, Vermont, who is a champion mower in annual contests around the state. Roger became interested in handmowing over thirty years prior to this July morning, when he was looking for a way to keep down the tall grass around his family's cabin. He bought a scythe and became acquainted with the local community that preserved and passed along the art of using such a tool. He also discovered that he had both an aptitude and an appetite for this rhythmic, physically rigorous, and surprisingly effective way of sheering off ripe stems of grass and grains.

The Shattucks demonstrate to our group how to cut a swath. Plant your feet so that you are facing directly toward the row to be mown, then advance in a slow shuffle. The blade passes through an arc that leaves a cleanly mown edge a foot or more to your right and gathers each stroke's sheared grass into a windrow about the same distance to your left. Skilled scythers achieve a surface as close and smooth as any push mower or power mower could accomplish. And while

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mechanical mowers do their best work when the grass is totally dry, it has always been the practice of hand mowers to go out after a rain or, as we are doing now, just after dawn when there is a heavy dew. The wet stalks are heavier and less likely to bend before the scythe's sweep. Our teachers pronounce three watch-words as the rest of us pick up our scythes and try to imitate what we have just observed: "polish," "slice," and "pivot."

Both the point and the heel of the blade are always held in contact with the ground, with no tilt and no lift for a backswing. This continuous motion bur-nishes the blade's bottom surface and sends a vibration up through your arms as you move forward. The grass is sliced, not chopped, with the blade sliding through the stems at an angle, from point to heel, rather than meeting them squarely edge on. Then it rustles back over the stubble at exactly the same height in preparation for the next slice. This dialogue with the grass makes a rhythmic, sibilant sound that is one of the distinctive pleasures of handmowing.

"Pivot" refers to another sensual attraction of such work. The power comes not from the movement of your arms but from twisting back and forth at the waist. Turning your torso smoothly left and right, you shuffle forward with knees springy and slightly bent, leaving two dark, shiny tracks in the shorn grass be-tween windrows. This is the whole dance, with the work always out in front, the harvest collecting to your left, and the scythe's whisper music pulling you far-ther and farther into the mystery of the grass. After we have been practicing for a while, a few of us line up side by side, although staggered to give safe clear-ance to our blades. We advance together like Vermont contradancers, leveling a smooth floor within the field.

In the discussion that followed, after we had taken a break for breakfast, sev-eral of Frost's poems were considered, including that wonderful one "The Tuft of Flowers." But the poem that was most enriched for me by the experience of handling a scythe in the dewy grass was "Mowing," from Frost's 1913 volume *A Boy's Will*:

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,  
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.  
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;

describe scythe - via website

Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,  
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—  
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.  
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,  
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:  
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak  
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,  
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers,  
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.  
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.  
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

*(Early Poems 24)*

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Though I had long loved this poem, the experience of mowing the hayfield in Craftsbury helped me enter into it and appreciate it in a new way. As we learned to keep the blades of our scythes down, we advanced from the percussiveness of swinging and chopping to a continuous, beautiful rustling. This subtle sound was the surest guide to effective technique. The words “whispering” and “whispered,” which Frost employs in the second, third, sixth, and fourteenth lines of his sonnet, are arguably the most important in the poem. Most readers surely feel their mystery, their suggestion of meanings just out of earshot that the poet, with his chosen stance of “enigmatic reserve,” will never make wholly plain. But the experience of working with a scythe helped me to relate that mystery to the subtle pulse of a keen blade sliding along the ground.

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In the 1987 “Voices and Visions” documentary on Frost, Seamus Heaney expresses his admiration for the whispering scythe of “Mowing”: “It’s not writing school proficiency of mimicking the movement of a mower by the line breaks. It’s a deeper rhythm of labor . . . the slightly lulling, consoling rhythm of a repeated motion.” “What was it it whispered?” evokes with a special precision the mower’s experience of pivot and reverse, with its shift of syntax and direction between the word “it” and its reiteration. Heaney singles out this question in Frost’s third line for special appreciation, commenting, “It’s colloquial. It does have the spring of spoken English about it.” Heaney’s connection here between the rhythm of mowing and the spring of language reflects the fact that he, like

Frost, is a poet who knows the countryside through physical labor as well as through language. But Frost's eloquent formulation penetrates even more deeply for me now that I can bring my own physical experience to bear—remembering mowing in the glow of my back and arms and in the throbbing pulse that echoed an hour spent wading through those subtle waves of sound.



The notable emphasis on sound in this poem is of course set up by the first line: "There was never a sound beside the wood but one." This line also highlights the solitary state of the mower. When Frost was farming in the early years of the twentieth century, haying in the main fields would already have been carried out by a cutting machine pulled behind a team of horses. By the 1920s and 1930s, such a cutter would more frequently have been pulled behind a tractor. Wet ground, low ground, uneven ground, and little strips of meadow between the woods and a road would have been relegated to an individual worker with a scythe. It was the fact of working away from the clash of machinery and the roar of motors that allowed the solitary speaker of "Mowing" to clear the whispering and to reflect on the significance of this dialogue between scythe and ground. Such an experience must be rare for most of Frost's readers today. Our own work out of doors so often involves the noise of engines, and our experience of solitude in nature is, conversely, more often associated with recreation than with work.

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The urgent physicality of labor powered by muscles, not gasoline, is implied by the fourth line: "Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun." The day is already far enough advanced for the sun to be warming the scene. In part, though, this remark about the heat may be a token of the muscular effort associated with the speaker's "long scythe whispering to the ground," as he bends over, holding the handle away from his body and pivoting back and forth from the waist. It is also a reminder that the haying must be done before the grass is so dry that it will not shear off cleanly and so that the windrows will still be able to bake in the sun when the mower leaves "the hay to make."

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After that morning in Craftsbury, I was incautious enough to mention to one Frost scholar that the experience of mowing had opened up new dimensions of the poem to me. His rejoinder was, "The scythe in that poem means one thing and one thing only." And of course it is true that Frost is continually alert to shadows of mortality. Whenever I hear the phrase "Et in Arcadia ego"—death's



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warning not to be lulled into a carefree state by the beauty of a pastoral landscape—it is always in that poet's dry Yankee accents. But the fact remains that a scythe is a tool as well as a symbol, that it was used by the poet himself in hand-mowing, and that its sound and technique informs both the music and the emotional tone of the poem.

✓ There is a tricky balance to observe here. In the same "Voices and Visions" documentary about Frost, William H. Pritchard calls attention to the period that decisively separates the sonnet's last two lines: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows. / My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make." The poem transcends the experience of labor, as Pritchard insists: "The scythe is just going on, just making its sound, finishing its task . . . It's really the poet who makes poetry. Not nature, not scythes" (Pritchard 27, 28). My purpose in the present reading is certainly not to reduce the poetry to its germinating instance. Rather, it is to suggest the value of cultivating, in our physical experience, an appreciation of the soil from which the art has sprung. William Meredith, who is also interviewed in the documentary, refers to Frost's characterization of poetry as "the transition from delight to wisdom." This is a helpful way of formulating the never resolved yet intimate relationship between a finished poem, with its tempered complexity, and the surges of impulse and experience that inspired it and that are perpetuated within it.

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Frost's line "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows," with its Shakespearean resonance, sums up the importance placed on work in "Mowing." Neither the lure of idle hours nor a fantasy of fairies would be satisfying to "the earnest love that laid the swale in rows." Frost understands the erotics of work—exertion pressing forward to culmination. Satisfaction lies—and lays—in finishing the job at hand, not escaping from it into a pastoral illusion. Any reading of Frost's poetry that reduces the physicality of the landscape or the labor of farmers to nothing more than intellectual argument or abstract music is a fantasy in this sense—an escape from the texture and solidity of fact. Both work and nature are more than tropes for this poet. They are the world, one in which poetry is grounded and by which it is inspired. Through the music and mystery of poetry we are enabled to re-enter nature with renewed senses and with a heightened capacity for wonder.

Once the experience of handmowing had enhanced my sense of the sonnet's achievement, by placing me in the wet field at dawn, I found that the specific ecology of that New England scene also emerged with comparable concreteness. Frost is one of the most gifted and precise naturalists among our poets in English. Over the past twenty-six years of living and teaching in Vermont, I have come increasingly to rely on him as a guide to the geology, forest history, agricultural history, and what Linnaeus would call its "floral calendar." An allusion in Frost's poetry to a flower is never merely decorative or incidental, despite what many critics seem to assume. It tells an ecological story and evokes a particular living community.

An example comes in the lines "Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers, / (Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake." I looked up pale orchises in my *Newcomb's Wildflower Guide*, since it was not a plant with which I was familiar. I found that the Tubercled, or Pale Green, Orchis (*Habenaria flava*) raises a slender flower spike above a couple of well-developed basal leaves and that it grows in moist meadows during late spring and summer. A swale is the older, more poetic name for a wet meadow or low ground. It describes both the sort of terrain where a solitary hand mower would have been called for during Frost's early years as a farmer in northern New England and the environment in which this flower, with its "feeble," sinuously slender stem, would have grown. The "bright green snake" is a similarly precise and telling reference. Vermont has relatively few reptiles—and no native lizards at all. The green snake (*Opheodrys vernalis*) was a fairly common sight until the latter part of the nineteenth century—often spotted by scythe wielding mowers as it slithered ahead of them into the still-uncut grass. With the advent of mowing machines, green snakes have become much rarer. They are not fast enough to elude those mechanical blades with the same success they had in staying ahead of a shuffling, deliberate human laborer.

Pale orchises and bright green snakes are the "facts" that Frost labors to encompass in his verse, along with the ecosystem and the agricultural economy in which they would likely be encountered. Marianne Moore described poems as imaginary gardens with real toads in them. But Frost's swale, snake, and orchis are at once concrete, closely observed, and precisely related to the human labor

proceeding around them and in their midst. Because his poetic landscapes resolutely avoid “anything more than the truth,” they can balance and sustain the ambiguity, and ambivalence, about spiritual meaning that is so central to his poetry.

## Windrow

A single morning's workshop on scything could never make anyone a competent mower. But my purpose has been to show that even a brief exposure of this sort can illuminate a poem such as “Mowing.” One implication may be that those of us who teach writers as sensitive to the living landscape as Frost should systematically integrate field trips and other outdoor experiences into our courses. This could simply be an occasional outing with our students to experience some phenomenon that figures in the literature we are reading. Excursions of several days would be even better although harder for most teachers to manage during the regular academic term. Regardless of the length of a class's time outside, however, the goal would be the same: to experience personally the images and rhythms we meet again on the page. We dwell in a poem so that the world, with all its other poems, may be renewed. Just so, we can return to poetry with fresh appreciation once we are regrounded in the earth. As John Dewey insisted, the most vital education grows out of the “play of mental demand and material supply” (107).

Such play becomes especially striking when Frost couples his close observation of the New England countryside with pointed allusions to the English poets. Robert Faggen suggests, for example, that there is a connection between the imagery of “Mowing” and a line in Samuel Coleridge's “Christabel”: “When lo! I saw a bright green snake” (*Early Poems* 265). Frost's line is enriched both by the poetic echo and the precise and appropriate placement of this snake in the unknown grass of a New England swale. A similar effect of compounding can enhance the experience of readers as well. Just as natural phenomena can reground a poem's language for us, so too can poetry mediate and heighten our awareness of the living earth.

An even more intriguing connection arises between the fourth line of “Mowing” and the first stanza of a song from *Cymbeline*:

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Fear no more the heat o' the sun,  
Nor the furious winter's rages;  
Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages;  
Golden lads and girls all must  
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.  
(qtd. in Kenner 121)

As Anne Ferry has discussed, Frost was particularly devoted to Francis Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, often imitating, responding to, or alluding to lyrics in this collection. The fact that this selection from Shakespeare was included in Palgrave's anthology (under the title "Fidele") thus heightens the possibility that Frost intended such an echo within his poem. I take a special interest in this association because of a story Hugh Kenner relates to the same stanza from *Cymbeline*. After celebrating the song's evocation of golden youth and its passing, Kenner goes on to tell that

in the mid-20th century a visitor to Shakespeare's Warwickshire met a countryman blowing the grey head off a dandelion: "We call these golden boys chimney-sweepers when they go to seed."

And all is clear? They are shaped like a chimney-sweeper's broom. They come to dust when the wind disintegrates them. And as "golden lads," nodding their golden heads in the meadows around Stratford, the homely dandelions that wilt in the heat of the sun and would have no chance against the furious winter's rages, but need never confront winter because they turn to chimney-sweepers and come to dust, would have offered Shakespeare exactly what he needed to establish Fidele's death in *Cymbeline* as an easy, assimilable instance of nature's custom.<sup>1</sup> (122)

In reading Shakespeare's verse today, as in reading Frost's, most of us run the risk of missing an entire range of concrete reference, because of our separation from the seasonal rhythms and tasks that informed the poets' lives. When we do experience these things for ourselves, however, we discover even in poems we have lived with for years that the metaphors become more satisfyingly extended, the descriptions more sharply focused and arresting.

✓ The importance of natural experience within the total meaning of a poem is shown especially clearly by Frost's "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things." The best-known lines in this poem come at its characteristically round-about ending: "One had to be versed in country things / Not to believe the phoebe wept" (*Early Poems* 263). The poem as a whole is as sly and irreducible as any by this supremely cagey poet, being at once a meditation on the emotional meaning of nature and a stringent insistence that such meaning reflects our basic ignorance of nature. Standing beside an abandoned house—so naturally associated for us with the sadness of loss, separation, and departure—we too easily hear in birdsong the weeping of former inhabitants or the sighing of visitors like ourselves. We project a human presence on the otherness of nature. But conventional academic readings of Frost, which delight in the poet's sardonic debunking of the pathetic fallacy, too often stop there. *sum ↓*

Frost's art circles around and around between the essential unknowability of the world and the perpetual suggestiveness of natural phenomena. Appreciation of this quality of suspension within his poetry depends on registering his natural details in their concrete particularity. As far as the standard, reductive reading goes, the word "phoebe" could as well be replaced by "birdy." "Robin" or "starling" would also do, if rhythm were all. But the fact is that those other birds would not do. Here is where a late spring or summer field trip to one of the sugarhouses, hunting camps, or abandoned farmhouses that dot the New England woods might enhance students' experience of the poem.

✓ Frost places the phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*), as he did the orchis and the green snake of "Mowing," in exactly the habitat where it belongs. It likes to nest under the eaves of buildings far from the road and close to the woods. Phoebes are easy to observe, and students will note their nervous habit of wagging their tails, their frequent shiftings from perch to perch, and the constant, plaintive up and down of their songs: FEE-be, fee-BE. The phoebe is an unostentatious bird. The feathers of its head, back, and wings are brown with an olive cast and those of its breast are creamy. A robin may have a name that would satisfy a critic looking for no more than a trochee in that line of verse. But its vivid red breast makes it much more of a visual presence and its full-throated, melodious song could never be mistaken for weeping, no matter how melancholy the human observer or the scene.

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The nondescript phoebe, by contrast, has a reedy repetitiveness that can sound heartsick, or even desperate, to a susceptible human. Being “versed in country things” can help us remember that this call is most likely a territorial assertion—translatable as something like “I am here now.” Without having heard the phoebe’s distinctive song, though, a reader might miss the poem’s emotional tension and subside into the equally “unversed” sentimentality of hearing no bird beyond the one on the page. Just as our projections onto nature are invariably skewed, so too our readings abstracted from nature are impoverished. Frost offers us the experience of particular natural environments as provocations to our own perpetually personal utterances. With his beloved Virgil, Frost finds in the world “the tears of things, mortal affairs that touch the mind.” He knows that the tears may have less to do with nature than with the particular human stories that surround an onlooker—as is also true in the *Aeneid*. But the mortality, and the manifold individuality, of the natural creation are much more than projections.

Frost is piqued by the disjunction between suggestions of weeping in a bird’s call and the otherness of the bird’s life, just as he is by the insistent but untranslatable conversation between the scythe and the ground. Robert Penn Warren declared that to be a poet was to stand in the rain every day, in the knowledge that sometimes lightning would strike. Frost’s poems include both the lightning strike and its afterimages against retina and optic nerve. To be alert and receptive readers of his poetry, we too need to venture out under the sky, into rain and sun. We need to hear the distinct calls of specific birds, to startle and be startled by snakes appearing at our feet. To confine our readings and reflections to the library or classroom—as if we had neither arms to swing a scythe nor legs to step forward into the mystery of dewy, snake-braided grass—would be an impoverishment. It would be like the diminishment of weeping in a world where no phoebes nest.

Thoreau adds the following remark to his celebration of the spring’s green crop: “The very cows are driven to their country pastures before the end of May; though I have heard of one unnatural farmer who kept his cow in the barn and fed her on hay all the year round” (127). Grand enclosures against the weather are an essential part of the agricultural, and the educational, year. But no barn, whether we call it the Western canon, ecocriticism, or environmental studies,

should confine us from enjoying our country pastures. Students and teachers must all remember, from time to time, to go to grass.

## Note

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1. The visitor in question was William Arrowsmith.

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*Beyond Nature Writing*

Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism

*Edited by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace*

University Press of Virginia Charlottesville and London

2001