

A Yield of Whispers: Frost's "Mowing" and Heidegger's "Earth and World"



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One of Robert Frost's earliest poems remains one of his most intriguing, the sonnet "Mowing" which appeared in his first volume, *A Boy's Will* (1913). Its enigmatic final couplet is well known:

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

The poem invites close reading, but a close reading immediately takes one beyond the confines of a narrowly rhetorical approach, if for no other reason than that to predicate "the fact" as "the sweetest dream" immediately introduces questions of epistemology and even ontology. Do the lines contain nothing more than a little enigma of word-play? An approach that is adapted to the kind of questions that the sonnet gently raises suggests otherwise, that here Frost with exquisite control touches on — and struggles against — the limits of poetic language. The way the poem invites the reader to "listen" to poetic language by way of the whisper of a scythe suggests the possibility of using Heidegger's terms from "The Origin of the Work of Art,"¹ in particular the terms "earth" and "world," to explore what they can teach us about this poem and even about certain aspects of poetic language. Ultimately, I hope thereby to consider what in turn the reading reveals about Heidegger's terms.

¹I realize that I must take Heidegger's terms out of their disquieting historical context and use them more or less "neutrally" in order to read this poem afresh, and that there are many questions that exceed the scope of this paper, concerning hermeneutics, deconstruction, and the fascist subtext of Heidegger's "mysticism," but my concern here is quite limited: what do Heidegger's terms "earth" and "world" reveal about this sonnet, and what does the sonnet, in turn, reveal about these terms?

Although sometimes cryptic, Heidegger's writing on art and poetry opens a fresh approach to the problem of poetry and truth. Whereas the tropes of poetic discourse have often led readers to conclude that poetic statements bear only an ambiguous or hypothetical relation to the "real world," Heidegger finds that all art is essentially poetry by virtue of poetry's capacity to "name" beings. He turns the problem of reference inside out, as it were, by considering art, and especially poetry, as the *privileged* way of access to Being, the site where Being shines most brightly.² With considerable tenacity, his later essays explore the significance of those murmuring undertones that often seem to escape, but never altogether desert, our readings and help us to understand how a poem penetrates through the indistinctiveness of ordinary discourse to "say" what has gone unspoken, engaging in a struggle which yields an uncanny experience with language and with being.³ The terms "earth" and "world" arise in a meditation on the manner in which Being discloses itself in the work of art, such that works of art are the site *par excellence* of Being's self-unveiling.

Although Frost excelled at capturing the intonations of the vernacular, such that his poems sometimes seem casually spontaneous, nevertheless their "poetic thinking" is frequently profound and surprising, as many critics have shown.⁴ Although Frost himself was almost forty

²On the "ontological difference" (the distinction between being and Being [*das Seiende* and *das Sein*]) as considered in *Being in Time*, see "Introduction" to *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). In relation to Heidegger's later writing, see "On the Essence of Truth" in *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

³Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 56. Re "Saying", cf. p. 213.

⁴In particular, see Richard Poirier, Frank Lentricchia and Judith Oster. Perhaps the most careful reading of "Mowing" published to date is Richard Poirier's in *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Mark Scott, in "Andrew Lang's 'Scythe Song' Becomes Robert Frost's 'Mowing': Frost's Practice of Poetry" (*The Robert Frost Review* 1:1 (Fall, 1991), pp 30-37), finds an array of literary echoes in the poem, and argues that it represents Frost's "original response" to Andrew Lang (1844-1912). Most other commentators treat "Mowing" more briefly. In *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of the Self*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1975), Frank Lentricchia [39-40] discusses it within the Jamesian terms of imagination's projections upon a reality "out there" [8]. In "The Resentments of Robert Frost" (in *On Frost: The Best from American Literature*, ed. Edwin Cady and Louis J. Budd (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1975), pp. 222-247), Lentricchia

before he at last published a book of poems, the speaking persona in *A Boy's Will* is a solitary young man who restlessly contemplates his romantic moods. Frost had not yet settled securely into the distinctive voice, the Yankee "sound of sense" that contemporaries would find so new and striking when *North of Boston* appeared in the following year. But looking back to this first book, "Mowing" stands out as a harbinger of Frost's mature style, a sonnet of masterly austerity and grace. In a letter to Thomas Mosher, Frost wrote: "In 'Mowing,' for instance, I come so near what I long to get that I almost despair of coming nearer." [*Selected Letters* 83] In the Table of Contents of *A Boy's Will*, "Mowing" is glossed, "He takes up life simply with the small tasks."

Mowing

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;
 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.⁵

The speaker muses upon the sound that his scythe made as he mowed the "swale" (a marshy hollow — he would be mowing swamp grass), and in particular upon what that sound "says" as it whispers. Taking it

discusses the poem in relation to modernism, showing how it achieves the "masculine" voice that Frost sought in reaction to the feminized poetry of his age (*On Frost* 222-247). Priscilla M. Paton's brief exegesis in "Robert Frost: 'The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows'" (in *American Literature* 53, 1 (1981), pp. 43-55), concludes that "Neither metaphor nor vision is pushed too far."

⁵Frost, *A Boy's Will and North of Boston* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), p. 13.

for granted that the scythe did indeed whisper something, his interest is in the *truth* of what the scythe whispered — not the truth about *whether* it whispered but the true “meaning” of its whisper. This concern for truth leads him to repudiate mere fancy or contrivance so that the second-last line, “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows,” emerges from and somehow satisfies the speaker’s inquiry and allows it to leave off with: “My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.” But that gnomic, paradoxical second-last line resonates with a strange authority. Is this finally what the scythe whispered? Or does the line declare the speaker’s decision that after all the scythe did not really whisper anything? But if the latter, what should we make of the last line?

It is clear from the beginning that the mower does not set out to hear the one sound beside the wood “objectively.” As Richard Poirier observes in *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, labor partly determines the speaker’s perceptions from the outset; the declaration that there was “never a sound beside the wood but one” can only be understood to refer to “sounds other than natural ones,” sounds that involve human agency:

In his conception of sound, that is, this speaker wants us to recognize that he is not the passive, sometimes fearfully receptive listener of Wordsworth or the ravished seer of Emerson.... For him, any sound of consequence apparently has to involve a human agency, and the whispering scythe, even at this early point, is potentially analogous to poetic “making.” [*Work of Knowing* 286]

This imagination is one that dedicates itself to the truth of something quite present to the senses, and Frost thus frames from the start the great task that confronts him: to betray neither imagination nor sensory experience but to name as truth what both together yield. If there is “fancy” in the question that starts his mind working, he steers against it to hew as closely as he can to its contrary, “truth,” while never abandoning fancy’s quest. The poem emerges from this game of navigating between hazards.

With the question “What was it it whispered?” the poem asks the reader to make the speaker’s concern his or her own, to train the ear to the sound of the whispering scythe, and more particularly to the meaning of the whisper. The onomatopoeia of lines 2 and 3a and the series

of guesses in the lines that follow invite us to join in the inquiry that begins tentatively, but becomes more ardent as inadequate, fanciful answers are cast aside. The implausible notion that the scythe whispered something in reference to the weather, complaining about the heat, is immediately supplanted by a second guess. Although again he imagines that the whisper has a referential intent, this time the reference is perplexing and indefinite: "Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound — / And that was why it whispered and did not speak." The virtue of this second guess is that it attends to the nature of the sound itself and the context in which it arose, without attributing to the scythe the speaker's own susceptibility to the heat, suggesting perhaps that attending closely to the sound of the scythe means leaving his self, at least his more fractious ego-self, aside.

The guess that the scythe whispers something "about the lack of sound" suggests that the scythe whispers precisely to emphasize that its own sound is the only sound, as we were told in the first line. The sound stands out in relief against a backdrop of nothingness; it reveals the nothingness by defacing it, as a smudge reveals a window pane. Thus, to whisper rather than to speak is to sustain and preserve this relief: of course the whisper breaks the silence by mentioning it, but the scythe respects the lack of sound by whispering and thereby drawing the mower's attention to the silence.

But these initial guesses are merely "perhaps." The speaker, now decides that the sound and his inquiry have nothing to do with "fancy." The thinking that accompanies work differs from idle daydreaming ("no dream of the gift of idle hours"). The "hand of fay or elf" introduces the world of fairy tale and romance only to insist upon shunning it; after all, these tales teach us that "easy gold" is hazardous, sometimes even fatal. In hindsight, it may be that the nearby wood suggests the escapist allure of its darkness and mystery (as in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"). In any case, he rejects the mere poeticizing that "easy gold" suggests. Compare how Marvell's mower in "The Mower, Against Gardens" laments that since the fashion for gardens causes the fields to be neglected, fauns and fairies must till the meadows:

'Tis all enforced, the fountain and the grot,
While the sweet fields do lie forgot,
Where willing Nature does to all dispense

A wild and fragrant innocence;
 And fauns and fairies do the meadows till
 More by their presence than their skill.

Frost's mower disavows this poetical solution. So the inquiry is playful now in a different way, a way that implies nothing trivial, but an "earnest love" that belongs to the spirit in which the speaker performed the labor of mowing.⁶

"Anything *more* than the truth would have seemed too weak...." The simplicity of this labor prohibits fantastic "more-than-truths" and falsehood appears as a kind of excess while truth is to be achieved by acts of abstinence or permission reminiscent of Keats's "negative capability." The subject is receptor and discoverer, rather than inventor or creator, as though truth may be corrupted by interference from the intellect. Likewise, the phrase "too weak" suggests that truth's mark is the strength and power of the love that accompanies the labor.

Abstractions such as these conflict, of course, with the poem's drive towards the concrete, towards a truth that is even somehow identical with the concrete, and so in danger of eluding language altogether. And at this point, having remarked on the "earnest love" of his labor, the speaker introduces visual particulars that accompany the whisper: swale, rows, "feeble-pointed spikes of flowers / (Pale orchises)," a bright green snake. Thus while the poem's long central sentence (lines 7 to 12) embraces an undecieved, matter-of-fact attitude toward whisper and work that forswears "Anything more than the truth," it also proclaims an "earnest love" that expresses itself in a record of details. This anticipates the reconciliation of fact and dream; the mowing might destroy pale orchises and scare a snake, but these things belong to the loving labor

⁶Poirier detects a double meaning in the word "earnest": "And it is to the Latin and Greek derivation of the word 'earnest' that we are invited to turn when reading of the 'earnest love that laid the swale in rows.' This is love that is more than zealous or serious; it is 'earnest' also in the sense of being a promise or token of something to come, the harvest of his labor, the 'sweetest dream' and the 'harvest' of the poem itself." [*Work of Knowing* 287] I would not argue with this interpretation, but the primary meaning of "earnest" derives from the Old English for battle-ardor. The much-discussed last word of *Beowulf*, "*lofgeornost*," couples the same two words in an expression that might contain a similarly unsettling hint of violence as in the phrase "the earnest love that laid the swale in rows."

and so receive the mower's notice and a kind of blessing. There is nothing onerous in his labor; he mows in a spirit that recalls Milton's Adam, who does work in Eden prior to the Fall, but finds the work pleasant. "Earnest love" envelops the mower and his toil, and though orchises and grass might fall, the flight of the snake perhaps intimates that this loving inquiry is dispelling some sort of error.

The snake's flight clears the way for the declaration: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." This, of course, cannot simply be taken for a statement of what the scythe whispered, for the line tells us that the scythe whispered nothing more than its own sound. The naked sound itself, "fact," is its whisper and nothing *more*, nothing human, nothing in speech. The sound itself remains other, and so, paradoxically, the scythe in its own way expresses precisely this: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." By virtue of abiding without having fanciful words imposed upon it, the scythe's whisper communicates this gnomic sentence that allows the poem to close with a further sentence that properly abstains from closing anything at all: "My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make."

The striking conjunction of the stressed syllables "fact," "dream," "knows," forces us to look beyond the level on which the line simply says that while at work the mower attends to labor, leaving dreams for moments of idleness. The word "dream" refers us back to the "dream of the gift of idle hours," but since dream and fact are incommensurable, this is no daydream, but instead the dream that *labor* knows. One is reminded of the root of "fact" in the Latin *facere*, to do or make. If one were to ignore the punctuation, the simple arrangement of words here might tempt us to read something like this: "'The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows,' my long scythe whispered — and left the hay to make." But punctuated in this way, the conclusion to the whole inquiry would be merely banal. It would have attributed particular words — human speech — to the scythe, and that is exactly what the scythe does not offer up. Furthermore, such a reading would have fatally located the source of the insight: it would have made the sentence the scythe's "idea," which it expresses to a (perhaps uncomprehending) mower. Frost permits neither of these readings; the sentence does not issue from the tool nor from the man "recollecting in tranquillity"; rather, the sentence arises from the *encounter* between the work of mowing and the earnest love that is strong enough to submit to the

simplicity of the whisper. As Poirier remarks, the line "results from what the poem has done and what the worker has done to dispose of false dreams and expectations; the poem moves ahead by speculative probing, by wonderments that leave intact the essential mystery of the relationship thus developed between men and scythes, landscape and poet."

[*Work of Knowing* 288]

If the sentence emerges from the encounter of work and love, man and scythe, this "sweetest dream" cannot be merely the mower's "subjective" and idle fantasy. Such a reading would run completely counter to the straining of the poem to hear and speak something not language in the ordinary sense. Instead, the words of the last two lines strike the reader as somehow inevitable. In his receptivity to experience, the poet has led us into that region where notions of "subjectivity" and "objectivity" only confuse matters, into a kind of absolute space whose chief characteristic is responsible attention to the thing as it is, to the being of the being. If this is dreaming, then it is only insofar as "dreaming" denotes the mode of man's being among earthly things: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows."

That we cannot be quite sure at the poem's end what the scythe whispers is not an ambiguity but the proper inconclusiveness. By the poet's act of attention, the scythe's whisper has revealed itself and the poem preserves the whisper in its opacity. There is something that cannot be said: a "fact" that cannot be penetrated or enunciated and yet somehow withstands. It is not too much to say that there is a kind of vacancy or nothingness at the heart of the poem, and it is by this that the poem is transparent to what is opaque. One is aware of the poem's straining to articulate what is other-than-language, but only by virtue of this transparency to opacity can it refer "beyond" its own words. As the scythe opens a clearing in the swale, it yields with its whisper a clearing of the being of mowing for the man, though a clearing that first presents itself as darkness. This clearing and this darkness, I would suggest, are those that Heidegger explored in "The Origin of the Work of Art": "Concealment as refusal is not simply and only the limit of knowledge in any given circumstance, but the beginning of the clearing of what is lighted." [*Poetry, Language, Thought* 53-4]⁷ The terms that

⁷Hereafter abbreviated as *PLT*.

Heidegger developed in this essay, the notions of Earth and World and a “double concealment” which establishes a “Rift-design” of promise and refusal, can be invoked to help us understand what transpires in the sonnet’s final couplet.



Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art”

“The Origin of the Work of Art” had its own origin in lectures that he gave in Freiburg and Zürich in 1935 and 1936, less than a decade after the publication of *Being and Time* (1927). Although its argument is layered and dense, it may be useful briefly to sketch the role played by the terms “earth” and “world.” At the outset, Heidegger explains the title: he means to explore what a work of art fundamentally *is*, where its origins lie in a phenomenological rather than historical sense. He begins by reviewing the three chief positions that philosophy has passed down to us: that the work of art is (1) a combination of substance and accidents; (2) a manifold of what is given to the senses; and (3) a combination of matter and form. All are found lacking, chiefly because they fail to do justice to the thingly quality of a work of art, and interpose a distracting metaphysics between the work of art and its beholder. The position that prevails today, that the work of art combines matter and form, is particularly ill-suited because it derives from a meditation on the nature of *equipment* (where the craftsman must give a useful form to a useful material) rather than on the nature of art as such. The nature of equipment is such that we pay a tool no attention as long as it functions properly. While the work of art is, like equipment, something crafted, it is unlike equipment in that it has no immediate usefulness, just as the “mere thing” (a stone, a star) has no immediate usefulness. Hence we have come to think of the work of art as an item of equipment that lacks usefulness rather than as something with a nature of its own.

Heidegger reconsiders the question of the nature of equipment and discovers in the course of this inquiry (almost accidentally it seems) a clue concerning the nature of the work of art. This occurs when he chooses to explore the nature of equipment through the example of a pair of peasant shoes. Simply as an aid to thought, he brings Van Gogh’s painting of peasant shoes into his discussion, and yet something about

the painting makes the nature of peasant shoes come to light with particular sharpness. It is in the course of this inquiry into peasant shoes that the terms "earth" and "world" first enter his essay, for a consideration of peasant shoes in general yields nothing satisfactory, no insight into what the shoes really are, yet framed in Van Gogh's painting, a rich accretion of meaning gathers around the shoes:

In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself. [34; author's italics]

The success of thinking by way of a painting suggests a way of thinking about the work of art — not now as quasi-equipment or as quasi-mere-thing but *as a work*. Heidegger proposes to consider a non-representative work of art in order to pursue this line of thought: how does a people's "world", a people's "earth" disclose itself in a work of art that does not depict or imitate some other thing? He chooses the Greek temple, specifically the temple of Poseidon in Paestum, south of Naples, Italy. All that the temple brings to light — of its surroundings and its "long-absent god" and votaries — together constitute the *world* of the temple: "It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being." [42] And yet the world that emerges thus is not the temple: the stone structure stands on the rock and *makes manifest* the storm by its stability, the light by its lustre, the air by its towering height, the surging sea by its steadfast repose. This emergence and rising of things, says Heidegger, is what the Greeks meant by "*phusis*." Yet the ground of this emerging and rising, that on which the dwelling is based, also comes to a kind of presence:

Earth is that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises without violation. In the things that arise, earth is present as the sheltering agent. [42]

We have now drawn closer to what is meant by the “work” of art — as distinct from equipment and mere thing. The work demands to be erected, set up, dedicated as a work in such a way that something is splendidly present, consecrated, praised. It sets up a world of meaning, not a collection of tangible things but “the ever non-objective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being.” [44] But just as truly as the work *sets up* such a world, so it *sets forth* the material out of which it has been made — stone, color, tone, language. A peculiarity of the work of art is its way of causing its material to shine brilliantly and strikingly for the beholder — whether it be wood or sound or language or anything else — and the work “rests upon” this material, is built out of it and relies upon it. But the word “material” belongs to equipment; what the work of art rests upon and causes to come forth is “earth”:

“The work moves the earth itself into the Open of a world and keeps it there. *The work lets the earth be an earth.*” [46; author’s italics]

Yet “earth” never comes into the Open fully: color, weight, sound — the material as such — cannot be penetrated or explained or rationally mastered:

Color shines and wants only to shine. When we analyze it in rational terms by measuring its wavelengths, it is gone. It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it. It causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction. ... The earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up. [47]

So the work of art sets forth the earth as “*self-secluding*,” matter comes into the open as something that hides itself. Earth and world are thus tightly intertwined in the work of art, as the meaningfulness of “world” appears by way of the self-secluding matter of “earth.” Both dimensions

of the work present themselves in a dynamic relation that Heidegger calls a “striving” [*Streit*], not a hostile or destructive conflict but an agon resembling a wrestling match rather than a war: “the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their natures” so that each becomes stronger. [49]⁸ Exhibiting this strife, so that earth and world come forth in their natures, is the real achievement of the work of art.

It is now possible to see how the work of art’s framing of this strife may be an expression of truth. In *Being and Time*, and “On the Essence of Truth,” Heidegger had painstakingly explored the meaning of “truth” in Western thought and had revived and expanded the sense of the Greek term “*aletheia*” — truth as unconcealedness, or as “a privation of darkness.”⁹ If one visualizes a being as emerging from darkness into the light yet never fully bathed in light, such that the unconcealed is always also concealed, then one begins to think of truth in the sense of *aletheia*. This is, of course, a far cry from the customary sense of truth as “conformity with fact,” but as Heidegger points out, something must first show itself before anything can conform with it — so what is the nature of this first showing? When a being appears, it unconceals itself as concealed. The concealment may be either a simple refusal of itself or may be more in the nature of a deception, for something may appear to be other than what it is. [54] Since we never know the difference, our knowing really is finite: the concealed may not be simply known-as-concealed.



“Earth” and “World” in Language

Heidegger has explained how the terms “earth” and “world” express the mode of truth’s self-disclosure in the Greek temple — and by exten-

⁸Given the historical context of Heidegger’s remarks this interpretation might appear to be apologetic, but I’m attempting to understand simply what Heidegger’s images mean for the work of art. Heidegger, indeed, does call it a “battle” [49-50] but this seems an awkward metaphor (though perhaps a telling one) for the mutually strengthening dynamic he has just described, one that so much more closely resembles a sporting event.

⁹Prof. William Richardson SJ, in a lecture for his course “The Later Heidegger,” Boston College, 1987.

sion, in any plastic work of art. But how do these counterpoles belong to the kind of disclosure that we encounter in the poem? In what sense is “earth” apparent in the work of art whose medium is language rather than stone or paint?

Heidegger’s answer, to my mind, is not entirely satisfactory, and (to anticipate a little) I think Frost’s poem bears out the point I want to make. It has become clear that the “earth” pole is related to, though not identical with, the material from which, or rather, *in* which the work has been fashioned. This represents an important way in which the work of art differs from equipment, since equipment is merely made “from” some material, in the sense that we do not notice the material as long as the equipment remains serviceable. But the work of art reveals the material itself, in its particular and marvelous quality, for the first time. Heidegger states:

By contrast the temple-work, in setting up a world, does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work’s world. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the lighting and darkening of color, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power of the word.

That into which the work sets itself back and which it causes to come forth in this setting back of itself we called the earth. [46]

The qualities of the work’s material — stone, wood, metal, color, tone, the word — come to shine in their opacity. So far, so good. But is “the naming power of the word” analogous to “the massiveness and heaviness of stone” and to other such sensible qualities of material? “Naming power” would seem to belong rather to the dimension of the poem that Heidegger calls “world” since it implies semantic force, the word’s manifestation of something not itself. On the other hand, Heidegger’s description of the way the material of the work of art functions in the “earth” pole brings to mind that sonorous, visceral, non-semantic force of words that poetry in particular exploits and causes to appear, to shine forth. (It is this dimension of a poem that necessarily gets either left behind or transformed by translation.) To advert to this dimension of

language, so evident in poetry, is not simplistically to reduce the term “earth” to matter — to language as mere sound-waves and ink-marks. But neither are we simply dealing with poetry’s frequent use of word-sounds for semantic purposes, as in onomatopoeia. Rather, what appears to correspond in poetry to the “massiveness and heaviness of stone” in the temple, is the unmistakable way words hammer on the ear, or caress the ear, the way words “taste” on the tongue as one recites the poem — in a word, the sensible music of language. Poetry makes this dimension of language shine forth, yet shine forth as the non-semantic, the self-secluding.

Yet Heidegger neglects this aspect of poetic language. Indeed, his use of the phrase “naming power of the word” would appear to bestow greater transparency on poetic language than it can really bear, as though the subject matter of a poem were fully present for the reader. This becomes clear at the end of the essay when Heidegger concludes that since “*Art then is the becoming and happening of truth,*” it may be said that “*All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry*” [71-72, author’s italics]. Poetry occupies a “privileged position” because “language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time.” [73] Implied here is a power in language that overcomes the limitations of other media by “nominating” beings: “Only this naming nominates beings *to* their being *from out* of their being.” [73] Although all art “names” in this way, poetry itself is privileged to name beings more unreservedly and brilliantly. But does poetic language really possess the kind of unique transparency implied here?

The sonnet we have been reading suggests that it does not, despite the fact that the poem’s success in “naming” its object, the whisper, is so extraordinary, or perhaps because of it. Either way, the poem suggests that the work of art causes the stuff of language too to shine *in its opacity*, no less than the other media of artworks. In other words, “earth” is as sensibly evident in the poem as in any other work of art.



Earth and World in “Mowing”

Heidegger claims that one experiences the “un-truth of truth” as a conflict that always has its particular site; in “Mowing,” the site of this

conflict is the whisper, at once expressive and inarticulate, the dumb “fact” upon which the poet meditates. The naming of “fact” as its opposite, “sweetest dream,” within the same sentence, inscribes the ineluctable difference between earth and world, the way they coexist in tangency without merging. Indeed, the word “fact” itself here becomes charged with the “un-truth of truth,” and with this word the “earthiness” of the poem reveals itself to be a double concealment as described by Heidegger — at once a refusal and a dissembling, for insofar as the whisper of mowing appears, it presents itself mutely as non-semantic “fact.” If the word “fact” is an *allusion* to what actually is (as “fay or elf” are allusions to the purely imaginary and fictional), it is of course hardly the actual being itself. Unlike just any word, the word “fact” is abstract enough to oscillate between its root meaning of *factum*, a thing done or performed, and a metaphysical meaning of an objective truth to be passively accepted by the subject. Consequently, it functions here almost as a non-word, a kind of ellipsis whose inadequacy prompts the reader to accept it as a stand-in for the ineffable thing-in-itself, to take its darkness for the darkness of the thing itself. Yet it hardly needs to be said that this apparent insufficiency in line 13 does not represent a failure on the part of the poet; rather, the poem is saved from a success that could only be meretricious, and instead the reader’s ear inclines ever so close to the thing itself. In Frost’s hands, the word “fact” registers the double concealment of the beings that we encounter, the concealment that is the being’s *refusal* of itself and the concealment that is the being’s *dissembling*: as ellipsis it indicates the self-denial of the whisper; as ambivalent, metaphysically-charged loanword from the language of science, it obscures the whisper. But this self-denial and this dissembling appear by way of the speaker’s unwavering attention to his task, his attention to the clearing in which the whisper sounds.

Thus, through restraint and a precise equivocality, the poem permits the opacity of the scythe’s whisper, so that it points towards “earth,” and makes the reader listen to the “earth” as well as to the “world” of the poem. This is the kind of conflict that Heidegger describes as a “rift” (*Riss*): “not ... as a mere cleft is ripped open; rather, it is the intimacy with which opponents belong to each other....” [*PLT* 63] In the last two lines of the poem, then, we become fleetingly aware of the Open of truth, the place of conflict between unconcealment and concealment, whose preservation is the rift-design. This encounter with the “Open” comes

to pass not only because of the sense of particularity that Frost develops through his description of the setting, but because of the actual particularity of the poem's inquiry, its insistence upon the meaning of the whisper. So it is not this word "fact" alone that establishes this encounter with the Open, for the whole poem is a questioning of the being of the whisper which is the "word" of mowing. By virtue of the aspirates and sibilants in the first three lines, and even more by the mood of quiet attentiveness sustained throughout the poem, every reading of the poem recreates the scythe's whisper.

Perhaps, then, the non-semantic force of the diction — the whisper of the poem's own words — is what the poem seeks to hear and understand; if so, then the poem comes to be "about" that dimension of language we have identified as "earth" — the very material of language, distinct from the world of meaning that words by their semantic force signify. It is not only the scythe's whisper that is heard: the poem trains our ear to the whisper of language, the "earth" of language. So considered, this sentence, "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows" is again perfectly right, for the word "fact," suggesting the ineluctably given, alludes to the self-concealment of the non-semantic without misconstruing it.

"Mowing" brings mowing and poetic thinking into a particularly intimate relation; one might even hear the whisper of the scythe as the scratch of the pen across the paper. The scythe's whisper becomes emblematic of what the reader experiences, of the poet's whispering that leaves the scythe to whisper and the mower to mow. Poem and inquiry are one: the sentence "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows" emerges from the mower-speaker's attentive abstinence — and the progress of this abstinence is precisely the method of the poem. One cannot locate the moment when this sentence arose, in the labor of mowing or in the labor of writing.

If the poem is less "about" the encounter with concealing unconcealedness than it is an enactment or "happening" of this encounter, it is significant that its title should be a participle (as are many of Frost's titles). It suggests that the subject of the poem goes on in time, and even that it goes on in the *participation* of man with work: with things, equipment (the scythe), world (the appearance of particulars), and earth (the impenetrability of the whisper). The title hints, then, at the temporality of man's participation with being. Frost has his own

words for this, most memorably his oxymoronic formula for what it is a poem achieves: "a momentary stay against confusion." In the preface to *Complete Poems* ("The Figure a Poem Makes"), Frost lays claim to accident, so that the poem's temporal nature as event¹⁰ preserves itself in the "clarification" that is from the start obscurely given but never deliberately planned: "It begins in delight, inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life — not necessarily a great clarification, such as cults and sects are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion."¹¹

Finally, I might add that Frost's use of mowing as a motif for poetic thinking is far from unprecedented, and a long-standing tradition has already endowed mowing with resonances. I have already made passing reference to Marvell's mower poems: "The Mower, Against Gardens", "The Mower to Glow-Worms", "The Mower's Song" make the mower an archetypal figure. But these poems belong to a georgic tradition that extends even beyond Virgil to Hesiod, in which the farmer-poet's intimacy with the earth stands for the essential condition of all mankind; poetry emerges not from musing at leisure, as in pastoral, but from a conjunction of human labor and the "facts," the things themselves in their brute difference from consciousness and indifference to desire.¹² The word "verse" itself (deriving from the Latin *versus*, a line or row) links the work of the poet to the work of the mower. So it is not, I think, simply a lucky coincidence that for Heidegger the "clearing" is the scene of the encounter with being and that in Frost's poem the labor of mowing — and making a clearing — produces an inquiry into the being of mowing's whisper. The side-to-side sweeping of the scythe is an apt

¹⁰As opposed to a mimesis in the traditional sense. Timothy Clark ("Being in Mime: Heidegger and Derrida on the Ontology of Literary Language" in *Modern Language Notes* 101 (1986): pp. 1003-1021) follows Heidegger's analysis of the term "*phusis*" and reinterprets the term mimesis as *event*, the movement of withdrawing-appearing, arguing that "one must insinuate the fold of the present-participle" into the sense of mimesis:

¹¹Robert Frost *Selected Prose*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 18.

¹²See Anthony Low, *The Georgic Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), and Michael Putnam, *Virgil's Poem of the Earth: Studies in the Georgics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

metaphor for the experience of thinking; S. T. Coleridge even managed to derive the etymology of "mind" from the verb "to mow" on these grounds.¹³ Heidegger, in a statement regarding the nature of language and the sign in "The Way to Language," uses a related figure — cutting a furrow — to expound the being of language as a whole.¹⁴ Cutting a trace or furrow in the soil in order that the soil may yield fruit is

¹³Samuel T. Coleridge explores this in a letter to Josiah Wedgwood that speculates about the etymology of the word "mind". He traces its roots through the German *Meinen* and *Mahnen*, whose old signification (he writes) is the same as the English verb "to mind". In turn, he traces these verbs to the word for mowing, finding the root metaphor in the sweeping motion of a scythe. As philology, his derivation may be wholly fanciful, but his thoughts on this matter arise from a consideration of the inadequacies of Locke's cognitional theories; clearly Coleridge sees in mowing a more apt metaphor for the experience of thinking than Locke's image of markings on a blank tablet.

But the insertion of the *n* in the middle of a German verb is admitted on all hands to be *intensive* or *reduplicative*/as the Dictionary Phrase is. In reality it is no more than repeating the last syllable as people are apt to when speaking hastily or vehemently. *Mahnen* therefore is *Mahenen*, which is *Mähen* spoken hastily or vehemently. But the oldest meaning of the word *mähen* is to move forward & backward, yet still progressively — thence applied to the motion of the Scythe in mowing — from what particular motion of the word was first abstracted, is of course in this as in all other instances, lost in antiquity. For words have many fates — they first mean particulars, become generals, then are confined to some one particular again.... — To mow is the same as the Latin *movere* which was pronounced *mow-ere* — & *monere* in like manner is only the reduplicative of *mow-ere* — *mow-en* — *mow-enen* — *mownen*, or *monen*. This word in the time of Ennius was *menere*, & hence *mens* — ... The Greek *mnaomai*, i.e. *menaomai*, from whence *mnhmh*, the memory, is the same word — and all alike mean a repetition of similar motion, as in a scythe. [*Collected Letters, II*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs. Vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-1971), pp. 696-697].

Coleridge finds in mowing a metaphor for thinking: man inquires by gently and steadily clearing a path. Coleridge's derivation of the word "mind" from the word "mow" was brought to my attention by Dr. Alan Crowley.

¹⁴See Heidegger's discussion of this whole, the unity of the being of language rather than just certain aspects of it, which he calls "the design":

The name demands of us that we see the proper character of the being of language with greater clarity. The "sign" in design (Latin *signum*) is related to *secare*, to cut — as in saw, sector, segment. To design is to cut a trace. Most of us know the word "sign" only in its debased meaning — lines on a surface. But we make a design also when we cut a furrow into the soil to open it to seed and growth. [OWL 121]

Heidegger's image for language's action when it shows by unlocking, and yields beings by appropriation (*ereignis*). Appropriation

yields the opening of the clearing in which present beings can persist and from which absent beings can depart while keeping their persistence in the withdrawal. ... The yielding owning, the Appropriation, confers more than any effectuation, making, or founding. What is yielding is Appropriation itself — and nothing else.
[OWL 127]

The reader and the poem itself both “yield.” “Yield” is a useful word for the process because its root is in the Old English word “gild” — a tribute, payment or return. In modern uses of the word, the transitive and intransitive senses can be quite at odds with one another: the soil yields wheat, but it yields to the plow. One is a production, the other a permission. But always something of the notion of tribute, of sacrifice and appeasement, is present. The transitive sense of the word merges with the intransitive sense at the point where the medieval notion of a transaction is found somewhere in the context. Its connotations have long been explored and exploited in English georgic, particularly by Marlowe and Johnson. When one yields something, one brings forth by surrendering one's hold on the thing. Poem and reader must both yield in order to preserve what a poem says. If the poem shows the neighborhood of mowing and thinking, it also shows the neighborhood of mowing and reading: we listen like the mower to the poem's whispers. 