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Just How “Like Horace in the True Horatian Vein” Was Robert Frost?

MICHAEL WEST

THE HORATIAN Serenity of Robert Frost” was the title of the section devoted to the American poet in 1946 by Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska in their *History of American Poetry 1900–1940*. The analogy with Horace has cropped up regularly in Frost criticism since its beginnings. In 1959, the brouhaha over Lionel Trilling’s birthday tribute publicized the fact that many of Frost’s academic admirers saw him as a much less serene poet than the one portrayed by Gregory and Zaturenska—as a poet often naively idolized by some who flocked to his readings and bought half a million volumes of his verse. A darker Frost has been in vogue since midcentury, and especially since Lawrance Thompson’s controversial three-volume authorized biography stressed the beloved American bard’s notable capacity for private rancor. But the analogy with Horace keeps cropping up regularly. Is it still valid? The question of just how serene a poet Frost was is complicated intriguingly by a question less frequently asked within the precincts of American studies: just how serene a poet was Horace?

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Horace who prevailed in the American imagination (thanks to translators like Eugene Field and the versifiers of Franklin P. Adams’s column “The Conning Tower”) resembled the late nineteenth-century British Horace—the poet primarily of the *Odes*, which were construed as repositories of polished but gelid bromides conferring a touch of class on anyone quoting them—the only classical author one could quote in polite society without incurring the charge of pedantry, according to Anthony Trollope. “Horace has but the clubman’s poise and

no stronger emotion than might move one toward a particularly luscious oyster," Ezra Pound opined in 1930, noting that "he is often rendered purely facetiously."¹ This supposed purveyor of Roman *vers de société* was a diminished version of the vital Enlightenment Horace of the *Satires* and *Epistles* whom the English Augustans gladly drew on for social wisdom befitting the man of sense—a model of good taste both aesthetic and moral who in vexatious circumstances nonetheless managed a serenity worth imitating.

Serenity, however, hardly describes Andrew Marvell's seventeenth-century "Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland," where Marvell's balancing act amid political turmoil suggests a classical predecessor he imagined as muscular and tough-minded, struggling to reconcile the dynamic tensions of a revolutionary era.

Consider some biographical parallels between Frost and Horace. Never mentioning his mother, the Roman poet was rather condescending toward women but admired his father, who educated him ambitiously, even sending him to Athens to study, but as a freedman bequeathed him an ambiguous social status that he remained rather defensive about. Frost's father was an alcoholic Harvard graduate who died young of TB, thereby uprooting his family from San Francisco and leaving his sickly and fearful eleven-year-old son to the care of his schoolteaching mother and his pragmatic grandfather, a successful factory foreman in Lawrence, Mass. Horace fought on the losing side in the bloody Civil Wars, thereby forfeiting his patrimony, and as a former Republican had to come to terms with the new and sometimes ruthless regime he'd fought. Inheriting his father's stance as a conservative Democrat, the mature Frost was increasingly alienated from his political party by the welfare-state policies of the New Deal.

Horace was relieved from uncongenial bureaucratic labor and enabled to devote himself to poetry by Maecenas' gift of a small suburban estate with five tenant farmers to do the farm work. Frost's Maecenas was his grandfather, whose largesse sent him to Dartmouth, Harvard, and abroad as

well as buying him two farms (where he soon tired of the work) to spare him less congenial forms of labor; then in later life, Frost enjoyed the patronage of American colleges, where as a writer-in-residence he perfected the fine art of educating while teaching as few students as possible. The threat of death pervades Horace's poetry and is only partially neutralized by various semi-jocular accounts of alleged narrow escapes—from death on the battlefield after throwing away his shield to run, from drowning, from a falling tree, from a ravening wolf. Temporarily unlucky in courtship, young Frost made the first of several theatrical gestures at suicide; his marriage was not without strain, exacerbated by tensions when—like his only sibling—two of his four children went insane (one committing suicide) and a third died at age four partly because of Frost's negligence. Whatever alleged "serenity" either poet managed to cultivate would seem an arduous uphill struggle, to say the least.

It would be easy enough to supplement these biographical analogies with evidence of direct influence. In the 1890s no subject except algebra boasted higher enrollments in American secondary education than Latin. Frost's four years of Latin and three of Greek at Lawrence High School included courses in composition in both languages. His interest in the classics sparked further reading on his own, memorizing favorite passages, then application to Harvard. "I had a passion for Latin and Greek when I was in college," he recalled, and during two years studying classical languages there to prepare for a career teaching them he earned distinguished grades.²

He owned three editions of Horace, whom he read desultorily over the years; indeed, in 1939 he proposed teaching a course in "the Roman classics" at Harvard, backing off only when the department suggested a senior classicist be present also. Sprinkled among the surprisingly few direct classical allusions in his poetry a handful to Horace have been noted, including my title line taken from his "The Lesson for Today." Similar poems like "Build Soil" and "New Hampshire" lay plausible claim to be "like Horace in the true

Horatian vein," for like Horace's *sermones*, Frost's entire poetic was explicitly founded on catching the conversational tones of voice that such rambling, mildly satiric verse ruminations strikingly exemplify. Horatian in another sense is the kicker close of "New Hampshire," where after defending that state at great length he tails off, "At present I am living in Vermont." This maneuver recalls the ironic ending of the *Second Epode*, where lengthy praise of country life is suddenly undercut by putting it all in the mouth of the vacillating moneylender Alfius. Along with Virgil's eclogues, that dramatic monologue surely made an impression on a poet who cultivated dramatic monologues and dialogues. "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader," he once remarked, echoing the *Ars Poetica* 102-103, and he must have noted that much of Horace's advice there has to do with dramatic and narrative poetry.³ Priding himself on having written some English accentual hendecasyllabics, Frost shared Horace's particular interest in classical metrics, so Helen Bacon may well be right in conjecturing that his poem "The Lost Follower" reflects Horace's *Epode* 16 in proclaiming, "The gold for which they leave the golden line / Of lyric is a golden light divine, / Never the gold of darkness from a mine." Writing in alternating dactylic hexameters and iambic trimeters, Horace there floridly bemoans a Roman society rent by civil dissensions and summons any remaining pious souls to flee Rome with him as their bard and voyage to the Blessed Isles to recover the Golden Age. An unusual number of the poem's hexameters exemplify the so-called "golden line" extolled in Latin poetics, with two nouns and two adjectives bracketing a central verb. Whether or not Frost had *Epode* 16 in mind when he extolled "the golden line / Of lyric," his brief epigram "An Answer" might be imagined as a response to it where the taste for puns that he shared with Horace flowered in a rueful skepticism about recapturing a Golden Age anywhere outside poetry: "But Islands of the Blessèd, bless you, son, / I never came upon a blessèd one."

In whimsically describing three concentric lines of defense against the Infinite, Frost's poem "Triple Bronze" clearly echoes Horace's phrase *aes triplex* (*Odes* 1.3). But the undoubted verbal echo of Frost's title points toward a deeper intellectual affinity between the two poets that merits extended exploration.

The Infinite's being so wide
 Is the reason the Powers provide
 For inner defense my hide.
 For next defense outside
 I make myself this time
 Of wood or granite or lime
 A wall too hard for crime
 Either to breach or climb.
 Then a number of us agree
 On a national boundary.
 And that defense makes three
 Between too much and me.

Frost's preoccupation with walls, boundaries, and limits has been often noted; the critical literature on "Mending Wall" alone is enormous and contentious. But no one has stressed the extent to which this preoccupation echoes an obsessive theme of Horace's. "Est modus in rebus," the Roman poet proclaims in his first Satire, where the word *modus* suggests his core values through such Latin and English cognates as *moderatio* = moderation and *modestia* = modesty. "Let there be measure in all things. / In short, there are set limits beyond which, / And short of which, the just man cannot remain," one recent version of this key passage has it.⁴ *Modus* also denotes the measure of rhythm, of course, so the verb *modulari*, to modulate, can specifically mean to play music or to compose verse. Indeed, though most scholars take his references to the lyre as merely poetic fancies, it has been argued with some persuasiveness that Horace may indeed have been an accomplished musician capable of accompanying his own verse. Fusing ethics and aesthetics, Horace's activity as a moral poet particularly proud of his metrical virtuosity is thus grounded upon keeping *due measure*.

Horace's sense of proper limits owed much, of course, to his early infatuation with Epicurean philosophy, which never entirely vanished. Epicurus taught that "freedom from pain and fear is the *telos* . . . but it is also a *peras* and a *horos*," a limit.⁵ Like the Christian concept of evil the Epicurean notion of happiness is essentially privative, essentially limited; with the removal of pain and fear it is vain to try to maximize the essentially negative quality of pleasure and erect it into ecstasy. Stressing motion and change, Epicurus relied on a rather vague notion of limits to provide stability, fixity, and certitude in a world that was politically turbulent and metaphysically baffling. In his great Roman disciple Lucretius, whom Horace occasionally echoes, the idea became so central that this Epicurean epic circumscribes this turbulent world within imaginary walls, the *moenia mundi*. "Lucretius was indeed correct in identifying the doctrine of limits as a unifying theme in the Epicurean philosophy, but . . . he overstated his case when he claimed that Epicurus tells us where the limits are" (DeLacy 113). In the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius credits his master with teaching that everything has a *finita potestas*, an *alte terminus haerens* (1.75–77)—a finite power, a deeply embedded limit in all. Fear of death is idle, for death is but the *terminus vitae*, the *terminus malorum*—the end of life and its evils. Many of these limits seem essentially inviolable; thus greed vainly ignores the *terminus habendi*, the limits of possessiveness, a theme Horace elaborated upon in poem after poem insisting that wealth cannot cross the boundary of the grave any more than can pain. But other Epicurean boundaries seem more permeable. "Birth is also a crossing of boundaries, an emergence *in luminis oras* [onto the shores of light] . . . Thus there are some boundaries (e.g., between life and death, justice and injustice) that can in some sense be crossed; others (e.g., the limits imposed on atoms or on the increase of pleasure) that cannot" (DeLacy 110).

What Horace inherited from Lucretius and his master Epicurus was thus a philosophical worldview where boundaries

were vital but where there was no clear distinction between those that were passable and impassable. This worldview also reverberated in Frost, who read his copy of the *De Rerum Natura* with gusto, wrote a poem entitled “Lucretius and the Lake Poets,” and preferred him and Epicurus among all the philosophers for “their boldness in facing the bleak infinities.”⁶ The three concentric defensive boundaries that Frost celebrates in “Triple Bronze”—his skin, his property, and his country—were also Horatian foci. Indeed, the turmoil of the late Republic may have accentuated a general anxiety about boundary violation that the shape-shifting tales of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* cannily exploited. Although Horace did not exhibit Lucretius’s marked aversion from bodily interpenetration in sex, the narrow escapes he describes from death by the sword, drowning, being crushed by a falling tree or eaten by a wolf suggest that, like Frost, beneath the cheerful veneer he worried that his innermost line of defense, his hide, might be breached or swallowed up and engulfed. Maintaining a sense of proper physical boundaries is of course a common and quite legitimate psychological concern, and Rorschach tests evaluate subjects quantitatively on the degree to which they perceive ambiguous visual images as either barriers or evidence of penetrability. In a provocative adaptation of this method to cultural history, R. F. Newbold compared representative 6,000-word passages from five Latin authors from the first centuries BC or AD with similar passages from five authors from the end of the fourth century AD, tabulating and scoring their verbal imagery in a manner analogous to that prescribed for Rorschach interpretation.⁷ The scores substantiated Newbold’s hypothesis that in the body politic of the declining empire there would be more imagery suggesting vulnerability to penetration and the need to maintain strong bodily boundaries. Moreover, an interesting corollary was his finding that of the five Golden- or Silver-Age Latin authors sampled, Horace was the only one to match the late Latin authors in the frequency of his barrier images while much less likely to use images of penetration

than were Virgil, Seneca, Tacitus, and Suetonius as well as all the late Latin authors.

While I'm not quite ready to stereotype Horace as a high-barrier personality in Rorschach jargon, like Frost he certainly seems poles removed from such allegedly low-barrier authors as Poe and Kafka. Poem after poem preaches respect for limits. *Odes* 1.3, the famous *propemptikon* to Vergil, makes much of the sacred barriers separating earth, sea, and sky, and in *Odes* 11.18 the greedy developer who breaches the natural shoreline to extend his property out into the ocean then becomes a bogeyman neighbor ready to “knock down the boundary markers / And encroach on the land next door that your tenant lives on.”⁸ Horace's cardinal value of *aurea mediocritas* is described in *Odes* 11.10 as navigating safely along the liminal zone separating open sea from the treacherous shoreline. Romans venerated the god Terminus who presided over stone landmarks, and in his second *Epode* Horace paints an idyllic picture of the rural peace that ensues when countryfolk honor Silvanus, *tutor finium*, guardian of boundaries on farms cleared from woodland, and as neighbors jointly celebrate the Terminalia sanctifying the borders demarcating adjacent properties.

“There is a limit to our time extension,” Frost proclaims in “The Lesson for Today,” and from that Epicurean doctrine of morality “Build Soil” draws the conventional Horatian moral:

Greed has been taught a little abnegation
And shall be more before we're done with it.

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None shall be as ambitious as he can.
None should be as ingenious as he could,
Not if I had my say. Bounds should be set. . . . (p. 292)

Like the drumlin woodchuck to whom he cheerfully compares himself, his survival is due to the fact that “though small / As measured against the All, / I have been so instinctively thorough / About my crevice and burrow.” Although the Frostian speaker in “Trespass” had neither posted nor

fenced his land, he was troubled all day by the “surly freedom” of someone wandering over it, and his equanimity was restored only when the visitor formally asked for a drink at the kitchen door, acknowledgment of his ownership that “made my property mine once more.”

Shelter within snug limits is the beginning of wisdom, dramatized by the speaker in “Any Size We Please,” who first indulged “an absurd dramatic spell” by stretching out his arms to the universe “in infinite appeal,” then drawing them in “for warmth of self-embrace,” “slapped his breast to verify his purse / And hugged himself for all his universe.” As the woodchuck hints, self-protection is the basis for any sound love. “Love has earth to which she clings . . . / Wall within wall to shut fear out. / But Thought has need of no such things . . .” —and Thought’s fantasies of freely ranging the universe are clearly inferior to Love’s bondage in “Bond and Free.” “My friends all know I’m interpersonal. / But long before I’m interpersonal, / Away ’way down inside I’m personal,” Frost remarks in “Build Soil.” “Just so before we’re international / We’re national and act as nationals” (p. 293). Since only intact identities can hope for worthwhile communion, poems like “A Time to Talk” and “Meeting and Passing” celebrate meetings of friends or lovers that take place beside walls. This theme is developed perhaps most richly in “Two Look at Two,” where a loving couple on an evening stroll “halted by a tumbled wall / With barbed-wire” are confronted first by a puzzled doe and then after an interval by a quizzical buck. Both deer slowly pass by on their side seemingly unafraid, but the wall that sunders the couple from the animals suggests the difficulty of crossing the boundary between species. By offering the animals protection, the wall facilitates such inter-species communion as takes place; but not only may much of the couple’s hypothesizing about their thought processes be illusory, so may the intimacy of their own relationship be qualified by the strikingly independent behavior of the male and female deer, who perhaps form a twosome only in the lovers’ coupling imagination.

Given the importance of walls, the urge to transcend them is often futile or suspect. Thinkers who seek to leap “from bound to free” find themselves eventually veering “back to bound” (“To a Thinker”). Thus the Frostian speaker in “There Are Roughly Zones,” who has planted a peach tree farther north than its proper habitat, finds himself worrying whether it will survive a killing winter night:

What comes over a man, is it soul or mind—
 That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?
 You would say that his ambition was to extend the reach
 Clear to the Arctic of every living kind.
 Why is his nature forever so hard to teach
 That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,
 There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed.

If the tree is destined to die, he ruefully and guiltily concludes, “It can blame this limitless trait in the hearts of men.”

But before we conclude that Frost and Horace are twin spirits in this respect, we should explore Roman attitudes toward limits a little further. On the Capitoline Hill stood the temple of Jupiter Terminus, also known as the temple of Jupiter Triumphator and Propagator. The legendary Romulus slew Remus for leaping over a wall there, then proclaimed, “So shall everyone fare who shall dare to leap over my fortifications!” The temple seems first to have honored Jupiter as the guarantor of stable boundaries. But as Rome expanded, so did its boundaries, and the ritual of *propagatio terminorum* was instituted. Livy describes how Roman generals departing on campaigns of conquest would first sacrifice to Jupiter to enlarge the boundaries of the state. Although Horace deploras rapacious landlords with similar aims, his ambivalent endorsements of Augustus’ foreign policy suggest that he did not regard stability as sacrosanct when it came to the borders of the empire but subscribed paradoxically to what has been well described as “a singular conception of dynamic stability.”⁹ Indeed, Horace’s work is permeated with a consciousness of the limits of limits. “In

love, the twin evils are warring and making / Peace, having spats and agreeing,” argues *Satires* 11.3. “If anyone tries to control these / Unstable elements, fickle as chance and as changeful as weather, / So as to give them stability, he can no more set them straight than / He can go crazy within the strict limits and measures of reason.”¹⁰ Often cited as a repudiation of Epicureanism, these lines nonetheless reflect the Greek philosopher’s ambivalence over whether some boundaries may not be absolute and inviolable. Can love be reconciled to limits? For all his skepticism of the passions extolled by Roman elegists like Propertius, an ode like 1.13 describing Horace’s confusion on beholding the marks left on Lydia by Telephus does not carry conviction in urging the merits of placid, peaceful love but suggests a sneaking envy for the passional experience it ostensibly deploras. And the generally tepid quality of his own love poetry seems consciously to be travestied when the second Satire of Book One recommends unembarrassed quickies with slave girls as a sort of golden mean between extremes like the adulterous pursuit of married women and passionate dissipation with courtesans.

But it is perhaps in the Bacchic odes that Horace’s ambivalence emerges most clearly. “Dulce est desipere in loco” (*Odes* IV.12.28) may seem a characteristically Horatian tagline in safely circumscribing within limits (*in loco*) any temporary sweet unwisdom contemplated. But the celebration urged for Numida’s return in *Odes* 1.36.11 specifically rejects any limit on tipping—*neu promptae modus amphorae*. Elsewhere, heady with immoderate drink, the poet cries, “Where are you taking me, Bacchus, full of yourself?” and compares himself to a Bacchante transported beyond the bounds of her native land in a Dionysiac ecstasy that qualifies him to sing Caesar’s praise (*Odes* III.25). Likewise in *Odes* II.19 the poet claims an ecstatic vision of the god in the remote wilderness that left him trembling with a mixture of fear, joy, and inspiration. In the fourth Roman ode of Book III, possession by the Muse Calliope is portrayed as an *amabilis insania*, a lovely delirium that carries him beyond

all bounds as a rapt boyhood wanderlust once transported him safely far beyond the borders of Apulia. Likewise, in *Odes* 1.22 song transported him in ecstatic reverie *ultra terminum*, beyond the fixed boundary of his Sabine farm, yet preserved him there in an encounter with a fierce forest wolf. Evidently, "to live sensibly and well, a man must respect nature's boundaries; but to understand other lives and live his own most fully, he must frequently overstep long-trusted, well-defined positions."¹¹ Thus the famous ode on the death of Cleopatra (and the defeat of her Bacchic consort Antony) lavishes pejorative Dionysiac diction on the queen and her eunuch aides—insane, drunk, frenzied, frantic, uncontrolled—but summons Romans to similarly abandoned celebration and concludes by sympathetically portraying Cleopatra's regal pride in facing her end serenely, much as if she were a trans-sexual Regulus (*Odes* 1.37). Summarizing Horace's attitude toward Dionysiac ecstasy as a mixture of attraction and recoil, Antonio La Penna concludes that like other Roman authors from Catullus to Vergil for whom "intoxication and fear are mingled in persistent ambiguity," Horace's poems show that "the experience of Dionysiac ecstasy fascinated him."¹²

If Horace's respect for limits is not unlimited, does Frost betray similar ambivalence? Much more rarely. "You may taunt me with not being able to flee the earth," he concedes in "Not Quite Social." "You have me there, but loosely as I would be held." "The Cow in Apple Time" leaps the wall to surfeit on fermented orchard windfalls, so that she "bellows on a knoll against the sky" while "her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry." The drunken ecstasy that "inspires" her makes her unproductive; hence this eminently rational poet's ingrained acceptance of bondage and limitation rarely falters. "The world has room to make a bear feel free" as she ambles over walls in the autumn, but her goal is the snug confinement of hibernation; by contrast man resembles a caged bear restlessly pacing, unable to be content within the physical and metaphysical limits the universe imposes on him ("The

Bear”). Such inchoate discontent prompts the poet in “A Star in a Stone-Boat” to search for a meteor fragment from interstellar space that may have fallen to earth locally and been incorporated in a stone wall by an uncomprehending farmer:

From following walls I never lift my eye
Except at night to places in the sky
Where showers of charted meteors let fly.
Some may know what they seek in school and church,
And why they seek it there; for what I search
I must go measuring stone walls perch on perch . . .

But the poem shrinks rather than expands his narrowly bounded universe, for should he ever find his dwindled star in a wall, it “promises the prize / Of the one world complete in any size / That I am like to compass, fool or wise.” “The Sound of Trees” constantly “talks of going / But never gets away,” tempting us “to lose all measure of pace, / And fixity in our joys,” and the poem ends in a rare mood of rebellion, with the poet promising someday to heed their ironically rooted advice, “make the reckless choice,” and “be gone” where they will never follow. But “Reluctance” is more typical in portraying the poet coming home after a late autumn hike over hills and walls with “heart . . . still aching to seek” but head and feet reluctant:

Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things
And yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?

Frost’s characteristic resignation to limits illuminates the critical controversy surrounding one of his most famous poems, “Mending Wall,” where the speaker challenges an adjoining farmer’s proverbial belief that “Good fences make good neighbors.” As *The Robert Frost Encyclopedia* observes, “The poem . . . is often read as a defense of the

utopian dream of a world without boundaries," and while the farmer's point of view has its critical defenders, "many critics do not believe that the poem ever does take a side," "an appraisal that has become the dominant critical view of the poem."¹³

But is the poem such an anomaly in a canon where most poems treat boundedness as necessary and desirable? Without presuming to settle the question, it's worth noting that most interpretations tend to treat the speaker as essentially a mouthpiece for Frost's own ideas rather than as a flawed dramatic character. Yet one should shrink from crediting Frost with the speaker's belief that his neighbor's adherence to ancient agricultural traditions makes him seem "like an old-stone savage," for Horace was only one of many Latin authors celebrating the ritual establishment of boundaries, and Frost himself hardly equated classical culture with the primitive stone age. Frost wrote the poem in England during World War I when "thinking of the old wall which I hadn't mended in several years and which must be in terrible condition. . . . I was very homesick for my old wall in New England."¹⁴ Its wartime composition hardly favored the utopian dream of a world without boundaries, for the ocean that sundered him from home also preserved America from the worst ravages of the war; and the lack of good fences along the Franco-Belgian frontier had not made France and Germany good neighbors. So not only philosophical conviction but nostalgia supports his comment on "Mending Wall" in later years that "the point of that poem is that you have to have walls even when there is no apparent need for them."¹⁵

Generally skeptical or non-committal on the possibility of an afterlife, in "Misgiving" Frost confessed to mild transcendental longings, like the leaves on a tree yearning to follow the wind and finally able to do so in the fall. But instead of following the wind far abroad as they'd promised, they now "seek sheltering wall, / . . . for the night" and pile up comfortably there, leaving the poet clinging wistfully to his transcendental ambition but dubious about fulfilling it:

I only hope that when I am free
 As they are free to go in quest
 Of the knowledge beyond the bounds of life
 It may not seem better to me to rest.

To the limited extent that this earth-bound poet could envision an afterlife, he tended to imagine it not as permanently crossing a Tennysonian bar into another world but rather as temporarily surmounting a barrier only to return in some form of reincarnation. "Birches" famously describes his ambition to climb a tree toward heaven until the trunk bent, unable to sustain this ambition, and set him down again on earth. Several poems in his final volume develop this vein of speculation, with "Kitty Hawk" envisioning a cycle in which the ethereal soul constantly risks the bondage of material substantiation: "Spirit enters flesh / And for all it's worth / Charges into earth / In birth after birth / Ever fresh and new." "Away" promises that the poet "may return / If dissatisfied / With what I learn / From having died," while his untitled valedictory poem describes his felling a single maple, then trudging home in the winter twilight to conclude ambiguously

I see for Nature no defeat
 In one tree's overthrow
 Or for myself in my retreat
 For yet another blow. (p. 478)

However whimsical these flirtations with reincarnation, they do suggest Frost's difficulty in conceiving of a desirable world not bounded by earth's physical limits. Although Horace indulged in no such eschatological fancies, his flirtations with Dionysiac ecstasy did offer him tantalizing glimpses of a world beyond rational comprehension. Moreover, his confidence in his verse permitted him to proclaim proudly, "Non omnis moriar"—I shall not wholly die (*Odes* III.30.6). Upon the publication of Frost's *Collected Poems* in 1939 Frost's editor sent him a congratulatory telegram concluding "exegisti monumentum aere perennius," adapting Horace's famous

boast to read, "You have erected a monument more lasting than bronze." Profoundly touched, Frost confessed, "The Latin gave me a stir that I never expected to have again in this world from publication."¹⁶ But for all the adulation Frost enjoyed during his career Horace's overweening confidence in his poetry seems—like the Nobel Prize—to have eluded him. If by the term "Horatian" we mean to designate a non-visionary poetic conversational even in lyrics and governed by a scrupulous sense of limits that humbly sticks to common sense and common experience, one could argue that Frost is even more Horatian than Horace.

NOTES

1. E. Pound, "Horace" (1930), in *Poetry and Prose Contributions to Periodicals*, Lea Baechler, A. Walton Litz, and James Longenbach, eds. (New York 1991), v.191–92. Always more complicated than this obiter dictum would suggest, Pound's attitude toward Horace evolved over the years and culminated at the end of his life in powerful versions of three odes. Frost's similar ambivalence toward Pound was reflected amusingly when late in life an interviewer asked him whether he'd "read a lot in the Classics," prompting the terse reply, "Probably more Latin and Greek than Pound ever did," *Interviews with Robert Frost*, Edward Connery Latham, ed. (Boston 1966), 229.

2. Quoted in Robert S. Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Classics," *Classical Journal* 35 (1940), 405.

3. Quoted in Helen H. Bacon, "In and Outdoor Schooling: Robert Frost and the Classics," *American Scholar* 43 (1974), 649. All my own quotations from Frost's works refer by title or page to *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*, Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson, eds. (New York 1995).

4. *Satires* 1.1.106–107, in *The Complete Odes and Satires of Horace*, Sidney Alexander, trans. (Princeton 1999), 195.

5. Phillip DeLacy, "Limit and Variation in Epicurean Philosophy," *Phoenix* 23 (1969), 106, my transliteration.

6. Reginald Cook, *The Dimensions of Robert Frost* (New York 1958), 26.

7. R. H. Newbold, "Boundaries and Bodies in Late Antiquity," *Arethusa* 12 (1979), 93–114. On this subject see also Charles Segal, "Boundaries, Worlds, and Analogical Thinking, or How Lucretius Learned to Love Atomism and Still Write Poetry," in *The Interpretation of Roman Poetry: Empiricism or Hermeneutics?* Karl Galinsky, ed. (Frankfurt-am-Main 1992), 137–56.

8. *The Odes of Horace*, David Ferry, trans. (New York 1997), 149.
9. Giulia Piccaluga, *Terminus: I Segni di confine nella religione romana* (Rome 1974), 200, my trans.
10. *The Complete Works of Horace*, Charles E. Passage, trans. (New York 1983), 70.
11. Kenneth J. Reckford, *Horace* (New York 1969), 57.
12. A. La Penna, "Il Vino di Orazio: nel *modus* e contro il *modus*," in *In Vino Veritas*, Oswyn Muray and Manuela Tecusan, eds. (London 1995), 272–73, my trans.
13. *The Robert Frost Encyclopedia*, Nancy Lewis Tuten and John Zubizarreta, eds. (Westport, CT 2001), 205.
14. Quoted in James L. Wilson, "The Other Side of the Wall," *Iowa Review* 10 (1979), 74.
15. Quoted in Clifford Lyons, "Not Unbounded," in *Robert Frost: Studies of the Poetry*, Kathryn Gibbs Harris, ed. (Boston 1979), 82.
16. Quoted in Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Later Years*, 1938–63 (New York 1976), 38.

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