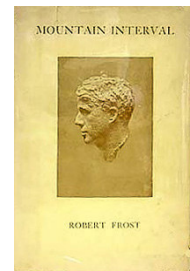




5 famous poems by Robert Frost (1874-1963) & background information to « The Road Less Taken »

Henry Holt & Company : New York, 1921



5 famous poems by Robert Frost

A) From *North of Boston* (1914)

1. « Mending Wall »

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:

He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors'.
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows?
But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me~
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

2. « The Death of the Hired Man »

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. 'Silas is back.'
She pushed him outward with her through the door
And shut it after her. "Be kind," she said.
She took the market things from Warren's arms
And set them on the porch, then drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.
'When was I ever anything but kind to him?
But I'll not have the fellow back,' he said.
I told him so last haying, didn't I?
"If he left then," I said, "that ended it."
What good is he? Who else will harbour him
At his age for the little he can do?
What help he is there's no depending on.
Off he goes always when I need him most.
'He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,
won't have to beg and be beholden."
"All right," I say "I can't afford to pay
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could."
"Someone else can."
"Then someone else will have to.
I shouldn't mind his bettering himself
If that was what it was. You can be certain,
When he begins like that, there's someone at him
Trying to coax him off with pocket-money, --
In haying time, when any help is scarce.
In winter he comes back to us. I'm done.'
'Shh I not so loud: he'll hear you,' Mary said.
'I want him to: he'll have to soon or late.'

'He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove.
When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,
Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,
A miserable sight, and frightening, too--
You needn't smile -- I didn't recognize him--
I wasn't looking for him-- and he's changed.
Wait till you see.'
'Where did you say he'd been?
He didn't say. I dragged him to the house,
And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke.
I tried to make him talk about his travels.
Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off.'
'What did he say? Did he say anything?'
'But little.'
'Anything? Mary, confess
He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me.'
'Warren!'
'But did he? I just want to know.'
'Of course he did. What would you have him say?
Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man
Some humble way to save his self-respect.
He added, if you really care to know,
He meant to dear the upper pasture, too.
That sounds like something you have heard before?
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way
He jumbled everything. I stopped to look
Two or three times -- he made me feel so queer--
To see if he was talking in his sleep.
He ran on Harold Wilson -- you remember -
The boy you had in haying four years since.
He's finished school, and teaching in his college.
Silas declares you'll have to get him back.
He says they two will make a team for work:

Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!
The way he mixed that in with other things.
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft
On education -- you know how they fought

All through July under the blazing sun,
Silas up on the cart to build the load,
Harold along beside to pitch it on.'
'Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot.'
'Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.
You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger!
Harold's young college boy's assurance piqued him.
After so many years he still keeps finding
Good arguments he sees he might have used.
I sympathize. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late.
Harold's associated in his mind with Latin.
He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
He studied Latin like the violin
Because he liked it -- that an argument!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong--
Which showed how much good school had ever done
him. He wanted to go over that. 'But most of all
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay --'
'I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.
He bundles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well.
He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.'
'He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be

Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different.'
Part of a moon was filling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard the tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night.
'Warren,' she said, 'he has come home to die:
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time.'
'Home,' he mocked gently.
'Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course he's nothing to us, any more

B) From *Mountain Interval*

3. « Birches »

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay.
Ice-storms do that. Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves

then was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.'
'Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.'
'I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve.'
Warren leaned out and took a step or two,
Picked up a little stick, and brought it back
And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.
'Silas has better claim on' us, you think,
Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles
As the road winds would bring him to his door.
Silas has walked that far no doubt to-day.
Why didn't he go there? His brother's rich,
A somebody- director in the bank.'
'He never told us that.'
'We know it though.'
'I think his brother ought to help, of course.
I'll see to that if there is need. He ought of right
To take him in, and might be willing to-
He may be better than appearances.
But have some pity on Silas. Do you think
If he'd had any pride in claiming kin
Or anything he looked for from his brother,
He'd keep so still about him all this time?'
'I wonder what's between them.'
'I can tell you.
Silas is what he is -- we wouldn't mind him--
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don't know why he isn't quite as good
As anyone. He won't be made ashamed
To please his brother, worthless though he is.'
'I can't think Si ever hurt anyone.'
'No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.
He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge.
You must go in and see what you can do.
I made the bed up for him there to-night.
You'll be surprised at him -- how much he's broken.
His working days are done; I'm sure of it.'
'I'd not be in a hurry to say that.'
'I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself.
But, Warren, please remember how it is:
He' come to help you ditch the meadow.
He has a plan, You mustn't laugh at him.
He may not speak of it, and then he may.
I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
Will hit or miss the moon.'
It hit the moon. Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.
Warren returned-- too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.
'Warren?' she questioned.
'Dead,' was all he answered.

As the breeze rises, and turn many-coloured
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,

And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
 So low for long, they never right themselves:
 You may see their trunks arching in the woods
 Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground,
 Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
 Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
 But I was going to say when Truth broke in
 With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm,
 I should prefer to have some boy bend them
 As he went out and in to fetch the cows--
 Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
 Whose only play was what he found himself,
 Summer or winter, and could play alone.
 One by one he subdued his father's trees
 By riding them down over and over again
 Until he took the stiffness out of them,
 And not one but hung limp, not one was left
 For him to conquer. He learned all there was
 To learn about not launching out too soon
 And so not carrying the tree away
 Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
 To the top branches, climbing carefully
 With the same pains you use to fill a cup

4. « Fire and Ice » (1923)

Some say the world will end in fire,
 Some say in ice.
 From what I've tasted of desire
 I hold with those who favor fire.
 But if it had to perish twice,
 I think I know enough of hate
 To say that for destruction ice
 Is also great
 And would suffice.

Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
 Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
 Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
 So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
 And so I dream of going back to be.
 It's when I'm weary of considerations,
 And life is too much like a pathless wood
 Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
 Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
 From a twig's having lashed across it open.
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over.
 May no fate wilfully misunderstand me
 And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
 Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
 I don't know where it's likely to go better.
 I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree~
 And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
 Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
 But dipped its top and set me down again.
 That would be good both going and coming back.
 One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

5. « Bereft » (1928)

Where had I heard this wind before
 Change like this to a deeper roar?
 What would it take my standing there for,
 Holding open a restive door,
 Looking down hill to a frothy shore?
 Summer was past and day was past.
 Somber clouds in the west were massed.
 Out in the porch's sagging floor,
 leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
 Blindly struck at my knee and missed.
 Something sinister in the tone
 Told me my secret must be known:
 Word I was in the house alone
 Somehow must have gotten abroad,
 Word I was in my life alone,
 Word I had no one left but God.

Background information to "The Road Not Taken"

1) Source: http://poetry.suite101.com/article.cfm/robert_frost_s_tricky_poem

Robert Frost's Tricky Poem

Analysis of 'The Road Not Taken'

© Linda Sue Grimes, Nov 13, 2006

Frost said his poem "The Road Not Taken" was tricky--very tricky. Three things make his poem tricky--the time frame, and the words "sigh" and "difference."

Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" has been one of the most analyzed, quoted, anthologized poems in American poetry. According to Wikipedia, "Popular explanation of this poem is that it is a call for the reader to forge his or her own way in life and not follow the path that others have already taken."

A Tricky Poem

Frost claims that he wrote this poem about his friend Edward Thomas, with whom he had walked many times in the woods near London. Frost has said that while walking they would come to different paths and after choosing one, Thomas would always fret wondering what they might have missed by not taking the other path.

About the poem, Frost asserted, "You have to be careful of that one; it's a tricky poem - very tricky." And he is, of course, correct. The poem has been and continues to be used as an inspirational poem, one that to the undiscerning eye seems to be encouraging self-reliance, not following where others have led.

But a close reading of the poem proves otherwise. It does not moralize about choice, it simply says that choice is inevitable but you never know what your choice will mean until you have lived it.

First Stanza – Describes Situation

The poem consists of four stanzas. In the first stanza, the speaker describes his position. He has been out walking the woods and comes to two roads, and he stands looking as far down each one as he can see. He would like to try out both, but doubts he could do that, so therefore he continues to look down the roads for a long time trying to make his decision about which road to take.

Second Stanza – Decides to Take Less-Traveled Road

He had looked down the first one “to where it bent in the undergrowth,” and in the second stanza, he tells that us that he decided to take the other path, because it seemed to have less traffic than the first. But then he goes on to say that they actually were very similarly worn. The second one that he took seems less traveled, but as he thinks about it, he realizes that they were “really about the same.” Not exactly that same but only “about the same.”

Third Stanza – Continue Description of Roads

The third stanza continues with the cogitation about the possible differences between the two roads. He had noticed that the leaves were both fresh fallen on them both and had not been walked on, but then again claims that maybe he would come back and also walk the first one sometime, but he doubted he'd be able to, again reflecting the idea from the first stanza about being sorry he could not travel both.

Fourth Stanza – Two Tricky Words

The fourth stanza holds the key to the trickiness of the poem.

Those who interpret this poem as suggesting non-conformity take the word “difference” to be a positive difference. But there is nothing in the poem that suggests that this difference signals a positive outcome.

The other word that leads non-discerning readers astray is the word “sigh.” By taking “difference” to mean a positive difference, they think that the sigh is one of nostalgic relief; however, a sigh can also mean regret. There is the “oh, dear” kind of sigh, and “what a relief” kind of sigh. Which one is it? We do not know. If it is the relief sigh, then the difference means the speaker is glad he took the road he did; if it is the regret sigh, then the difference would not be good, and the speaker would be sighing in regret. But the plain fact is we do not know what that sigh is. It is a truism that any choice we make is going to make “all the difference” in how our future turns out.

Careful Readers Won't Be Tricked

So Frost was absolutely correct; his poem is tricky—very tricky. But only if we are not careful readers. If we read into poems claims that are not there. And in this poem, it is important to be careful with the time frame. When the speaker says he will be reporting sometime in the future how his road choice turned out, we have to realize that we cannot assign meaning to “sigh” and “difference,” because the speaker himself cannot know how his choice will affect his future, until after he has lived it.

Robert Frost on his own poetry:

"One stanza of 'The Road Not Taken' was written while I was sitting on a sofa in the middle of England: Was found three or four years later, and I couldn't bear not to finish it. I wasn't thinking about myself there, but about a friend [Edward Thomas, 1878-1917] who had gone off to war, a person who, whichever road he went, would be sorry he didn't go the other. He was hard on himself that way."

Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, 23 Aug. 1953

2) Source: www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_2/frost_road.html

This poem is usually interpreted as an assertion of individualism, but critic Lawrence Thompson has argued that it is a slightly mocking satire on a perennially hesitant walking partner of Frost's who always wondered what would have happened if he had chosen their path differently.

3) Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Road_Not_Taken

"The Road Not Taken" is a poem by Robert Frost, published in 1916 in his collection *Mountain Interval*. It is the first poem in the volume, and the first poem Frost had printed in italics.

The poem, especially its last lines, where the narrator declares that taking the road "one less traveled by" "made all the difference," can be seen as a declaration of the importance of independence and personal freedom. However, Frost likely intended the poem as a gentle jab at his great friend and fellow poet Edward Thomas, and seemed amused at the slightly "mischievous" misinterpretation. "The Road Not Taken" seems to illustrate that once one takes a certain road, there's no turning back, although one might change paths later on, they still can't change the past.

4) Source: <http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/frost/section7.rhtml>

Summary

The speaker stands in the woods, considering a fork in the road. Both ways are equally worn and equally overlaid with untrodden leaves. The speaker chooses one, telling himself that he will take the other another day. Yet he knows it is unlikely that he will have the opportunity to do so. And he admits that someday in the future he will recreate the scene with a slight twist. He will claim that he took the less-traveled road.

Form

"The Road Not Taken" consists of four stanzas of five lines. The rhyme scheme is ABAAB; the rhymes are strict and masculine, with the notable exception of the last line (we do not usually stress the -ence of difference). There are four stressed syllables per line, varying on an iambic tetrameter base.

Commentary

This has got to be among the best-known, most-often-misunderstood poems on the planet. Several generations of careless readers have turned it into a piece of Hallmark happy-graduation-son, seize-the-future puffery. Cursed with a perfect marriage of form and content, arresting phrase wrought from simple words, and resonant metaphor, it seems as if "The Road Not Taken" gets memorized without really being read. For this it has died the cliché's un-death of trivial immortality.

But you yourself can resurrect it from zombie-hood by reading it--not with imagination, even, but simply with accuracy. Of the two roads the speaker says "the passing there / Had worn them really about the same." In fact, both roads "that morning lay / In leaves no step had trodden black." Meaning: **Neither of the roads is less traveled by. These are the facts; we cannot justifiably ignore the reverberations they send through the easy aphorisms of the last two stanzas.**

One of the attractions of the poem is its archetypal dilemma, one that we instantly recognize because each of us encounters it innumerable times, both literally and figuratively. **Paths in the woods and forks in roads are ancient and deep-seated metaphors for the lifeline, its crises and decisions.** Identical forks, in particular, symbolize for us the nexus of free will and fate: We are free to choose, but we do not really know beforehand what we are choosing between. Our route is, thus, determined by an accretion of choice and chance, and it is impossible to separate the two.

This poem does not advise. It does not say, "When you come to a fork in the road, study the footprints and take the road less traveled by" (or even, as Yogi Berra enigmatically quipped, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it"). Frost's focus is more complicated. **First, there is no less-traveled road in this poem; it isn't even an option.** Next, the poem seems more concerned with the question of how the concrete present (yellow woods, grassy roads covered in fallen leaves) will look from a future vantage point.

The **ironic tone** is inescapable: "I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence." **The speaker anticipates his own future insincerity--his need, later on in life, to rearrange the facts and inject a dose of Lone Ranger into the account. He knows that he will be inaccurate, at best, or hypocritical, at worst, when he holds his life up as an example.** In fact, he predicts that his future self will betray this moment of decision as if the betrayal were inevitable. This realization is ironic and poignantly pathetic. **But the "sigh" is critical.** The speaker will not, in his old age, merely gather youths about him and say, "Do what I did, kiddies. I stuck to my guns, took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." Rather, he may say this, but **he will sigh first; for he won't believe it himself. Somewhere in the back of his mind will remain the image of yellow woods and two equally leafy paths.**

Ironic as it is, this is also a poem infused with the **anticipation of remorse.** Its title is not "The Road Less Traveled" but "The Road Not Taken." Even as he makes a choice (a choice he is forced to make if does not want to stand forever in the woods, one for which he has no real guide or definitive basis for decision-making), the speaker knows that he will second-guess himself somewhere down the line--or **at the very least he will wonder at what is irrevocably lost: the impossible, unknowable Other Path. But the nature of the decision is such that there is no Right Path--just the chosen path and the other path.** What are sighed for ages and ages hence are not so much the wrong decisions as the moments of decision themselves--moments that, one atop the other, mark the passing of a life. This is the more primal strain of remorse.

Thus, to add a further level of irony, the theme of the poem may, after all, be "seize the day." But a more nuanced *carpe diem*, if you please.

About John Constable (1776-1837)

NATURAL PAINTURE: "For the last two years I have been running around after pictures, and seeking the truth at second hand. I have not endeavored to represent nature with the same elation of mind with which I set out, but have rather tried to make my performance look like the work of other men. [...] *There is room enough for a natural painture.* The great vice of the present day is *bravura*, an attempt to do something beyond the truth. Fashion always had, and will have, its day; but truth in all things only will last, and can only have just claims on posterity." *John Constable's letter to John Dunthorne, Sr., 29 May 1802*

SIX-FOOTERS: The 'six-footers' are among the best-known images in British art and comprise the famous series of views on the river Stour, which includes *The Hay Wain* 1820–1, as well as more expressive later works such as *Hadleigh Castle* 1829 and *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831. These paintings lie at the very heart of Constable's achievement.

Constable's decision to start painting six-foot landscapes around 1818–9 marks a significant turning point in his career. He was determined to paint on a larger scale (about 6 foot x 4.5 ft) both to attract more notice at the Royal Academy exhibitions but also, it seems, to project his ideas about landscape on a scale more in keeping with the achievements of classical landscape painting.

As important as the six-footers themselves was Constable's decision to paint related full-scale preliminary sketches for most of them. These large sketches, with their free and vigorous brushwork, were unprecedented at the time and they continue to fascinate artists, scholars and the general public. It has been said that it is this practice more than any other aspect of Constable's work which establishes him as an avant-garde painter, resolved to re-think the demands of his art and to address them in an entirely new way. The exhibition re-unites the full-scale sketches with their corresponding finished pictures in order to explore their role in Constable's working practice.

Constable succeeds in developing a single thematic concept – the life of the Suffolk river he had known since boyhood – and gradually invests it with a greater sense of drama, heroic action and narrative weight.

Source: <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/constable/> for the Tate 2006 exhibition of Constable's work.

YOUTH: John Constable was born in East Bergholt, Suffolk, on 11 June 1776, the fourth child and second son of Ann and Golding Constable. His father was a prosperous local corn merchant who inherited his business from an uncle in 1764. Constable was educated at Dedham Grammar School, where he distinguished himself more by his draughtsmanship than his scholarship. In 1793 his father decided to train him as a miller and, consequently, Constable spent a year working on the family mill, which helped him to determine his course of life: he would be an artist. John Constable was born in East Bergholt, a village on the River Stour in Suffolk, to Golding and Ann Constable. His father was a wealthy corn merchant, owner of Flatford Mill in East Bergholt and, later, Dedham Mill. Golding Constable also owned his own small ship, *The Telegraph*, which he moored at Mistley on the Stour estuary and used to transport corn to London. Although Constable was his parents' second son, his older brother was mentally handicapped and so John was expected to succeed his father in the business, and after a brief period at a boarding school in Lavenham, he was enrolled in a day school in Dedham. Constable worked in the corn business after leaving school, but his younger brother Abram eventually took over the running of the mills.

INFLUENCES ON HIM: In 1796-1798 he took lessons from John Thomas Smith and later from George Frost, who supported his love of landscape painting and encouraged him to study Gainsborough's works. In 1700 he entered the Royal Academy Schools. As a student he copied Old Master landscapes, especially those of Jacob van Ruisdael. Though deeply impressed by the work of Claude Lorrain and the watercolours of Thomas Girtin, Constable believed the actual study of nature was more important than any artistic model. He refused to "learn the truth second-hand". In 1799, Constable persuaded his father to let him pursue art, and Golding even granted him a small allowance. Entering the Royal Academy Schools as a probationer, he attended life classes and anatomical dissections as well as studying and copying Old Masters. Among works that particularly inspired him during this period were paintings by Thomas Gainsborough, Claude Lorrain, Peter Paul Rubens, Annibale Carracci and Jacob van Ruisdael (17th c., Dutch landscapes). He also read widely among poetry and sermons.

HIS INFLUENCE: John Constable was one of the major European landscape artists of the XIX century, whose art was admired by Delacroix and Gericault and influenced the masters of Barbizon and even the Impressionists, although he did not achieved much fame during his lifetime in England, his own country. Although he never was popular in England, some of his works were exhibited in Paris and achieved instant fame. In 1829 he was finally elected a Royal Academician. Not an intellectual, but a sensual approach to Nature.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HIS PAINTINGS: His early style has many of the qualities associated with his mature work, including a freshness of light, colour and touch, and reveals the compositional influence of the Old Masters he had studied, notably of Claude Lorrain.^[4] Constable's usual subjects, scenes of ordinary daily life, were unfashionable in an age that looked for more romantic visions of wild landscapes and ruins. He did, however, make occasional trips further afield. For example, in 1803 he spent almost a month aboard the East Indiaman ship *Coutts* as it visited south-east coastal ports, and in 1806 he undertook a two-month tour of the Lake District. But he told his friend and biographer Charles Leslie that the solitude of the mountains oppressed his spirits; Leslie went on to write:

His nature was peculiarly social and could not feel satisfied with scenery, however grand in itself, that did not abound in human associations. He required villages, churches, farmhouses and cottages,

In order to make ends meet, Constable took up portraiture, which he found dull work—though he executed many fine portraits. He also painted occasional religious pictures, but according to John Walker, "Constable's incapacity as a religious painter cannot be overstated."

About Richard Long

The artist's manifesto, taken from his official website: <http://www.richardlong.org/>

Art as a formal and holistic* description of the real space and experience of landscape and its most elemental materials.

[* emphasizing the importance of the organic, interdependent relationship between the whole and its parts.]

Nature has always been recorded by artists, from pre-historic cave paintings to 20th century landscape photography. I too wanted to make nature the subject of my work, but in new ways. I started working outside using natural materials like grass and water, and this evolved into the idea of making a sculpture by walking.

Walking itself has a cultural history, from Pilgrims to the wandering Japanese poets, the English Romantics and contemporary long-distance walkers.

My first work made by walking, in 1967, was a straight line in a grass field, which was also my own path, going 'nowhere'. In the subsequent early map works, recording very simple but precise walks on Exmoor and Dartmoor, my intention was to make a new art which was also a new way of walking: walking as art. Each walk followed my own unique, formal route, for an original reason, which was different from other categories of walking, like travelling. Each walk, though not by definition conceptual, realised a particular idea. Thus walking - as art - provided an ideal means for me to explore relationships between time, distance, geography and measurement. These walks are recorded or described in my work in three ways: in maps, photographs or text works, using whichever form is the most appropriate for each different idea. All these forms feed the imagination, they are the distillation of experience.

Walking also enabled me to extend the boundaries of sculpture, which now had the potential to be de-constructed in the space and time of walking long distances. Sculpture could now be about place as well as material and form.

I consider my landscape sculptures inhabit the rich territory between two ideological positions, namely that of making 'monuments' or conversely, of 'leaving only footprints'.

Over the years these sculptures have explored some of the variables of transience, permanence, visibility or recognition. A sculpture may be moved, dispersed, carried. Stones can be used as markers of time or distance, or exist as parts of a huge, yet anonymous, sculpture. On a mountain walk a sculpture could be made above the clouds, perhaps in a remote region, bringing an imaginative freedom about how, or where, art can be made in the world.

Bristol 2000



A Line Made By Walking by Richard Long.



A Circle in the Andes by Richard Long.



A Line in Scotland, 1981, by Richard Long.



Richard Long at Lismore Castle, County Waterford

Two examples of Richard Long's "textworks"

WHITE LIGHT WALK

RED LEAVES OF A JAPANESE MAPLE
ORANGE SUN AT 4 MILES
YELLOW PARSNIPS AT 23 MILES
GREEN RIVER SLIME AT 45 MILES
BLUE EYES OF A CHILD AT 56 MILES
INDIGO JUICE OF A BLACKBERRY AT 69 MILES
VIOLET WILD CYCLAMEN AT 72 MILES

AVON ENGLAND 1987

DRY WALK

113 WALKING MILES
BETWEEN ONE SHOWER OF RAIN AND THE NEXT

AVON ENGLAND 1989

Plan suggested for ELE 22 (2007) on Nature in the Arts

Intro: [1] Introduce the docs:] Magazine article from famous British weekly (*The Economist*), whose subject is not the economy at all, but in praise of two artistic exhibitions which took place in the UK in 2006. Brought together in this article because both focus on nature: how John Constable represents Nature in his paintings & the unusual ways in which a contemporary artist relates to, and makes an art of, Nature. Then certainly the most famous poem by R. Frost on a poet getting at a fork in a path in the wood, and his take on the difficult human task of choice making. Finally a painting by Constable, also with a natural setting (as is mostly the case with this painter): a cornfield in the English countryside.

[2] Indicate what the general theme of these documents is:] Hence this set of documents stresses how important nature is in the artistic expression of all mankind – be they American, or from the UK, or as we can suppose from any country on the face of the planet. Also not limited to one particular art, but extending to all forms: poetry, photography, literature, paintings, sculptures, criticism, etc. The many possible meanings of such a simple activity as walking in a natural environment.

[3] Indicate what your angle of approach will be:] I will stress the prevalence of Nature in all our lives. At all stages in our lives, whichever form of artistic expression we choose, Nature surrounds us, helps us voice our feelings, serves as model or reference, helps us conceptualize our life on earth, etc. [4] Indicate the plan you'll follow – slowly, clearly, fully.]

1) Human beings “immersed in the landscape.”

- All artists here decide to **experience nature first hand**, see it for themselves, roam the countryside, vanish in its immensity, be “human” in the sense of fragile & limited, in comparison with Nature’s strength, vastness, and eternity. In this limited sense, this is a Romantic endeavour (≠ 18th century where cities were preferred). Constable’s insistence on the “direct observation of nature” (B3) influenced the Barbizon school, & even impressionism. Be “at one” with nature.

- **Various places mentioned or visible:** Avon, wood, (Blackwater) river, leaves, mud, Suffolk fields, rill, corn field, etc.

- **Vital question of perspective / viewpoint in art:** “from the ground up” (B31) = a kind of revolution in painting. Cf. Constable’s views of Salisbury cathedral *from the meadows* or *from the Bishop’s ground*, NOT from a (detached) height. The poet’s view = that of the painter (immersed, watching from the level of the ground, what any trekker would see).

- Immersion in nature **provides inspiration & gives the artist the necessary energy** (B11). Also provides him with metaphors for life & human experience, as in **fables and parables** – which is what Frost’s poem reads like.

Transition: Indeed, Nature is often perceived by human beings as a set of signs / metaphors, as if its beauty hid something.

2) Nature as sign or metaphor.

- Nature can **transform any Act into Art**: moving stones around (B14), leaving one’s footprint in a field, **walking** in Nature can be transformed into an art (Long) – which reminds us of Emerson’s famous essay *Walking*. Why or how? Humans tend to see Nature as a system of signs that need interpreting: Cf. metaphor of life as a road or path (the part of the painting we have the clearest view of), of woods as places of danger, cataclysms as signs from the Gods. Humans even try to vie (= rival) with nature by **leaving signs / marks of their own**. Cf. Interesting phrase: “carve a line in the grass” (B6) = walking as carving, i.e. an artistic gesture + B14-6: the symbolism behind Long’s sculptures.

- **Nature is so multifaceted that it can express all aspects of human experience**, however contradictory they may be. From down-to-earth experiences (dirt, mud) to the most elevated ideas (“Divine glory,” “Revelation”). Nature as God-made according to Constable (Cf. presence of churches, spires, etc. In his paintings). This idea predates Romanticism & was particularly expressed in the 18th century (Nature as a perfect watch / mechanism & God as watch maker). Example of such an experience: the difficulty of making choices, regretting having to make a choice – not necessarily because it was the wrong one, but because one never knows what *could have been* → idea of human limitations, frustrations, regrets, etc.

- In both cases (Long/Constable), Nature is **linked with youth, truth & origins**: a way for artists to revert to their origins, their father’s mill (B26); a return to a happy past (B19), or to a more primal (= primitive) state; a preference for what is essential or “natural” (≠ conventional, contrived, true).

Transition: The problem is, is it possible to find this truth, to avoid idealizing Nature (as Constable set out to, B28)? Is this return/regression other than simply a form of nostalgia?

3) The question of Truth in Art.

- **A contradiction in terms** in the article: “not an **idealized** landscape” (B28) ≠ idealized version once Constable confined himself more to his London studio. Obvious **composition** in Constable’s painting: explain how the view is framed & what the viewer looks at first, how his/her eyes is guided by the colours, symmetry, central part of the picture, etc. So art is also **artifice**, ambiguity, a plurality of meanings.

- Allude to the **2 periods in Constable’s artistic production**: plein-air paintings ≠ resorting to memory in London (B40). Constable’s aim is to **make nature dramatic / heroic**, to glorify simple living, to vie with history painting / historical landscapes (B34), & his painting *does* glorify the beauty / grandeur of nature. The village in dwarfed in comparison + absence of any human or animal presence in this study (≠ the 1826 painting inspired by this study).

- As concerns the poem, stress the ≠ between the received interpretation of it (glorification of individualism / personal choices, optimistic outlook on life) and its real meaning: poking fun at friend Edward Thomas who never could make a choice and NOT regret it + is the last stanza about being unfaithful to oneself, to one’s youth? (“telling” A16 in the sense of pretending); is it about lying to oneself and others, betraying youthful illusions? (by pretending to have been original in one’s choices) → a “tricky” poem indeed, as Frost argued.

Conclusion: [Summarize:] Omnipresence of nature in our lives: physically, intellectually, in our language & imagination.

[Branch out:] We depend on it to live a fuller life & expect much of it, and look for our essence in it. But Nature only makes as much sense as we are ready to give it. It is indeed a reflexion of our needs, wishes, hopes, fantasies, contradictions.