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Robert Frost’s “Nighthawks”/ Edward Hopper’s “Desert Places”

by PAUL STRONG

The first few months of 1913 were singular times for Robert Frost and Edward Hopper. Robert and Elinor were overseas for the first time and had been living in England less than a year. Ezra Pound had “discovered” Frost and was touting his work all over London. The poems Frost brought to England stashed away in his trunk were accepted by David Nutt and published as A Boy’s Will in April. At thirty-nine Frost had his first book. Just two months earlier, in February, the Armory Show had opened in New York. Amidst the Redons, Rodins and Cézannes, the Matisses, Picassos and Picabias, one Hopper was mounted. It would be hard to imagine a starker contrast to the works which caused such a furor. Nonetheless, “Sailing” was purchased for $250. “Nude Descending a Staircase” brought barely a hundred dollars more. At thirty-one Edward Hopper had sold his first oil. It would be ten years before he sold another. That recognition came so late to such gifted men as Frost and Hopper was surely due, in part, to temperaments which resisted the changes in painting and poetry which marched under the banner of “modernism.”

In Hopper’s case, this meant virtually ignoring the innovation which marked the first decades of our century. He always maintained that in 1907–1910, during his three visits to Paris, he had not even heard of Picasso. Critics pointed to similarities between his early work and that of Cézanne; he claimed that as late as 1912 he was unaware of Cézanne. As for their similarities: “The angularity was just natural to me; I liked those angles.” When Lloyd Goodrich put up a slide of Hopper’s “High Noon” beside a Mondrian, Hopper’s reaction was typical: “You kill me.” All his life he claimed to dislike abstract art and, in fact, the subject matter and compositional schemes of his early work depended heavily on the Impressionists, especially Degas, and the Eight. In a manner remarkably like Frost, he habitually underplayed his artfulness and encouraged a view of himself as “uncomplicated.” Critics were just too much. For him, “Second Story Sunlight” was simply “an attempt to paint sunlight with almost no or no yellow pigment in the white. Any psychological idea will

have to be supplied by the viewer."⁴ When viewers obliged and supplied ideas he remarked, "The loneliness thing is overdone."⁵

By all accounts Hopper was a taciturn man; even so, his reluctance to discuss his work seems obsessive. "During the preparation of his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1933, Hopper was even reluctant to divulge information concerning his early work. He was even secretive about his mature work. . . . After his death in 1967, and Mrs. Hopper's death in 1968, a number of works bequeathed to the Whitney Museum had never been seen by anybody, including his closest friends."⁶ As Gail Levin has written: "Over the years, Hopper attempted to limit access to his personal life. Shy and reserved, he usually preferred to hide behind a controlled public image of an uncultivated, self-made painter, working in the narrow bounds of the American realist tradition, without imposing on his art any intellectual or private content. He insisted upon the cooperation of his sister Marion in keeping up this image, which was carefully orchestrated by Jo. In 1956, when he was being interviewed for a *Time* magazine cover story, Hopper wrote to Marion that their researchers had 'probed quite enough' and warned that if anyone tried to interview her, 'tell them absolutely nothing about me or our family.' "⁷

The similarities with Frost are striking. Like Hopper's rejection of the Cubists, Frost feuded publicly much of his life with the Imagists, Wastelanders, and left-wing intellectuals he called the "Pound-Eliot-Richards gang."⁸ In a now famous phrase, he said he would as soon write free verse as "play tennis without a net." Instead, he wrote sonnets and meditative lyrics in the tradition of Wordsworth, Arnold, and the older masters enshrined in *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*. This student of Emerson, William James, and Santayana, who could casually toss off allusions to Bertrand de Born and Arnault Daniel,⁹ delighted in portraying himself as an ordinary man whose art was artless, without deep meaning. He never tired, when "barding around" the country, to chide those who presumed to find profundity in his work. As Donald Hall recalls in *Remembering Poets*, at such times he played "Mortimer Snerd" putting down the professors, "those fancy intellectuals who read all those hidden meanings into a simple old fellow's poems."¹⁰ He would have had his audience believe he was just your ordinary farmer-poet, albeit one who had not read the pastorals of Theocritus.

⁵. O'Doherty, p. 72.
Yet Frost's public stance, while it may be dismissed as mischievous posing unbecoming a man of his stature, had real benefits—it gave him a club to use against those who said "never trust the poet—trust the poem." For Frost, like Hopper, had a secretive streak, a need to keep control over his own work. Like the paintings found after Hopper's death, Frost had a "strongbox," or so he said in a letter to Louis Untermeyer, in which he claimed to have held back a word-hoard of poems with the intention of publishing them gradually. Not only would these poems provide a hedge against the anticipated ebbing of his poetic faculty; they would make such a decline virtually impossible for critics to detect. As he delightedly wrote Untermeyer, "Did you ever hear of quite such a case of Scotch-Yankee calculation?" 11

Frost is well-known for such puckish moments, for the sense of play that pervades his public statements, letters, and poetry, for the comfortable open-collared shirts and tousled hair. Hopper seems dour by contrast. Although he almost never spoke in public and the written record is sparse, 12 there is an eloquent gallery of photographs which give a sense of the man—neatly dressed, pensive, rarely smiling—even when his wife, Jo, grins beside him. His self-portraits tend to be even more severe, often picturing a sitter with downturned mouth and the hint of a frown. As Brian O'Doherty remarks, "The legend makes Mr. Hopper a Great Stone Face, a sort of artistic Buster Keaton sculptured on some Rushmore in Parnassus." 13 Yet beyond such differences of personal style, the men shared a deep-rooted conservative bias which expressed itself in their art, and one is struck that critics commenting on the painter's style might well be describing the poet's, or vice versa.

Hopper's style, as Charles Burchfield saw it, was characterized by "supreme simplicity verging, in many instances, on starkness.... There remains only the uncompromising classical form, freed of all restricting variations or digressions." 14 Frost's friend and fellow poet, Edward

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12. Not surprisingly, there is a classic quality to Hopper's writing style. He preferred brief paragraphs, simple sentences, simple diction (for an example of Hopper's prose, see note 14). Indeed, "simple" is a word which recurs frequently in his writing and interviews. Even the titles of his paintings are brief—most only a few words long.
14. Charles Burchfield, "Hopper: Career of Silent Poetry," Art News, 49 (March 1950), 17. In Hopper's essay "Charles Burchfield: American," The Arts, 14 (July 1928), 12, the qualities Hopper chooses as distinctive in Burchfield's art might as easily serve to indicate what is distinctive in his own work, or in Frost's, for that matter:

His art fits into no pigeon-hole. Such an isolated and vigorous originality seems so simple and natural a phenomenon that one ponders why such a one does not happen more often.
It makes many of his successful contemporaries seem like very learned professors of painting. It clears the air and brings us back to good sense, which always prevails in the end.
It has no fear of standing on its own simplicity. It does not strive to be cosmopolitan, or for sophistication that it may not be thought provincial.
By the real and pressing need to make known its message, and by its natural good sense, it avoids the pitfalls that a less original talent might fall into.
It follows no fashions, but is destined to be always new by its originality and truth. And above all, it reaffirms the sovereignty of natural endowment, emotional and interpretive.
Thomas, found an essential quality of Frost’s language in its “heightened and intense simplicity.”\textsuperscript{15} William Pritchard, characterizing the verse of Frost’s great volume, \textit{North of Boston}, calls it “dignified and formal.”\textsuperscript{16} Simplicity, formality, dignity. These are the hallmarks of Hopper’s oils and Frost’s verse. They seem especially apt given Frost’s observation in “The Figure a Poem Makes” that a poem, which “begins in delight and ends in wisdom,” can provide “a momentary stay against confusion.”

The Keatsian notion that art befriends us with its glimpses of order, beauty, and truth in a world of weariness, fever, and fret has implications which are thematic as well as stylistic. In many of Frost’s best poems man is a small, relatively helpless creature, contending with a powerful, impersonal, often hostile environment. One thinks of “Once by the Pacific,” the ocean raging so terribly that “The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff, / The cliff in being backed by continent; / It looked as if a night of dark intent / Was coming. . . .” Similarly in “Storm Fear” Frost’s speaker, a nighthawk, muses as a blizzard pelts his isolated New England farmhouse:

\begin{quote}
When the wind works against us in the dark,
And pelts with snow
The lower chamber window on the east,
And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
The beast,
‘Come out! Come out!’—
It costs no inward struggle not to go,
Ah, no!
I count our strength,
Two and a child,
Those of us not asleep subdued to mark
How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length,—
How drifts are piled,
Dooryard and road ungraded,
Till even the comforting barn grows far away,
And my heart owns a doubt
Whether ’tis in us to arise with day
And save ourselves unaided.
\end{quote}

In the piling drifts and ungraded road one senses an undoing of the work of creation, the sort of confusion art tries to “stay.” Finally, there is “An Old Man’s Winter Night,” where the protagonist finds himself awakened by some unexplained noise into a cold, dark room in the middle of the night, unable to remember what woke him or why he is stumbling about. Alone, surrounded by a barricade of barrels, Frost’s old man is no match for the out-of-doors which looks “darkly” in at him. The poem’s ironic conclusion, “One aged man—one man—can’t keep a house, / A farm, a countryside, or if he can, / It’s thus he does it of a winter night,” strikes

\textsuperscript{15} Pritchard, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{16} Pritchard, p. 98.
the typical Frostian note and suggests just how difficult it is to “stay” con-
fusion, or, as Richard Poirier has put it, “to ‘keep’ things from time.”

The connection with Hopper is striking. Like Frost, Hopper often focuses on a single figure in a room. At times there is no figure at all—some of Hopper’s most memorable canvases are of stately Victorian mansions in splendid isolation. The impulse which may have brought him to depict, time after time, the beautiful mansard roofs of Gloucester, Cape Ann, and Portland has been guessed at by Lawrence Campbell, who writes: “Knowing he could not save the buildings he loved—the domestic gabled houses of New York, the Ninevite brownstones and office buildings with sheets of light leaping across dark Manhattan sidestreets, windows, doors and other openings—he might at least make pictures of them . . . .” Now it may well be that Hopper simply “liked those angles,” yet, if Campbell is right, Hopper’s gingerbread catalog was also his way of “keeping” a house. Moreover Hopper’s streets and landscapes, like Frost’s, often contain elements which seem specifically designed to enhance our sense of littleness, of insignificance, in his coldly lit universe. This is the case in “Gas,” for example, where the enervated, balding, slightly stooped figure is dwarfed, even engulfed by humanoid gas pumps. They tower over their attendant who has chosen the concrete island over the green world on which he turns his back. The single barber pole in “Early Sunday Morning,” on the other hand, accents the absence of a human figure. In a different way the coffee urns in “Nighthawks”—side by side, almost touching—provide a wry comment on the man and woman who evince no more warmth or humanity than their bright, metallic counterparts. Finally, there is “Manhattan Bridge Loop” with its solitary figure at the canvas’ extreme left margin, facing away from the gallows-like structures and gigantic lamppost which provide the sort of non-human menace one expects in a grade-B science fiction film about space invaders. No wonder the small brown man, at canvas edge, seems to be trying to escape.

A single figure travelling through a vaguely menacing setting is a central symbolic situation in Frost as well:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it—it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less—
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

The mood of “Desert Places” is pure Hopper. As is the case in his paintings, the empty setting, the “blanker whiteness of benighted snow / With no expression, nothing to express,” points toward an inner void which is the artist’s main concern. Frost’s protagonist, like the hibernating animals in their lairs, has withdrawn into a deathly (“smothered”) state of isolation—as the poem would have it, a “blankness.” His absent-spiritedness recalls Hopper’s figures, who, as Matthew Baigell has observed, “often appear to be in a state of withdrawal, perhaps even evincing symptoms of schizophrenic retreat. Some have slipped into near catatonic trance; their struggle has become a totally private one.” Critics have seen a similar quality in Frost’s work. One thinks of “Acquainted with the Night,” with its protagonist who has “outwalked the furthest city light” and “looked down the saddest city lane.” His nighthawk protagonist even drops his eyes (in a gesture typical of Hopper’s men and women), lost in private reverie, Baigell’s “catatonic trance.”

Wandering off also appeals strongly to Hopper’s isolatos. His “People in the Sun” seem content to simply let their minds wander. Some remove to the ocean as “Seawatchers,” a canvas which recalls in an eerie way the opening lines of Frost’s “Neither Out Far Nor in Deep.” The surreal “Rooms by the Sea” hints at the possibility of permanent escape. One wonders who left the door open, and why. In these oils the sea seems to beckon man, much as the woods do in Frost’s “Come In” or “Stopping by Woods.” Escape is also implicit in Hopper’s many railroad scenes, from “Dawn in Pennsylvania” to “Railroad Sunset.” At times Hopper’s male protagonists seem to want nothing more than to get away from their stony-faced women, as in “Hotel by a Railroad” or “Four Lane Road.” In this mood, Hopper adds his variations to a traditional American theme found in Twain, Hemingway, and, more recently, Mailer.

Men, women, and the distances they keep is of interest to Frost as well. Like Hopper he chooses to focus on those differences in temperament that make communication between the sexes difficult, even with those

21. When O’Doherty remarked to Hopper, “Some say your woods and Robert Frost’s are menacing—‘The woods are lovely, dark, and deep . . .’” Hopper replied, “I admire Frost. That and another one called ‘Come In,’” p. 80.

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closest to us. More often than not, while Frost’s male protagonist is away at his outdoor chores, his wife is home engaged in her own version of mending walls. On his return he is likely to find himself walled out, a stranger to her fantasies, fears, and private griefs. Frost created a remarkable series of poems which consider “the loneliness and hysteria of women who, finding their husbands unexpectedly alien, are crushed by solitude.” Occasionally their hysteria slips into madness, as in “A Servant to Servants” and “The Witch of Coos.” At other times, the gulf between partners causes the wife to leave and seek solace elsewhere, as in “Home Burial,” or to run off and leave her husband for good, as “The Hill Wife” does:

She strayed so far she scarcely heard
When he called her—
And didn’t answer—didn’t speak—
Or return.
She stood, and then she ran and hid
In the fern.

He never found her, though he looked
Everywhere,
And he asked at her mother’s house
Was she there.

Sudden and swift and light as that
The ties gave,
And he learned of finalities
Besides the grave.

Escape fascinates Frost’s male protagonists as well. In “Birches,” for

23. Some of the most interesting recent work on Hopper concerns his depiction of male-female relationships. In “Symbol and Reality in Edward Hopper’s ‘Room in New York,’” *Arts Magazine*, 56 (January 1982), 150, Gail Levin writes: “Hopper’s painting sets up a pronounced, if stereotyped, male-female dichotomy: he sits on the left reading a newspaper, emphasizing his intellect and pragmatic character, while she, seated opposite him, turns to make music, revealing her artistic, more emotional, feminine nature. She is shown disturbing the deadly silence, interjecting her presence, demanding his attention. He is introspective, withdrawn, unresponsive.” In a similar vein John Hollander in “Hopper and the Figure of Room,” *Art Journal* (Summer 1981), p. 160, describes “Second Story Sunlight” this way: “It is not the gabled frames alone, disposing the figures in a sort of allegorical diptych, that move this painting toward the emblematic. Its contrast is between youth and age, the active (even if, in this case, a conventionalized, female erotic-passive) life as opposed to the contemplative one. In the latter case, the trope of available consciousness, of mental room for memory and meditation, is established by what we see of the room through the window behind the reading figure. The sunlight enters there, as if shining into rather than on a human head; it organizes its rectangular presence with regard to the furniture and the picture on the wall—more memory than sign—and generally signifies, even as it reveals. The young woman’s mental house—including the bright strip of balcony on which she is displayed, and the physically disengaged but semiotically attached gable behind her—is brighter without but dark within: it is far less open to thought, and to speculation about it.”


25. In a brilliant chapter, “Women at Home,” Poitier considers those Frost poems concerned with “the plight of women who have nothing but a home to keep—with too little work if childless, too much if there are boarders or workers on the farm” (113) and discerns a pattern which “seems to emerge from these poems. In ‘The Witch of Coos’ as in ‘A Servant to Servants’ we have a woman imagining a figure of insane, frustrated, and obscure sexuality caged in a house with a married couple. And this married couple, too, is ever so subtly characterized as possibly sexless, possibly frigid, and therefore potentially obscene” (117-18). In Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1975), p. 74, Frank Lentricchia describes Frost’s gallery of home-bound women as the “crazed, the half-crazed, and the about-to-be crazed.”
example, the speaker, weary of life's considerations, would "like to get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over." At times this impulse is transformed into a positive attempt to find some comforting Truth about our place in the scheme of things. Despite the knowledge that nature often appears hostile, as in "Once by the Pacific," or simply indifferent if one is well versed in country things, Frost's searchers never seem to give up hoping; indeed, they are tireless in their quest for "counter-love, original response." Of course they can't always get what they want. One recalls the protagonist in "For Once Then, Something" who thinks he sees "a something white, uncertain" which may be the Truth he's after or may simply be "a pebble of quartz." Like the sea-gazers in "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep," Frost's searchers want some answer from Nature, some evidence that we are not alone amidst "empty spaces." Yet his coda to "The Star-Splitter" seems to best express Frost's melancholy conclusion: "We've looked and looked, but after all where are we?"

Curiously, in this regard at least, Hopper seems to offer more solace than Frost. For every man who turns his back on nature, like the attendant in "Gas," others seek her out, as does the figure in "Pennsylvania Coal Town." And while one might wish him a younger man, planting in warm spring sunlight rather than an older man, raking, one feels he gains some sustenance from the sunlight. Of Hopper's many works which concern man and nature, one of the most beautiful is "Evening Wind." The sensual young woman is vibrant and vital, drawing energy from the wind which billows into the room. It is hard to view this small etching without being reminded of M. H. Abrams' classic discussion of wind as metaphor:

"The rising wind, usually linked with the outer transition from winter to spring, is correlated with a complex subjective process: the return to a sense of community after isolation, the renewal of life and emotional vigor after apathy and a deathlike torpor, and an outburst of creative power following a period of imaginative sterility."26

Like many Hoppers, "Evening Wind" depicts a female figure, alone in a room, yet I believe it one of his most optimistic works, one that should give pause to those who see little but isolation, torpor, and sterility in his oeuvre. "The loneliness thing is overdone!" it seems to cry.

What would Frost whose beastly wind "works against us in the dark" have thought of "Evening Wind?" There is no telling, of course. In fact, I have found no evidence that Frost knew of Hopper or of his work, although there is the tantalizing fact that in 1915 Louis Untermeyer took Frost to Greenwich Village where he met Hopper's friend and colleague, John Sloan.27 That Hopper knew of Frost's work is amply documented, as in the Selden Rodman interview: "Perhaps because he reminded me of a character in Robert Frost, I asked him whether he was familiar with

27. Untermeyer, p. 6
Frost's poetry. He said that he was, and that he admired it greatly because it was not just beautiful words beautifully arranged."28 It is not surprising to find Hopper responding to Frost's formal grace, yet his "not just" intimates that there is something more here, something that caused him to admire Frost's poetry "greatly." I believe that Hopper must have sensed a kindred spirit in Frost, one who, for the most part, shared his temperament and outlook. Thus when we consider Jo's oil, "Edward Hopper Reading Robert Frost"—Hopper, in slippers and undershirt, caught for once with his guard down—we might do worse than imagine him pleasurably lost, lost in Frost's "Desert Places."