Remediation Qualms & A Transmission History of Robert Frost's Public Talks

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ABSTRACT

In anticipation of an online audio edition that I am in the final stages of preparing, this article offers a transmission history of Robert Frost's public talks, analyzing possible reasons why these talks the poet delivered between 1915 and 1962 have largely receded from public memory in the last sixty years.1 Specifically, the article examines how Frost's conflated definition of 'written prose' has stifled both Frost and his editors, and how it subsequently rendered talk transcripts, or 'written records of spoken prose', as a subpar form of expression that calls for an extensive revision to be read as more formal essays, i.e., 'prose composed directly in writing'. Instead of being stifled by what I call 'remediation qualms' — misgivings about a shift in media formats from aural to written text, as well as misplaced desires to uphold a particular image of the poet through remedial editorial interventions — this article calls for recognizing and citing Frost's public talks as a genre of their own.

WHAT IS THE FIRST THING THAT COMES TO MIND WHEN THINKING ABOUT Robert Frost today? Some might recall instances that exemplify his celebrity at public affairs, such as his role as a Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1959 and his performance at President John F. Kennedy's inauguration ceremony in 1961. Some might have more personal memories of encountering his poems in their high school textbooks, while others might be tempted to brush him aside as a white, male, canonical author no longer in fashion. Regardless of how one feels about the poet, it is telling that, in 2020, the popular literary magazine *McSweeney's* opened its humorous article "Famous Lines of Poetry Revised for the Age of Coronavirus" with a parody of Frost's poem for readers who were practicing social distancing: "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I — I

1. The online audio edition of Frost's talks, tentatively titled *Frost Talks: Editorial Care and Literary Re/Mediation,* will be published as part of Yokoyama's digital monograph.

took the one less traveled. Duh" (Pell 2020). That is, Frost's poetry has long been part of the common lingo for many in the Anglophone world, even providing comic commiseration for our collective lot in a crisis.

While Frost remains one of the iconic American poets of the early twentieth century, what is less known today is that he gave many playful talks and readings at universities, colleges, and other public venues between 1915 and 1962 with the object of making poetry accessible to general readers as far as the segregated United States allowed. During his talks, he demonstrated — often through humor — how every participating member of society must investigate the figures of speech used by poets, scientists, politicians, and other authority figures. On one occasion, Frost made mischievous commentaries on the political climate of his time, cautioning against the warmongering rhetoric that spurred the proliferation of atomic bombs and the looming tension of the Cold War (Frost 1946–1947). On another occasion, he entertained the audience by demonstrating his comical rhyming exercises using what he called "heavy-duty" poems such as "Departmental", also educating the audience through his auditory attentiveness to language (Frost 1946–1947, 1958). As if to prove his mission statement to "be a poet for all sorts and kinds", these talks epitomize Frost's dedication to the democratic discussion of literature and daily discourse (Frost 1995, 721–22; Frost 2014, 154).

There is no denying that these talks were central to the formation of Frost's career as a popular poet as well as to the formation of the mid-twentieth-century American literary scene. Yet Frost's talks as a genre have long been overlooked. While this disregard may be in part due to the inaccessibility of the audio recordings housed in the archives and their complex copyright arrangements, I propose that literary and editorial conventions are equally responsible for their scholarly neglect.

In what follows, I explore the transmission history of Robert Frost's public talks to suggest how Frost's conflated definition of 'written prose' has stifled both Frost and his editors, and how it subsequently rendered talk transcripts, or 'written records of spoken prose', as a subpar form of expression that calls for an extensive revision to be read as more formal essays, i.e., 'prose composed directly in writing'. I argue that while some of the editorial conundrums had to do with the inadequacy of talk transcripts to capture the dynamic exchange between the poet and his live audience, there was also a tacit assumption that Frost's conversational and wandering talks would be unsuitable for print publication and even damaging to the poet's image. While literary scholar Lisa Seale and others have since sought to reappraise Frost's informal talks and recognize their "meandering" nature as a reflection of his unique workshopping method

(Abshear-seale 1995), I suspect the otherwise common aversion towards Frost's extemporaneous expressions has a deeper roots in the Anglo-American editorial tradition. Based on my analysis of this perceived necessity for converting transcriptions of informal talks into formal essays, I propose a collective liberation from what I call 'remediation qualms' — misgivings about a shift in media formats from aural to written text, as well as misplaced desires to uphold a particular image of the poet through remedial editorial interventions — and a citation of Frost's public talks as a distinctive genre of their own.[2]

Remediation Qualms

Despite his career of nearly five decades as a poet who "bards around", Frost's talks and readings as a genre have not received significant attention from his readers.[3] One reason for such neglect is that collections of Frost's public talks are far less accessible than collections of his poems. During Frost's lifetime, the poet's publisher Henry Holt and Company released collected editions of poetry — *Collected Poems of Robert Frost* (1930), the enlarged edition of *Collected Poems of Robert Frost* (1939), and *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (1949). Posthumously, Holt published *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (1969), with editor Edward Connery Lathem adding Frost's final and tenth poetry book *In the Clearing* (1962) to the 1949 edition. Today, beyond the original Holt editions, there are multiple trade editions of Frost's poetry that are readily available, including Random House's Everyman's Library Pocket Poets edition (1997) and the Penguin Classics edition (2015), as well as the Digireads Publishing's *The Road Not Taken and Other Poems* (2017) and the Canterbury Classics' leather-bound edition

2. I am not the first to propose the public talks of poets as a unique genre. In discussing the San Francisco Talk series he hosted and curated between 1977 and 1981 — featuring writers like Ron Silliman and Lyn Hejinian — Bob Perelman refers to poets' public talks as a genre, especially as some poets in his talk series mused on the interplay between spoken and written text; see Perelman 1998. In this essay, I explore the interrelated concerns of 'remediation qualms' as seen among Frost and his editors i.e., the challenges of media conversion labor and the perceived need to correct spoken remarks through remedial editing.
3. "Barding around" is a term used by the poet himself, as noted in David M. Shribman's introduction to Edward Connery Lathem's edition of talks; see Lathem 2009, xi.

(2019).[4] Within the sphere of scholarly editions, Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson added ninety-four previously uncollected poems to Lathem's 1969 edition in their 1995 edition *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays* published by the Library of America.

Meanwhile, most of Frost's talks remain uncollected, save for a few scholarly efforts that offer glimpses of approximately seven hundred public talks and readings Frost delivered in the period between 1940 and 1962 (Richardson 2007, 238). For example, Reginald Cook published the currently out-of-print *Robert Frost: A Living Voice* (1974) with the University of Massachusetts Press, detailing the records of Frost's twelve talks delivered at the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College between 1953 and 1962. In the early twenty-first century, Lisa Seale published four, single transcriptions of Frost's public talks in The Robert Frost Society's *The Robert Frost Review* journal (Seale 2003, 2005, 2016, and 2018). And today, the only trade edition of talks currently in circulation is Edward Connery Lathem's *Robert Frost Speaking on Campus* (2009) published by W.W. Norton & Company, which showcases excerpts of forty-six talks delivered between 1949 and 1962.

Frost himself was ambivalent about reproducing his talks in print forms, especially in the early 1930s. For instance, when Harvard University nominated Frost to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton lectures in 1936, part of the agreement was to subsequently publish the talks through the university press (Parini 1999, 301–05; Richardson 2007, x). He was at first reluctant to assent to this publishing arrangement as he customarily delivered his talks without notes. In the end, however, Frost resolved to have a stenographer record his talks (Parini 1999, 301; Richardson 2007, xxix). A year after the Norton lectures, Frost remained hesitant about the idea of publishing his talks in print and confided in his literary critic and friend Sidney Cox about the daunting editorial toil involved in turning the stenographic records into a publishable text: "My public talks owe any felicity they may have to the fact that they are gone on the wind. I wrote down not a word for Harvard last year and it would have thrown me off my phrasing to have known of anyone's taking notes on me in my audience. But I am resigned to what I am in for" (Frost 1964, 437).

4. Canterbury Classics is one of the five imprints of Printers Row Publishing Group, which reproduces classics in modern aesthetic formats including leather-binding. Digireads Publishing is a subsidiary of Neeland Media LLC, which has been in operation since 2003. *The Road Not Taken and Other Poems* reprints Frost's first three poetry books.

I suspect that, beyond the virtue of the talks' ephemerality, Frost's reluctance to prepare his talks for publication was complicated by his unexamined resistance to distinguishing between the 'written records of spoken expressions' and the 'prose composed directly in writing'. Despite a considerable difference between talk transcripts and essays, Frost persisted in thinking of them both as a single mode.[5] Talk transcripts, in this regard, were not treated as notations of spoken prose but as something that must be revised into more formal pieces of writing for publication. Two years after the Harvard talk, with still no publishable manuscript in sight, Frost conceded his aversion to written records of his talks in a letter to English Professor R.P.T. Coffin who had requested the poet's notes for remarks he delivered at the annual Poetry Society of America dinner in 1937. In response, Frost tortuously evaded Coffin's request by citing the only exception he had made to publishing prose — as far as his conflated definition of 'written prose' was concerned — the preface he wrote for Edwin Arlington Robinson's book *King Jasper* (1935). Referring to his appreciation for the ephemeral and fleeting nature of spoken remarks, Frost confided in Coffin: "I thought I was about ready to let [the lectures] set when I accepted the Harvard invitation to deliver them in writing after delivering them by word of mouth. Something in me still fights off the written prose" (Frost 1964, 461).

Frost's stance on 'written prose' — i.e., essays and would-be essay talk transcripts — was consistent. Earlier in 1921, Frost had already turned down the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks's request to provide essays for the journal Brooks edited.[6] In a letter to Brooks, Frost noted how he kept deferring the publication of essays: "I used to say prose after thirty; then in the thirties, prose after forty. Still distrusting myself at forty odd, I now say after fifty. Out of what we don't know and so can't be hurt by, poetry: out of knowledge, prose" (Frost 2016, 192). In the late 1930s, Frost also halted joint efforts between his early biographer Robert S. Newdick and his publisher Holt to publish a collection of writings titled "Prefaces and Parleyings", including materials originally delivered as talks. Despite his original permission for Newdick to prepare and publish records of his spoken remarks, Frost seemingly experienced a change of heart and

5. As Mark Richardson has shown, prior to publishing poetry in earnest in 1913, Frost already had a good amount of his essays published though not in conventionally prominent venues; see Richardson 2007, xvii, 350.

6. Mark Richardson notes that the journal in question is most likely *The Freeman* (Richardson 2007, ix).

subsequently paused the agreement, citing that it would be discourteous should the "Prefaces and Parleyings" come out before Harvard's lecture collection (SUTTON 1976, 227; RICHARDSON 2007, ix). In a letter addressed to historian and editor Bernard DeVoto in 1937, Frost again expressed his annoyance with the pending business with Harvard: "I have decided to let you make the English Selected Poems your occasion rather than the prospective Harvard essays because I dont [*sic*] want any more depending on those essays than already depends. I am inhibited badly enough over them as it is. Damn the essays. Our little grand-daughter Robin (under three) says her Uncle Bob in Billings Montana distinguishes between nice damn and terrible damn. Well I am thinking of terrible damn" (FROST 1964, 437). In the end, neither the Harvard nor the Newdick collection materialized, and Frost eventually — at least allegedly — destroyed the transcriptions of his Harvard talks (THOMPSON 1970, 675).

Concerning the reissuing of his talks in print, it appears Frost struggled with what I call 'remediation qualms', i.e., misgivings stemming from an irreconcilable difference between the modalities of talks and the norms of written essays.[7] Incidentally, there appeared to be others who seemed to have considered that the records of Frost's spoken remarks were only publishable after extensive, and at times remedial, editorial interventions — something I will explore further in the latter sections of this article. As far as media conversion is concerned, it raised the question of just how much revision was called for to translate aural expressions into written text. Even when he did consent to the publication of his talks — rather than avoiding or aborting the effort altogether — Frost remained perplexed as to how best to revise his talks in accordance with writing norms. In a letter written to George Whicher, Frost's colleague and an editor of the *Amherst Graduates' Quarterl*y, for instance, Frost agreed to the suggested editorial emendations for "Speaking of Loyalty" originally delivered at an Alumni Luncheon at Amherst College on June 19, 1948, but with much reluctance:

7. New Media Studies scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have a monograph titled *Remediation*: *Understanding New Media*. They observe how — despite the implication of its novelty — new media often adapts existing cultural practices that are informed in conjunction with the preceding media format, and how works rendered into a new medium carry the traces of previous media (BOLTER AND GRUSIN 1999). While I am cognizant of the uniqueness of their terminology, the two media I am concerned with in this essay are spoken and written prose, hearkening back to the classic observations of Walter Ong in his *Orality and Literacy* (1982) rather than to those of new media.

"The temptation is to go even further than you with this and round it into a real piece. But perhaps that wouldn't be fair to those who heard it as a speech or talk. They might feel bamboozled. It hurts like everything not to bring my point out more sharply" (qtd. in RICHARDSON 2007, 316).

Frost's unease about the tension between the structure of spoken expressions delivered from a podium and the conventions of written essays on a page was well-founded. When Frost did fully convert his talks into essay format, they gained certain legibility among his contemporary and future editors. One such example is his well-known essay "Education by Poetry" (1931). Now largely recognized as an essay that illustrates the importance of education in metaphors — so that one would know how to critically investigate the figures of speech in science, history, and politics — "Education by Poetry" was originally delivered, on November 15, 1930, as an address before the Amherst College Alumni Council. As Richardson's collation analysis suggests, Frost extensively revised the talk's transcript by reconstructing and fine-tuning his spoken remarks to convert the piece into an essay, or what would read as a record of a more formal lecture. By removing local references shared between him and the Amherst College audience, the authorial intent of revision seems to have lain in enabling the piece to be self-contained and independent of its original context (RICHARDSON 2007, 270–72). The effectiveness of Frost's media conversion labor may be measured in the subsequent printing history of the essay, which, following its first printing in *Amherst Graduates' Quarterly* (February 1931), was reprinted in both the *Boston Evening Transcript Magazine* (February 1931) and the *Amherst Alumni Council News* (March 1931). The piece was also collected in Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem's *Selected Prose of Robert Frost* (1966) and Poirier and Richardson's Library of America edition of *Robert Frost: Collected Poetry, Prose, and Play* (1995), as well as in Richardson's *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost* (2007).

While some talks enjoyed further dissemination, others suffered from their remediation shortcomings. Especially when the revision was shouldered by Frost's contemporary editors, the texts' distance from the author was used as a justification for their exclusion from future editors' collections of Frost's works. In preparing *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, for example, Richardson defined many of Frost's talks as "informal workshops" and collected only those talks that bore empirical evidence of authorial revision, which Richardson interpreted as the indication of the poet's intent to publish them (RICHARDSON 2007, 239–41). According to this rubric, some of the talks prepared for publication by the hands of others

— such as "What Became of New England?" revised by Robert S. Newdick and originally published in *Oberlin Alumni Magazine* in May 1938 and "Poverty and Poetry" prepared by Frost's biographer Lawrance Thompson and published in the Princeton Library periodical *Biblia* in February 1938 — were left out of Richardson's 2007 edition *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost* even though they were previously collected in his 1994 Library of America edition under the section titled "Lectures, Essays, Stories, Letters" (Richardson 2007, 239–41). While each edition must follow its editorial rationale, what has been omitted by the most recent editions of Frost's 'written prose' are the records of Frost's defense of rural New England and its hardworking class of people in response to the infamous reviews he received from critics in his early years (Yokoyama 2019).

Transcribing for the Tone and Temporality

As literary editors started preparing records of Frost's talks for posthumous publication in the 1970s, they, too, were confronted by the constraints of print publication. While editors in the 1970s and 1980s had access to audio recordings of Frost's talks — especially from the last two decades of the poet's career — without the author's supervision, their editorial interventions were necessarily limited. The main goal of Frost's posthumous editors, then, shifted: instead of converting the talks into essays, editors began seeking ways to represent their performative qualities as far as print allows. Subsequently, since the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, editors have had the option of turning to digital technologies and platforms that offer better means of capturing the temporal dynamics of Frost's talks. Even then, transcriptions continue to play a key role in making digitized audio recordings accessible and in facilitating copyright negotiations by identifying precisely what is recorded on tape (Yokoyama 2021).

In the preparation of Frost's talks for posthumous publication, the biggest editorial challenge has been determining the degree of emendation called for. To date, every editor working with the audio recordings of Frost's talks has supplied writing-specific graphic markers — i.e., punctuation and other typographic conventions such as paragraphing — to his spoken remarks to make 'legible' to readers the dynamic properties of informal speech, which unfolds, adds, and amends over time. Whether to make further editorial interventions such as polishing Frost's original syntax or grammar, however, has been left to each editor's informed judgment. A

comparative analysis of the three editorial approaches below will illustrate the different impressions they might make, as well as the subsequent debates they might invite.

Cook, Sitar, Tressault

In preparing his *Robert Frost: A Living Voice* (1974) Reginal Cook adopted a practice of silent editing, a common technique generally used to make minor and inconsequential emendations that do not alter the fundamental meaning of what has been said. When employing silent editing, editors usually define general, global policies for the changes they introduce but do not offer detailed, localized records of every single change. Silent editing, therefore, assumes the best intentions of editors, prioritizes the legibility of a reproduced text, and guides readers who wish to investigate the formation of text to focus only on the changes the editor deems subject to debate. For Cook, Frost's syntax, repetition, and mumbled utterance were subject to such silent emendation. Cook wrote:

> Of the several problems encountered in preparing a transcription of the Frost tapes, the first and the most persistently recurrent has been syntactical. He started sentences and left them dangling when intrusive thought deflected the original intention. Secondly, he was repetitious, which made necessary judicious excision. Thirdly, and certainly the most frustrating was the occasional word murmured unintelligibly in low register, which will forevermore remain unclear. These three problems — syntax, repetition, and unintelligibility — have been in part obviated by emendations. Since his sentences, like those in relaxed conversation, tend to trail into one another, divisions had to be made. I assumed the responsibility of punctuating the sentences and organizing the paragraphs according to the apparent central thought. I have cut some repeated phrases but added nothing not indicated by inserted brackets.
>
> (Cook 1974, 31–32)

Cook claimed that his editorial labor — which is often inaccessible to readers — mostly concerned reformatting the informality of spoken expression in accordance with the formality and legibility of written expression and involved only minimal intervention. Yet he also curated a certain reading experience as he edited out his frustration of not being

able to decipher murmured words, so that his readers could focus on the main ideas Frost sought to communicate without being distracted by what they could not understand. That is, through his editorial work, Cook emphasized the semantics he considered central to a given talk.

Readers of Cook's edition, then, are presented with a highly mediated text that is reflective of Cook's interpretation of the talk event. Additionally, as silent editing does not leave a record of minor edits, readers are positioned — even compelled — to trust Cook's informed judgment. The edition inscribes Cook's authority in yet another way: Cook had originally served in the role of interlocutor of Frost's talk at Middlebury College's Bead Loaf School of English, and his edition foregrounds this earlier role by literally embedding him not just as a reporter on but as a participant in the event — a stylistic choice that is reminiscent of an ethnographer. The following passage is Cook's transcription of Frost's talk delivered on June 30th, 1955, which I reproduce at length to illustrate its legibility as well as Cook's editorial interventions in his supplementary annotations:

> I thought if I came up again some evening, I'd like to talk about Puritanism — in Greek, Roman, Early Roman, New England, and Later Roman — and right out of the head, not out of my books. I'm one of these people who read some. You can see how little I depend on books for anything I do. They [his books] are in such disorder that they're very fresh to me whenever I happen on one that I've been looking for. [*Laughter*] *A Pleasant Night*: I haven't seen that for twenty years. I'll have to get that down and read it. But I can't get a talk out of it. I'll just have to come up and talk off the cuff, as they say, about Puritanism and the greatest poem that it produced: *Comus*. You thought I was going to say something else, I see. Shall I say that Puritanism didn't repent, you know? It relented a little and became Unitarianism. I've found it relenting. [*Laughter*] I'll come up and talk about that.
>
> (Cook 1974, 76)

Coupled with the larger objectives of Cook's edition to offer personal insights into Frost's literary enterprise based on his friendly relationship with the poet, Cook's transcriptions offer a collegial representation of Frost's talk events. Indeed, in the talks featured in Cook's edition, Frost is seen laughing at Cook's routine requests for the poem "Come In", which entertains a thrush's last song of the day at dusk. Cook transcribed the exchange, suggesting his close relationship with Frost with his bracketed annotations. In the following transcription Frost is seen talking about his

literary praxis, where he refers to his performance as "saying" poems. The first-person singular in the square brackets refers to Cook:

> One more. Something else. Don't ask me afterwards why didn't I "say" something. Tell me now. What is the last one I'll say? See if I know it. [I called out "Come In" and "Directive."] Everybody ought to smile when Doc Cook asks for "Come In." That's his specialty, isn't it? Doc and the thrushes. [*Sarcastically*]
>
> (Cook 1974, 114)

Also implied in Cook's transcription is an amicable relationship between Frost, Cook, and the summer program attendees — so much so that we, the readers, can gather that the poet's sarcastic humor was well-taken and welcome.

Of course, Cook's use of silent editorial emendation is not without its critics. James Sitar, for instance, identified an excessive number of "cleanups" in Cook's transcription, noting, in his "Robert Frost Seven Dartmouth Talks" (2001), that it fell short of capturing the dynamic unfolding of Frost's talks:

> Cook presents his transcriptions to stand as pseudo-essays presented by Frost, complete with a polished syntax. This format excludes of Frost's somewhat half-realized thoughts and directions. Much of Frost's tone and rhythm, I feel, is lost in the Cook transcriptions. This loss can be attributed to Cook's aforementioned cleanups. This essay-like impression, which is difficult to miss when reading his transcriptions, is misleading. In presenting the text of the Bread Loaf talks as such, Cook gains a sort of publishable quality, but loses the genuine Frostian element.
>
> (Sitar 2001)[8]

In preparing transcriptions for seven of Frost's talks delivered at Dartmouth College's Great Issues Lecture series between 1944 and 1961, therefore, Sitar utilized punctuation not to impose a formal syntax structure but to denote the pace of Frost's speaking. For example, Sitar employed ellipses to reproduce the tempo of Frost's talk as the poet self-corrected, added, and expanded on what he had just said. The transcription

8. Sitar in the Preface to his "Robert Frost Seven Dartmouth Talks". His transcription was gifted to and housed in Dartmouth College Library.

prepared by Sitar seeks to reproduce the process of how Frost articulated his thinking. Additionally, Sitar's commas indicate the tempo of Frost's 'quipping' rather than marking a syntactical unit. As seen in the first sentence of the following transcript, Frost's self-reflective utterance "I suppose" is not segmented by commas despite the written norms for an aside, but transcribed as occurring without a pause and in a single breath:

> I've always made considerable claims for poetry in my heart I suppose and made some rather humorous ones . . . with my friends. I had to. Or else you know, or else. (laughter.) But I wouldn't claim . . . I would claim them in the spirit of poetry. Now there's two ways to take the world that are safe. One is as a joke, take it humorously. Learn to take a joke and so learn to take the world with . . . by the help of jokes. You gotta do that cause, one knows that from the people he knows. He knows the kind of people who don't and how lost they are. Then there's a still . . . better way . . . not better, another way . . . side-by-side with it, perhaps a little, one might claim, if he was claiming a lot for poetry you know, claim a little higher. But to take poetry right is to take life right.
>
> (Sitar 2001, 12)

In comparison with Cook's transcript, Sitar's transcript illustrates a more pensive Frost. Also captured with Sitar's use of commas is Frost's tendency to rush when least expected. His transcript notates a quickening pace in Frost's speech, particularly as he wrapped up the talk and hurried off the stage, as if to shy away from the audience's prolonged applause.[9]

In addition to the methodologies deployed by Sitar and Cook, there is another technique of transcription that warrants consideration: the verbatim transcript, such as the one prepared by India Tressault for the Middlebury College's Special Collections. Unlike the intentions of the previous two editors, the editorial intent of Tressault's transcript is not, to the best of my knowledge, yet part of the scholarly record. Tressault could have produced their transcript as a part of routine archival processing work or for the purpose of accompanying audio files for the library's online exhibition. Regardless of their intention, Tressault's transcript is now a part of Middlebury College's online collection *Robert Frost at Bread Loaf (RFBL),* first made available circa 2006. Unlike Cook's transcription with its numerous editorial emendations, Tressault's transcript reproduces Frost's

9. Such a tendency of the poet is also reported in the contemporary newspaper article; see Anderson 1949.

every utterance, including his misspeaks, mumbled words, and fillers. In accordance with this verbatim approach, Tressault also notates the tempo of Frost's speech through interspersed em-dashes that function much like the ellipses in Sitar's transcriptions. Here is Tressasult's transcript of the talk delivered at Middlebury College on June 30th, 1955, the same passage transcribed by Cook, quoted earlier:

> I thought if I came up again in the, uh, to the, uh, some evening, I'd like to talk about Puritanism in Greek, Roman, early Roman, New England, and later Roman. And, uh, I l — n — right off the, right out of the head, you know, not, not of my books. I'm one of these people that reads some. But my, you can see how little I depend on books, uh, for anything I do. They're in such disorder that I ca — that I, uh, [unclear] they're very fresh to me whenever I happen on one that I been looking for [laughter]. I have *Pleasant Night.* I haven't seen that for twenty years and I'll get that down and read it. But it, I can't get a l — a talk out of it; I just come up and talk off the, off the cuff, as they say, about Puritanism and the great, greatest poem that it produced, the, uh, *Comus.* You thought I was gonna say something else I see [laughter]. [Unclear] And, uh, and the, the, uh, shall I say the, uh, Puritanism didn't repent, you know, it relented a little and became Unitarianism [laughter]. That's the fi — final relenting. I'll come up and talk about that.
>
> (Tressault n.d.)

In comparison with Cook's text, Tressault's text establishes its credibility differently. Tressault transcribed all kinds of semi-lexical sounds as well as what they could not decipher. In addition to rendering Frost's speech mannerisms with colloquial spelling as they heard it (e.g. "gonna"), Tressault's text communicates transparency and the earnest effort to report what is recorded on the tape — but it leaves the semantics of the text to readers to decipher.

Talks as a Genre

Despite differences in editorial intention and degrees of editorial emendation, the transcriptions of Frost's talks prepared by Cook, Sitar, and Tressault all share one common problem: the limit of transcriptions to reproduce — or even indicate — the tone of Frost's talks in their original aural performance. While today the role of transcriptions may be

reduced to being supplementary to digital audio recordings, the problem of conveying tone via transcription may remain an oversight in Anglo-American textual scholarship. That is, just as Frost himself conflated 'written records of spoken prose' and 'prose composed directly in writing' and subsequently struggled with the notion that the talks were not on par with his essays, editors — and possibly the readers they imagine — might be troubled by another aspect of remediation qualms when seeing the transcriptions accompanying an audio edition of Frost's talks, like the ones I am preparing to publish.

To put the matter bluntly, the formal conservatism at the heart of the Anglo-American editorial tradition, with its focus on routing out textual corruptions and revealing original and/or final authorial intentions (Greg 1950; Bowers 1964), makes the genre of the talk an especially challenging one for editors. Cook is not alone in perceiving the necessity of silent emendation — or remedial editing — as he sought to "obviate" Frost's syntax, repetition, and occasional unintelligibility (Cook 1974, 31–32). Frost's biographer, Lawrence Thompson, also "edited heavily" with the poet's permission and even "took the liberty of compressing sentences where [Frost] had spoken with a certain amount of clumsiness" as he prepared "The Poet's Next of Kin in College", originally delivered at Princeton University on October 26, 1927, for print publication (qtd. in Richardson 2007, 299).

If an editor were to employ a verbatim method for talks' transcription, would it invite unkind commentaries from readers for making Frost appear inarticulate, a fear Frost himself echoed in his concern, as he supervised the revision process of "Speaking of Loyalty" to be published in the *Amherst Graduates' Quarterly* in 1948, that his unedited talks on the print page did not always "bring [his] point out more sharply" (qtd. in Richardson 2007, 316)? Or would it invoke a familiar, judgmental sentiment based on a tacit historical agreement that publishing Frost's talks as they were would damage the poet's image, such as when Virginia Van Fossman, Resident Alumni Secretary of Oberlin, explained why no one sought to prepare for circulation Frost's remarks delivered at Oberlin College on June 8, 1937: "It was the general consensus of opinion that the rambling remarks which Mr. Frost made [at the commencement] were not worthy of him" (qtd. in Richardson 2007, 240)? Could a posthumous editor of Frost's talks free the poet, his literary critics, and general readers alike from such historical remediation qualms, especially the ones that concern the perceived need for corrective editing, once and for all?

We cannot know what forms of editing or methods of transcription Frost had in mind in 1959 when he finally eased his stance and asked his former student and friend Jack Hagstrom to start collecting tape recordings and phonograph records of his talks and readings (Kelly 2012).[10] But if the poet's historical apprehension stemmed from the impression that his talks resisted translation into an essay format or went against the image of the author established through print publications, it is high time that we, Frost's twenty-first-century readers and editors, let go of those apprehensions in ourselves. Indeed, one of the beneficial consequences of acknowledging *our* historical remediation qualms and of revising the corresponding image of the author in print is the opening it provides for us to reevaluate Frost's performance behind a podium and the role of his conversational and meandering talks therein.

Shifting our focal point to the poet's stage performance, moreover, also necessitates due attention to the reception of Frost's talk events from a wide range of audience members, including a "youngster and poem-scarred veteran" in Westtown, Pennsylvania (Longstreth 1952) as well as a crowd at Stanford that was "filled with enthusiasm, audibly greeting the announcement of certain poems with delighted recognition, ready to recite some of them right along with the speaker, and calling for encores" (Nichols 1953). Reflecting on Frost's talks delivered for Harvard University's Norton Lecture series in 1936 — the original instance of his post-performance remediation struggles — a local newspaper reporter illustrated the warm reception of the poet from a thousand attendees from all walks of life: "Mr. Frost, gray-thatched and smiling, gently addressed his audience as though they were townsfolk of his adopted Vermont hills, gathered round the cannonball stove of the village store. It was a mixed gathering — students and professors, children and patriarchs, intellectuals and the unlearned, brought together despite the rain by a love of that magic which translates bare words into quivering things of pure emotion" (Dame 1936). A second newspaper article concurred: "There can have been very few occasions in the history of such public events in Greater Boston in our times when there was so much friendliness concentrated under one roof and directed at one man" (Holmes 1936).

Such an exuberant reception from his general readers was not an anomaly during the nearly five decades of Frost's career, almost as if to fulfill the prophesy he penned in a letter back in 1913 to "be a poet for

10. Thanks to Mark Richardson who helped me cross-examine the letter in question.

all sorts and kinds" (Frost 2014, 154). Frost's penultimate talk delivered at the University of Detroit in 1962, for instance, drew over 8,500 people and exceeded the venue's seating capacities (Seale 2005, 10). As Lisa Seale informs us in her editorial notes, such popularity was doubtless the consequence of Frost's then-recent visit to the USSR on a cultural exchange trip appointed by President Kennedy. Regardless of Frost's growing fame — or because of it — 6,500 seats were reserved for high school students at a reduced rate, ensuring the accessibility to his talk for diverse age groups (Seale 2005, 10). In addition to appealing to diverse age groups, Frost's performances targeted different demographics through their varied venues. For example, Frost regularly performed at cultural community centers such as 92nd Street Y in New York City, as a part of the YM-YWHA Poetry Center's annual programming during the 1950s.[11] But he also visited remote areas such as Gloucester on the northern shore of Massachusetts, to deliver a talk at the local high-school auditorium in 1953, prompting a newspaper to report the extraordinary event with much enthusiasm: "Robert Frost gave Cape Ann its greatest literary event since Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke at the Lyceum on March 5, 1845" (Bethell 1953).[12]

With the emergence of electronic publishing, transcriptions in print are no longer the only option for reissuing Frost's talks today. However, the transmission history of Robert Frost's public talks still points to the political implications of editorial labor, as the textual representation of his works tends to be equated with the poet's temperament, prestige, and respectability. The critical neglect of Frost's public talks is paradoxical given Frost's commitment to auditory attentiveness to spoken language. It is high time that we, Frost readers and editors alike, unlearn the conflated characterization of 'written prose' when assessing the transcription of Frost's talks and overcome the historical remediation qualms that rendered talks as a subpar form of expression. Only then might we cite — as in celebrate — his talks as a distinct genre of their own.

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11. These event program brochures are housed in the Amherst College Archives & Special Collections. See "Subscription Series 1956–1957", "Readings, Lectures, Plays by Contemporary Poets, November 1957–1958", and "The Twenty-First Season of The Poetry Center: 1959–1960".
12. See also Damon 1953.

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