Chapter 1

The Quest for a Name in “Frost”

By proper names I find I do my thinking

In an interview conducted by reporter John Sherrill for the August 1955 edition of Guideposts, an inspirational monthly publication, Frost offers some curious observations about naming. In fact, he anticipates the questioning by saying, “I hope you won’t ask me to put names on things...I’m afraid of that” (Interviews 148). And in response to Sherrill’s first question about what God meant to him in “Bereft,” he says, “If you would learn the way a man feels about God, don’t ask him to put a name on himself. All that is said with names is soon not enough” (149). Sherrill sums up Frost’s message in this way: “Imagine that you see a butterfly, and its beauty is something you want to capture and take home with you. You catch the butterfly and place it carefully on a cardboard under glass. And to your sorrow, you haven’t caught the butterfly at all. You can examine the thing that you have under glass, and give it a name. But your relation to it is changed. Where once the butterfly had a subtle, vibrant aliveness, the very act of pinning it down has destroyed it for you” (150). In his attempt to express his close understanding of Frost in a Romantic way, Sherrill partly does to the complexity in Frost’s words about naming what he claims ought to be avoided in the case of the butterfly. In this chapter I would like to move beyond this limited response and explore Frost’s dauntingly complex sense of the name, including both his negotiation with the idea of poet as namer and his repeated poetic attempts to find or create his own name through his poems. In both cases, this theme of the name and of the poet’s signature emerging from his works involves the issue of identity that I have discussed in the Introduction.

T. D. O’Brien, Names, Proverbs, Riddles, and Material Text in Robert Frost
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This search for identity involves the basic philosophical issues, as well, that Lentricchia and Stanlis most prominently highlight: those related to the post-Kantian, Romantic tradition within which and against which Frost’s poetry, with its Jamesian, pragmatic bent, works. As Lentricchia captures it, Frost’s poetic development involves a Romantic inclination to constitute an identity from imagination, but not one that establishes the identity’s existence in terms of universal truths; instead, that imagination works upon the material world acknowledged to be “out there,” separate from the perceiving mind, and skeptically constitutes “a self in language against” the objects in that world (Lentricchia, *Robert Frost* 137). One of the trickiest jobs for readers of Frost’s poetry, however, is to negotiate the encounters Frost’s personae have with the material world. This job is tricky because often these encounters quite transparently enclose a search for “the answer,” for some universal truth. Thus, while the momentum of the poems—and we’ll see this as they move toward acts of naming, of coming up with some proverbial solution to a problem, or of constructing a riddle about an object to be identified—flows toward some unifying answer, their various eddies work back against that movement, undercutting any definite sense of meaning derived from the search, leaving only signs that the fundamental elements of human experience are unnameable.

The most apparent area of naming in Frost’s poetry can best be approached through territory marked off by Emerson. In two works, the poem “Hamatreya” and the essay “The Poet,” Emerson establishes the rough boundaries of one area of naming in Frost’s poetry. At one extreme, naming expresses the arrogant desire to possess and control, as suggested in “Hamatreya”:

Minott, Lee, Willard, Hosmer, Meriam, Flint  
Possessed the land which rendered to their toil  
Hay, corn, roots, hemp, flax, apples, wool, and wood.  
Each of these landlords walked amidst his farm,  
Saying, “‘Tis mine, my children’s and my name’s.” (1–5)

The *ubi sunt?* stanza that follows (Where are these Men? Asleep beneath the grounds,” 11), along with the “Earth Song,” in which Earth claims her independence from men, undercuts avaricious naming. This combination of nature’s resistance to naming and man’s need to control nature by labeling occurs either peripherally or centrally in a number of Frost’s poems. For instance, in “A Hundred Collars,” Lafayette’s neck is outgrowing his collars just as “a nursery tree . . . outgrows the wire band of its name tag” (51). In “Paul’s Wife,” Paul’s possessiveness toward his wife, who is so thoroughly “natural” as to have emerged from a log, extends to his