Chapter 4

The Material Text as Witness Tree

Acts of naming, the name itself, the proverb, and the riddle—these are all fundamental elements in the search for identity represented in Frost’s works. As we have seen, though, all these gestures involved in that search lead to the same outcome: the self and the sense of secure knowledge underpinning it disappear in the act of naming. What survives is either the intimidating, imponderable mystery of our condition or mere materiality, whether flesh and bones or the letters of a name. In a way, that perception of our existence as nothing more than material, as nothing more than Kant’s ding an sich (“thing-in-itself”), is the mystery of it all, at least to a consciousness that, because it senses itself as separate from its material lodging, assumes that something equally separate and outside of its own time and space, and just as unidentifiable as itself, must have created it.¹ The essential project in Frost’s poetry, the search for identity through external structures in nature and, as I have tried to emphasize, preexisting linguistic structures, inevitably fails. The game of the name ends without satisfaction, even if the game haunts the searcher with a pending answer.

This game leaves Frost to define himself in terms of his relationship with his poems. It makes sense, therefore, to move to the poems as the things that might redeem Frost’s always-already lost sense of who he is. The poem resembles the name: it at once locates and loses what it seeks; as signature, it seems palpable and real on the page, but that palpability by its very nature excludes the intangible self and the presence of the poet. More generally, then, the identity issues we have been tracing emerge through the attempts Frost makes to negotiate a place for his self within or next to

the poems he creates. This negotiation takes the shape almost of a dialectic that goes something like this: I write books that I fear possess a materiality of their own, that seem affiliated with the female world, and that readers experience outside my controlling presence; I want to participate in the manly world of physical activity and the management and marketing of real objects, not just of books whose status in the world is questionable; and I want to remain a poet who is also a man, certain of who he is and what he and his tangible outputs can command of the world. While exploring the poem-object as perhaps Frost’s “last best hope” at marking his identity, we will be moving back and forth from the view of the poem as commodity to the perception of it as material fact, mere type on paper, and as an expression that also highlights the “thingness” of the objects in the imaginary world the poem creates. The rubric “material text” stands loosely for this broad range of activity. Though it would be neater to cull out the various “materialities” in Frost’s poetry and life, it would not be as accurate: Frost himself often tangles up these different implications in his poetry and poetics, and in tracing his often quizzical attempts to conceive of identity as economical value and material presence, we must respect these tangles.

Published in 1942 when the sixty-eight-year-old Robert Frost was thought to be well past his creative prime, the Pulitzer Prize–winning A Witness Tree presents the reader with a cover image of a tree marked with what seems like a text, and its largely ignored preface poems are both titled after trees—“Beech” and “Sycamore.” As Douglas Mao reminds us in Solid Objects, the tree, in its “banality,” is “both a fine provocation to existential crisis and one of the standard examples of the ordinary object, referent, or thing-out-there in Western philosophical and literary discourse, its popularity in this area rivaled only by that of the . . . table and chair” (48). Though it refers specifically to Virginia Woolf’s use of the tree to explore material reality, Mao’s observation can spur us to examine Frost’s abiding concern with the material presence of his poems and his anxiety about the autonomous presence of the text unaccompanied by the voice of its author.2

Focusing on this largely unexplored element in Frost’s poetry as it relates to his quest for identity involves us in a discussion of several significant aspects of Frost’s poetics. First, Frost himself repeatedly calls attention to the material presence of his poems in a negative way by distancing himself from the words on the page, as if they were somehow misleading without an authorial presence. He did this in discussions of his poetics of the “sentence sound” that emerged largely through a series of letters to friends during his stay in England and in his stylizing himself throughout his career as the bard who at public occasions would “say” rather than “read”