Fictions of Rhythm
In an essay entitled “The ‘Final Finding of the Ear’: Wallace Stevens’ Modernist Soundscapes,” Peter Middleton argues that “[s]ound is secondary” and noncognitive and finds Stevens’ and other modernist American poets’ investment of belief in sound to be “utopian.” Of course, such investment was not limited to the American modernists. The romantic poet William Wordsworth speaks of the “power in sound / To breathe an elevated mood,” and fellow romantic Samuel Taylor Coleridge qualifies a legitimate poem as one that, “like the path of sound through the air,” carries the reader forward. Likewise, the nineteenth-century French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé aspired toward a musicalized language for poetry that would make the poet capable “not just of expressing oneself but of modulating oneself as one chooses.” Paul Valéry, Stevens’ contemporary, believed, as Lisa Goldfarb writes, that “the poet must perceive the primacy of sound over meaning.” Hence American modernist poets like Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams could not claim uniqueness but rather obstreperous insistence upon both the primacy of sound and its value beyond the semantic.

These poets’ willingness to believe that linguistic sound offers transparent access to our innermost thoughts, feelings, and emotions ought to be startling; it certainly has been challenged and problematized by scholars pointing to both the constructed and the socially, historically, and politically situated contexts that produce both the poem and the poet’s subjectivity. Yet cognitive research proves that rich phonological representations are activated early in our processing of silent reading; this so counters Peter Middleton’s assertions about the nature of sound that we
should reconsider these poets’ appeal to prosody as a primary ground as perhaps not merely utopian or impressionistic, even if we recognize their statements to exaggerate the importance of sound over meaning. While a full correlation of psycholinguistic findings in relation to some modernist poets’ investments of belief in sound will have to wait for another essay, this one will prepare that ground by disentangling competing claims regarding sound among three particular American modernists (Stevens, Williams, and, especially, Robert Frost) and by offering a novel solution why Frost’s claims have fared worse than these contemporaries’, all of which are equally predicated upon the sound structure of a poem.

Stevens and Frost

As two preeminent American modernists writing metrical verse, Stevens and Frost might well share a limited legacy of formal innovation; and yet Stevens has been granted greater stature as a prosodic innovator and theorist. It is tempting to attribute this difference in reception to Frost’s adamant rejection of newer modes of poetic rhythm, while Stevens practices free verse alongside metrical composition. Nonetheless, the difference is more likely attributable to the specific nature of their prosodic innovations, which differ significantly in the level of phonological representation involved, a difference that matters to the reception of their legacy.

As in his well-known remark in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens’ comments about sound focus on the sounds of individual words: “Above everything else, poetry is words; and . . . words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds.” Rarely, if at all, does he speak of larger linguistic units, such as the phrase, sentence, or line. Throughout Stevens’ letters and his prose, we find statements such as “I like words to sound wrong,” or “A variation between the sound of words in one age and the sound of words in another age is an instance of the pressure of reality.”

Likewise, as I have shown elsewhere, much of Stevens’ early and mid-career metrical innovations turn upon an inventive yet strictly rule-governed play with lexical stress, that is, with how words sound depending upon their linguistic, syntactic, and, of course, metrical environments. Stevens’ placement of words into the meter in such a way that they “sound wrong”—i.e., altered from normative realizations—displays quite a sophisticated awareness of factors influencing lexical phonology; these run the gamut from historical pronunciations and cross-linguistic difference (particularly between French and English) to quite supple realizations of
English stress rules (for lexical, compound, and phrasal stress). For example, when Stevens writes,

\[
/ x \backslash \\
\text{Of ocean, perfected in indolence} \quad (CPP, 85)
\]

\[
/ x \backslash \\
\text{More exquisite than any tumbling verse} \quad (CPP, 29)
\]

he is echoing usages of an earlier age, as in the second line of Robert Herrick’s couplet from 1647, and John Clare’s line from 1819:

\[
/ x \backslash \\
\text{Gods Grace deserves here to be daily fed.} \quad \text{Robert Herrick}
\]

\[
/ x \backslash \\
\text{That, thus increast, it might be perfected.} \quad \text{(Robert Herrick)}
\]

\[
/ x \backslash \\
\text{I dropt me down with exquisite delight} \quad \text{(John Clare)}
\]

And when Stevens writes lines like those below, he is drawing on the use of French stress patterns, to motivate an alternate pronunciation:

\[
\backslash x / \\
\text{Attach. It seemed haphazard denouement}^{14} \quad (CPP, 33)
\]

\[
/ x \backslash \\
\text{A vital, linear ambiance. The flare}^{6} \quad (CPP, 327)
\]

In stark contrast, the next examples display Stevens self-consciously forcing a bungled Anglicization of a foreign word, a rhythmic tactic that contributes to the comic portraiture of the young poet:

\[
/ x \backslash \\
\text{When amorists grow bald, then amours shrink} \quad (CPP, 12)
\]

\[
/ \quad \text{One eats one paté, even of salt. quotha} \quad (CPP, 22)
\]
Supple auditor of French that he is, Stevens’ use of the rhythm rule to retract stress from the second syllable of *amour* to the first to avoid a stress clash with *shrink* displays a virtuosic multilingual wit, one echoed in the prior examples.

Were these examples not enough, one could examine Stevens’ existential play with the stresslessness of nonlexical words to unmoor any certain meaning, and thus destabilize what otherwise ought to be a triumphant declaration: for example, in response to the question “What am I to believe?” in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” the twelve-syllable, entirely nonlexical iambic-pentameter line “I have not but I am and as I am, I am” winkingly refuses our desire to impose certain *iambs* and shapes on belief. Or we could look to evidence in “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” of Stevens’ masterly orchestration of the full variety of circumstances that produce disyllabic words with initial stress. As the poem renders its serial, modulating impressions of the sea “In that November off Tehuantepec,” the image brought to mind shifts from “rosy” to “chop-house,” “porcelain,” “musky,” and, finally, “Chinese chocolate,” as in “And made one think of chop-house chocolate.” Thus, within the metrical baseline “And made one think of [\(\times\)] chôcolâte,” we find activated supple rules for “fitting . . . a selection of the real language of man in a state of vivid sensation” to the meter: these range from phonological rules governing segments (i.e., consideration of vowel length and its influence on stress [e.g., the underlying vowel length and lexical rhythm of *rosy* and *musky* are comparable to the vowel length and lexical rhythm of *Mary*, not *Marie*] and the reduction of sonorant sequences [*porcelain*]), to stress rules involving larger entities (e.g., compound stress [chop-house] and the rhythm rule, whose domain is the phrase [*Chinese chocolate*]).

In summary, we can isolate the word as a significant locus of Stevens’ innovative metrical effects, discerning how his virtuosic meter intensifies our awareness of the variable rhythms that come from words’ shifting relationships in linguistic context, grammar, syntax, and metrical placement.

In contrast with this exacting play with words by Stevens, Robert Frost treats words as plastic elements within larger compositional units, rather than individual lexical entities. Frost once remarked, “The strain of rhyming is less since I came to see words as phrase-ends to countless phrases just as the syllables *ly*, *ing*, and *ation* are word-ends to countless words.” Clearly, Frost came to regard words, for poetic purposes, as functionally
equivalent to morphological adjuncts in language—they may be essential, but they are not the base.

That base, for Frost, lies in larger prosodic units like phrases and, especially, sentences, which Frost presents as the domain generative of meaning: “I shall show the sentence sound saying all that the sentence conveys with little or no help from the meaning of the words.” Indeed, when Frost speaks of words, he speaks of them as “other sounds” that may be strung upon the sentence sound, suggesting that, for him, sentence sound is primary: “A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung.”

As we might expect then, unlike Stevens, Frost rarely invites us to attend to individual words, to modulations in their stress accents or even finer adjustments in linguistic rhythm occasioned by their changing syntactic functions or metrical placement. Instead, Frost invites us to hear the possible shifts in either the nature or location of melodic accent—a higher-level accent that falls across sequences of words and reflects a speaker’s or reader’s sense of what holds the greatest informational, contextual, or emotional value.

Frost’s acclaimed “Home Burial” exemplifies how his scaffolding of speech rhythms within the metrical template focuses attention on the intonational contours (that is, both on the possible locations of the tonic syllable and the potential for shifts in pitch height and direction on the tonic) and thus on the range of interpretive stances associated with the characters’ statements. Its opening lines, with multiple possibilities for melodic accent, mirror the poem’s subject matter—a mobile and latently violent power struggle between the husband and wife. Whether we place melodic accent on either or both members of the contrastive gender pair (he and her, she and him) or upon the preposition before makes a tremendous difference to our interpretation of the poem’s unfolding drama: “He saw her from the bottom of the stairs / Before she saw him.” That all of these decisions are enabled by the poem’s metrical rhythm, a muted blank verse, means that readers must struggle with decisions regarding melodic emphasis as essentially matters of interpretation. The multivalent possibilities for pitch height and direction on the phrase “before she saw him” are essentially inferential: any single prosodic change also involves meaning. In contrast, the flat and falling tone of the neutral declaration, “She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,” acts as a baseline for the expressive departures of the characters’ speech.

Another way to convey Frost’s distinctive prosodic innovations is to say that whereas Stevens influences how we produce the stress contours of a word, which is the lowest level of our language’s accentual structure,
Frost attempts to govern the reader’s assignment of melodic accent to words that already possess stress, using the higher of the language’s two levels of accentual structure, intonation.

This distinction is important because whereas word-stress (stress accent) is so familiar and apparently fixed that it can be represented in dictionary entries, melodic accent is inherently variable and is commonly held to be idiosyncratic and unpredictable. Thus, readers are far more likely to recognize and enjoy the shifts in lexical rhythm (stress accent) that Stevens’ verse involves. But these same readers are likely to resist, resent, or, worse yet, entirely miss the shifts in melodic accent that Frost claims are essential to his verse.

Indeed, while no less overstated than Stevens’, Frost’s beliefs in the importance of certain properties of sound, are, by their nature, less easily defended. This is in large part because the sound combinations Stevens primarily engages lie at lower and more fixed levels of the prosodic hierarchy, the rhythmic organization of language:

The Prosodic Hierarchy: Prosodic Domains in Language

Utterance
Intonational Phrase
Phonological phrase
Phonological word
Foot (Moraic Trochee)
Syllable

Stevens’ metrical experiments draw upon the prosodic organization of language at or below the level of the phonological word. They either vary the location of stress accent, as we saw with denouement or ambiance, or they call upon well-attested phonological processes (e.g., elision and the reduction of sonorant sequences) and the internal structure of syllables in English to compress additional phonological material into a single metrical foot. We are far more likely to agree to the possibility of a poet’s manipulating the placement of stress accent within a word, not only because of past precedent, but also because the accentual stresses of words themselves are predictable.

By contrast, Frost’s sound of sense—his belief in the expressive force of “the intonation entangled somehow in the syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence”—involves higher levels of the prosodic hierarchy that are, by definition, variable and responsive to an array of paralinguistic and other factors (For example, a reader’s or listener’s mapping of prosody onto intentions involves pragmatic issues beyond a speaker’s [or author’s]
control,28 as well as matters of “individual difference”29). These factors, along with our unfamiliarity with technical descriptions of intonational phonology, make us intuitively less likely to agree that a poet can fix melodic accent. Instead, we are likely to resist the idea that the arrangement of words on a page can so specify how the reader’s voice should posture that a single articulation of the poetic line is not only possible but inevitable;30 instead, we might agree with Dwight Bolinger, who so titled a seminal article on intonation, “Accent Is Predictable (If You’re a Mind-Reader).”31

Frost and Williams

To suggest that Frost’s and Williams’ sound configurations are deeply similar would certainly have been rejected by both poets. Nonetheless, the parallels between Frost’s theories and Williams’ are even closer than those between Frost and Stevens. Williams, like Frost, intuited that the structure of speech sound can yield a new means of prosodic organization for the modern poem. Frost: “[M]y conscious interest in people was at first no more than an almost technical interest in their speech—in what I used to call their sentence sounds—the sound of sense. Whatever these sounds are or aren’t . . . I say, I began to hang on them very young. . . .”32 And Williams: “From the beginning I knew that the American language must shape the pattern; later I rejected the word language and spoke of the American idiom—this was a better word than language, less academic, more identified with speech.”33 The fact that Williams claims to harness the cadences of speech rhythm as a new measure displacing meter, whereas Frost claims to “get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre”34 should not dissuade us from seeing these parallels, as is brought out in the following comments:

When you listen to a speaker, you hear words, to be sure,—but you also hear tones. The problem is to note them, to imagine them again, and to get them down in writing. But few of you probably ever thought of the possibility or of the necessity of doing this.35

You see, basically he [Williams] was listening to himself talk and listening to other people around him talk, and trying to find a way of putting it down on the page so that he’d be able to take advantage of all the beautiful little rhythms of medical office-kitchen-bathroom-street-grocery speech.”36
These statements objectively reveal what the poems—with their differences of register and diction, syntactic structures, and tone—do not: the poets’ shared interest in bringing to the page the sonic play of seemingly spontaneous speech. In poem after poem, particularly in early Williams, we find sudden changes in the direction or height of melodic accent. These are often prompted by a specific class of syntactic units, ranging from sentence adverbials (“Gold against blue”), parenthetical elements (“this could be / applied fresh at small expense”), and vocatives (“my townspeople”), to social formulae (“Forgive me”), moved constituents (“first the right / forefoot // carefully”), and interjections (“phew!”; “For Christ’s sake”), which are separated from adjacent or surrounding syntactic units by pauses and other factors. As a result, these irruptive sequences multiply the frequency and type of intonational phrases and tunes characterizing the statement. (By contrast, one might say a neutral declarative statement in American English possesses a single intonational contour with a fairly regular falling tune, but see discussion of “Never Again” in the next section of this essay.) Whether these effects successfully simulate actual speech or not, they encourage the reader to imagine that the poem is occurring in an actual discourse situation—one that possesses immediacy (“This Is Just to Say”), dramatic context (“Portrait of a Lady”), and, perhaps most elusively for modernist poets, audience (“Tract”).

Frost’s effects are both less obvious and less energetic. Typically, the diction is less idiomatic, the register more elevated, and the syntax more hypotactic. Nonetheless, Frost’s extensive right-branching sentences employ conventions similar to those of Williams’ briefer and more excitable sentences. Compare Williams’ “Pastoral” to the start of Frost’s “Directive.” Both poems begin with one or more sentence adverbials that—by virtue of their distinctive intonational contours—create characteristic tunes (of course, they also serve to establish temporal and/or spatial context):

When I was younger
it was plain to me
I must make something of myself.

(Williams, CP, vol. 1, 64; adverbial italicized)

and

Back out of all this now too much for us,
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,
There is a house that is no more a house . . .

(Frost, CPPP, 341; adverbials italicized)
Both poems also interrupt ongoing syntactic units with parenthetical asides

\[ \ldots \text{all,} \]
\[ \text{if I am fortunate,} \]
\[ \text{smeared a bluish green} \]

\textit{(Williams, CP, vol. 1, 64; moved constituent italicized)}

and again

\[ \text{The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you} \]
\[ \text{Who only has at heart your getting lost,} \]
\[ \text{May seem as if it should have been a quarry—} \]

\textit{(Frost, CPPP, 341; moved constituents italicized)}

While syntactically inessential, the asides convey affective values intrinsic to each poem's trajectory and semantic force. Frost's poems also achieve a range of tones by drawing upon a similar set of constructions, as do Williams' poems in general. Frost's subset of asides, however, is comprised less of the brief interjections and vocatives characteristic of Williams (although both are found in \textit{North of Boston}) than of lengthy nonrestrictive appositives, parentheticals, and, especially, imperatives, whose \textit{“voicing”} (i.e., pitch direction, height, and pacing) differs appreciably from the primarily declarative sentences with which they are interwoven.

Of course, none of this is to say that the \textit{sound} of the two poets' work is similar. What is intriguing and perhaps has kept many scholars and readers from noting the strong parallels is just how different the effects of each poet's intonational contours are. Williams' lines tend to align with intonational phrases, turning intonational tunes into a prosodic measure: what we hear is the rise and fall of the voice, organized by line. In contrast, Frost's versification counterpoints a line's metrical stress and its ongoing syntax \textit{against} the intonational contour or melodic accent of constituents within the line: what we hear is the play of tension between the more-or-less regular rhythms that the metrical organization of the verse occasions and the possibilities for distinctive melodic tunes that the text's speech rhythms suggest may be superimposed upon the metrical rhythms. In assessing Frost's theories, we should remember that while today we \textit{“hear”} his verse as canonically metrical, his contemporary critics were misled by quite a few of his poems (arguably, many of the most interesting ones) to think he wrote \textit{“vers libre, . . . an excellent instrument for rendering the actual rhythms of speech.”}  

In short, in order to assess Frost's claims \textit{vis-a-vis} Williams', we must see past both well-worn narratives about Frost being a conventionally
metrical poet as well as Frost’s own posture vehemently rejecting free verse. Critics like John Sears and Tyler Hoffman have contended that this posture was at least partially motivated by Frost’s need to proselytize and/or to distinguish himself from the Imagist poets. I would remind us that Frost also recognized that free verse had some limited utility and first found “a voice of his own” in what I will, somewhat perversely, argue was for him the closest thing to a successful free-verse poem: “My Butterfly,” a rhymed verse comprised of iambic lines of variable length.

Frost himself considered “My Butterfly” to be a breakthrough, especially its second stanza. That stanza is where, after two lines of iambic pentameter, the poem torques away from its imitations of Keats, archaic diction, and a precious register through an abrupt change in tone and mood that propels the poem briefly in ways reminiscent of Williams’ verse:

The gray grass is scarce dappled with the snow;
Its two banks have not shut upon the river;
But it is long ago—
It seems forever—
Since first I saw thee glance,
With all thy dazzling other ones,
In airy dalliance,
Precipitate in love,
Tossed, tangled, whirled and whirled above,
Like a limp rose wreath in a fairy dance.

Like “After Apple-Picking,” Frost’s other early poem comprised of iambic lines of variable length, this poem uses a parsing line—a line of variable length that parses syntactic units into individual lines—to indicate factors typically linked with intonation: pacing, affect, tone. The effect is limited, as Frost said the effects of free verse are: “[Free verse is] good as something created momentarily for its sudden startling effect.” Nonetheless, Frost positions the poem penultimately in A Boy’s Will, giving it a significance that lies as much in its prosody as its biographical relevance. For it was Reverend Wolcott’s comment to Frost upon reading this poem among others that “the tone of [his] verses was too much like that of talk” that Robert Newdick reports to have galvanized Frost’s poetic:

That observation was to Frost like the drop of acid that magically brings down the precipitate from a chemical solution, for the tone of talk was precisely what he had been striving for without being quite conscious of it. . . . Now he realized, too, what he had found most
offensive in Lanier: the underlying concept of the aptness of musical notation for verse. 49

Frost opposes a musical tune (or, for that matter, setting verse to music) because it lacks the expressive signification carried by intonational tunes. Yet, as he and Williams recognized, intonational tunes are ephemeral. By North of Boston, whose period of composition coincides with Frost’s theorizing the sound of sense in letters, Frost will typically use “the very regular preestablished accent and measure of blank verse” to contain the comparably evanescent effects of the “very irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation.”50 Thus, Frost’s election of seemingly so slight a poem as “The Pasture” as epigraph to his Collected Poems also becomes more plausible in light of his focus on intonational tunes. We may not agree with his assessment, but his belief in the poem’s production of five tones in a single stanza—a “light, informing tone”; an “only’ tone—reservation”; a “supplementary, possibility”; and a “free tone, assuring” followed by an “after thought, inviting”—makes it a fit introduction to an oeuvre to be judged primarily by its counterpoint of stress and melodic accent.

Frost’s Legacy

Since Williams and Stevens, as well as Frost, all invest belief in theories about sound, we might well wonder why Frost’s theories have fared the worst in critical estimations. Yes, Frost “fiddl[es] with his terminology,” shifting terms much as Williams does. But none of these poets could, as Timothy Steele says of Frost, “focus his meaning to his own satisfaction.”52 Imprecise though it be, Frost’s theory is, actually, better developed than at least these two contemporaries, neither of whom writes anything more than loosely assembled notes on meter, measure, and the like. Frost’s discussion of intonation, tone, irregular accent, and how speakers underline their words even anticipates the language and markings of intonational phonology, albeit with one important caveat, that accent is or can be made reliably predictable, or that such an outcome would even be desirable.

This penultimate section will explore Frost’s alleged desire for intonation to achieve a kind of transparent perlocutionary force through an investigation of “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same,” a poem that seemingly thematizes Frost’s theory of sentence sounds and that is, in both critics’ and Frost’s own estimation, an accomplished text, even a “tour de force,” yet one that fails to fulfill Frost’s theory of sentence sounds, a point Frost himself seems to concede when he prefaces his reading of the
poem for the *Yale Series of Recorded Poets* by saying, “[T]his does something that I don’t usually approve of, like a statistical thing, sentence after sentence the same.”

The poem is comprised of six sentences, each of which except the last is qualified in some way by what Frost might call a “reservation” or “supplementary” tone. While all the sentences are in the indicative, only two make direct positive statements of fact: the second half of “Be that as may be, she was in their song” and “And to do that to birds was why she came.” These two sentences are also among the only ones to coincide with a single line, a point to which we’ll return later. The other sentences suggest a more imaginative mood or conditional statement (which in modern English is often conveyed by means of modal auxiliaries)—a willing suspension of belief which permits Adam to hear in the birds’ song an oversound. Between the two kinds of propositions, we hear the pull of tones that critics have celebrated as giving the poem its virtuosic feel.

But this poem’s pull of tones is less effortless or colloquial, per se, than in “Home Burial” or even “Mowing,” for reasons that may lie in Frost’s renovation of his source line. From Hamlet’s “So have I heard and do in part believe it,” Frost introduces at least two important changes: the change of the verb *hear* to *declare*, and the change of the primary verbs *have* and *do* to the modals *would* and *could* (“He *would* declare and *could* himself believe”). Despite Frost’s disapproval of the simple declarative statement, his practice here shows that syntactically complex declarative statements do, in fact, possess multiple sounds, in part due to the range of verb choices possible within them. *Believe* belongs to *representatives*, a type of verb by which “the speaker is committed, in varying degrees, to the truth of a proposition,” but *declare* belongs to *declarations*, by which “the speaker alters the external status or condition of an object or situation solely by making the utterance.” The implicit gap between the two—the failure of the speaker to alter the external status or condition solely by making an utterance (the kind of power implicit in chant and spells that Frost toys with in “Mending Wall”) or by believing it (being committed to the proposition’s truth)—opens into an exploration of varying degrees of commitment and affect that have important phonological as much as philosophical effects. Similarly, Frost’s change to the modals *would* and *could* not only favors words that convey a speaker’s stance or orientation toward his statement, it also participates in foregrounding a space between one’s personal volition, habit, or intention, and one’s degree of commitment in believing this same thing. In a love poem, the kind of poem that Frost surprisingly almost never wrote and that conventionally makes a simple declaration, such grammatical complexities are unexpected as well as sonically interesting.
When Frost reads the poem aloud, it is notable that he interrupts himself twice to mark shifts in tone. After the first line, he says “See the tone of it” and then repeats the line but with different words (“He could himself believe, he would aver”); next, he indicates a shift in tone that coincides with the sentence adverbial “admittedly.” A significant question is whether Frost is celebrating this poem for its evident shifts in tones, as he does “The Pasture,” or whether he feels compelled to note the tone because the poem might not infallibly convey its intonational effects without additional notation (something Frost frequently chastised Vachel Lindsay for; and something Williams tended to do both in readings and in letters). My subjective opinion is that this poem does, in fact, successfully indicate shifts in tone on the page but that it does so by means of the very foregrounded elements Frost singles out, rather than by a development of dramatic context.

In the two instances that Frost’s remarks isolate, as well as in other cases in the text, which I’ve italicized below for emphasis, Frost uses fronted and moved adverbials, limiting adverbs, negative particles, and modals—stance words, i.e., familiar rhetorical markers, to create shifts in tone and therefore cadence (e.g., “he would declare and could himself believe”; “probably it never would be lost”; “Admittedly an eloquence so soft / Could only have had an influence . . . / When call or laughter”; “Be that as may be”; and, of course, “Never again would birds’ song be the same”). In this poem, he does not—as so frequently elsewhere—rely on the implied feelings of a posited lyric speaker to comb tonally ambiguous words such as oh or no or yes “into the . . . single one of its meanings intended.” While the adverbials and modals found in “Never Again” can certainly be made to carry an oppositional meaning, as in irony, they are not as tonally multivalent. For Frost, “Never Again” uses rhetorical conventions to orchestrate tone: tone arises not from context (i.e., from dramatically developed setting and character, as in “Home Burial”) but from underlying argument. The initial line with its use of contrastive emphasis (would and could; declare and believe) to more narrowly delimit the location of the focus (if not the direction of melodic accent on the focus syllable) is a good example: it presents a near-perfect balance of two somewhat opposed propositions—the commitment to declaring in the grammatical aspect of “habitual” or “durative” action (“He would declare”) against the implicitly conditional state of belief in his own declaration (“and could himself believe”). The poem sustains both the doubt about its proposition and its avowed determination to believe in that proposition. The movement and the turn of the sonnet are a perfect balance of these impulses as well: “Be that as may be, she was in their song.”
Here, the adverbial concessive clause, which begins with a relic of the subjunctive, is answered by the first unqualified declaration in the poem: “... she was in their song.”

Leaving the issue of intonation for a moment, this effect—which makes the problem of sustaining belief, much akin to the problem of sustaining tone, central to the poem—is mirrored, as other scholars have noted, by the ways in which Frost’s sentences here run over not only line breaks but also stanzaic boundaries, inviting us to hear both lineages of the sonnet in play. For while the rhyme scheme follows Shakespeare’s exemplar, the poem’s arc might better be described as Petrarchan: the problem of belief elaborated in the first eight lines is answered by an affirmation of love’s effects, however qualified, in the last six, and, one might say, justified—sonically, albeit not logically, by the soaring contour of the final declaration in the second half of the final line. Against the definitive “Never again would birds’ song be the same” with its falling contours and emphatic stress, is counterpointed, “And to do that to birds was why she came,” in which the final nominal triumphantly soars and stays aloft; it imaginatively escapes postlapsarian time and the audible fall of declarative statements by triply erasing closure. At least in my hearing, its rising intonation soars above syntactic ending, line ending, and poem ending to keep the voice afloat.

Here Frost accomplishes, by means of sonic equivalences what might not be accomplished by statements of fact, an achievement that accords with Frost’s statements in other contexts: “The greatest satisfaction comes from weaving intonations together to make a work of art”64 and “Statement yes but it is only as the poem and the sentence within the poem transcend statement (not exceed) statement (not fall short of it) that poetry arises.”65

If this sonnet succeeds in telling the voice how to intone, or at least in more narrowly identifying a range of postures than is true of other Frost poems, why should its success be troubling? Again, Frost says of this sonnet that it does “a statistical thing.”66 Was he, perhaps, less committed to confining the reader to a single tune than he professed or than critics have interpreted his theory of sentence sounds to be? Like Tyler Hoffman and Timothy Steele before me, I’d like to suggest that the very possibility of mistaking vocal intonation in Frost is important and was important for Frost. Indeed, Frost is aware of the importance of context to specifying vocal intonation, as the following entries from his Notebooks attest:

Tune (Sound and Soundness. Tone from context. Tune from tone and meter.67

The question of how any intonations are made fast to the paper. By the context partly: partly by idiomatic signs.68
Whatever we believe about Frost’s legacy and about the legacy of some other modernists, we may well resist the idea that the arrangement of words on a page can or should so specify how our voice should posture that a single articulation of the poetic line is not only possible but inevitable. Instead of a poetry that aims to dramatize affective states or to “confer . . . [the poet’s] identity on the reader,” more important may be the invention of new rhythms and new resources equally capable of representing affect or of constructing knowledge. In other words, recognizing a poem such as “Never Again . . .,” which possesses a pull of tones but no real tonal ambiguity, to be a tour de force does not preclude the question of whether it is more than a set piece. If not, to what extent does its success in specifying a particular set of intonational contours constitute a limitation?

The answer may depend on how we interpret Frost’s theory of the sound of sense. Do we take his statement “Never if you can help it write down a sentence in which the voice will not know how to posture specially” as a directive to the writer that leaves space for individual difference and divergence by the reader? Or do we take this and other statements as transferring an “auditory image” that shapes or even determines readers’ prosodic experiences and thus their interpretations of the text? And what are the ethical, as much as aesthetic, ramifications of success or failure? Here, we can point to well-known accounts of the failure of readers to interpret Frost’s poems right until they heard him read it, as well as to Frost’s apparent displeasure at these reports; we can also point to contemporary accounts from psycholinguistics and popular media that provide both empirical data and anecdotal endorsements for the efficacy of explicit prosody, i.e., an author’s own reading of his or her text (or even attributed qualities), on a reader’s implicit prosody, that is, on how the reader then reads the same text or a subsequent one attributed to the same author. The point is cognitive studies prove Frost and some other modernists right in their underlying assumptions about the functions of high-level prosodic information, but questions remain both about whether or not melodic accent is or can be made reliably transferable and whether doing so would be to the ultimate benefit of a poem or not.

Human and Non-Human Language
Illuminated by Cognitive Studies

To explore these questions, I will draw upon cognitive studies of human and non-human language that hold profound implications both for Frost and for the “speech-based poetics” of modernism that similarly
values the poem’s ability to transcribe a poet’s speech rhythms to the page. Together, these studies suggest the epistemological as well as prosodic limitations inherent in such enterprise.

Ellen Bryant Voigt’s study of rhythm and syntax, *The Art of Syntax*, cites brain studies of infants that demonstrate that the recitation of the alphabet or numbers is stored in one part of the brain, but knowledge in another. Thus, an 18-month-old who bursts into a riff of numbers “fourfivesixseveneight” “doesn’t actually count that high: the string of sounds belongs not yet to meaningful speech but to song.” These same studies also show that different areas of the brain light up on an MRI when the same child sings these numbers versus when she uses them semantically.

Such discoveries pose significant issues for our understanding of Frost’s theory of the sound of sense, as for our understanding of other modernists’ investments of belief in sound, since these studies suggest that the intonation of linguistic strings reproduced in their entirety may belong to the realm of song, whereas the intonation of new language use belongs to the realm of knowledge. To the extent that we inhabit any poet’s tunes, replicating their exact melodic contours, then much like the 18-month-old reciting the alphabet, we as readers may be limited to reproducing a song or tune (a simulation of the speaker’s expressive values), rather than being engaged in the construction of new knowledge. Frost’s (and Stevens’) purported “indifference to language as a signifying system” is directly relevant here: as Frost scholar Tyler Hoffman says, “he [Frost] prefers to dwell on the felt structure of the sentence apart from the words that comprise it”; that is, its pre-existing tune and tonal message.

A new study of the evolution of human language syntax, conducted by two linguists and a psychobiologist, confirms the cognitive separations implied above and suggests further issues for the limits of speech-based poetics as described by many of the modernists. According to this study, our infinite human language syntax emerges from

the adventitious combination of two pre-existing, simpler systems that had been evolved for other functional tasks. The first system, Type E(xpression), is found in birdsong, where the same song marks territory, mating availability, and similar “expressive” functions. The second system, Type L(exical), has been suggestively found in non-human primate calls and in honeybee waggle dances, where it demarcates predicates with one or more “arguments.” . . . Each layer, E and L, when considered separately, is characterizable as a finite state system. . . . When the two systems are put together they interact,
yielding the unbounded, non-finite state, hierarchical structure that serves as the hallmark of full-fledged human language syntax.\textsuperscript{78}

The implications for Frost, and, to a lesser extent, for Stevens and Williams, are staggering. For Frost figures the poet’s range of sentence sounds as analogous to a species of bird’s characteristic tunes: “Just so many sentence sounds belong to man as just so many vocal runs belong to one kind of bird. We come into the world with them and create none of them. What we feel as creation is only selection and grouping.”\textsuperscript{79} To the extent that birdsong comprises only an expression layer, which imparts a single meaning to an entire song, rather than a lexical layer—that is, a range of sounds that can communicate essential information and, through the elaboration of an infinite syntax, construct variable arguments, Frost delimits verse and its readers to a partial range of actual human language functions, those focused upon a “limited, holistic range of intentions . . . [those that] convey messages, not meanings.”\textsuperscript{80}

In his exemplary poem “Never Again . . .,” while the birds’ song is described as never again being the same, the poem does not ask us to imagine it as now possessing a lexical layer. That might be the case, were Eve’s influence described as rhetorical or argumentative. However, her distinctive “eloquence” is regarded as influential only (and even then, this influence is hedged as being conditional) “when call or laughter carried it aloft.”\textsuperscript{81} That is, it is influential only in the specific cases of non-phonemic sounds, such as laughter, or of the stylized sequences of tones characteristic of calling. It is particularly interesting to note that the latter sequences—which are termed “call contours” in the literature of intonational phonology\textsuperscript{82}—are recognized as well-established conventional patterns that we might say, like birds’ song, convey “messages, not meanings.”\textsuperscript{83} Indeed, the call contour with its stylized “sequence of two levels [of pitch] with the second lower than the first by approximately the musical interval of a minor third”\textsuperscript{84} correlates with neuroscientific studies in the field of music showing that pitch changes according to a minor third have fairly universal, expressive values for the prosodic patterns produced by speakers of American English.\textsuperscript{85} That is, it is thereby probably safe to say that far from adding a lexical layer to an expressive one, Eve’s “voice” is abstracted away from the lexical and thereby syntactic combinations that give rise to novel meanings are instead constrained to a fairly fixed expressive value akin to music or nonlinguistic sound. To the extent that Eve’s vocal influence stands in for Frost’s notion of sentence sounds, her example suggests a poetics that prioritizes expression over argument, the acoustic dimension of sound over the phonemic.\textsuperscript{86}
What we might take away from both studies is not only germane to Frost but also broadly implicative of the central problem of modernist poets’ theorization of sound. For Frost’s potentially desiring his readers to inhabit his individual intonational tunes and hence his construction of meaning, rather than claim their own, wherever the voice is too firmly scripted is a result that should remind us of Williams’ own intonational-based measure—the late triadic-line verse or variable foot. Williams called this measure the crowning achievement of all his work; nonetheless, he eventually disavowed it, calling it “overdone, artificial, archaic—smacking of Spencer [sic] and his final Alexandrine.” Frost, who plies the intertwined resources of grammar, rhetoric, and intonation to create similar effects, stops short of disavowing what he has achieved, but, in recognizing that he can write something “statistical” that he still approves of, suggests the equal limitations of his prosodic theory.

Returning to the modernist dilemma of speech representation in general, we might see how all these modernist poets emphasize the plastic, i.e., expressive, qualities of linguistic sound, seeking in the prosodic organization of sound aesthetic satisfactions that exceed the semantic and aspire to confer values beyond meaning. The very proof from cognitive studies that we tend to reproduce an auditory image of a text once we are exposed to it suggests anew not the failure of these poets’ astute accomplishments but rather a ground why subsequent generations of poets came to be suspicious of the modernists’ beliefs in the purported transparency of “absolute rhythm,” choosing instead to tilt their verse productions toward the materiality of language.

Notes

I owe tremendous thanks to Minda Rae Amiran and Tom Cable for acute remarks on drafts of this essay.


5. Goldfarb, Figure Concealed, 15.

6. Consider, for example, Frost’s vigorous appeal to the sonic contours of words in verse as an extra-semantic dimension essential to the poem’s delivery: “I try to make each word serve two purposes; in addition to its own meaning it serves as a guide to
the voice in reading preceding and succeeding words. If this is not always true of each word, it is true of each phrase or each line.” We might wonder at the purpose of such a guide, if Frost did not elsewhere elaborate that “By the arrangement and choice of words on the part of the poet, the effects of humor, pathos, hysteria, anger, and, in fact, all effects, can be indicated and obtained.” Quoted in Robert Newdick, “Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense,” American Literature 9 (1937): 297–98.

Now compare these statements to Stevens’ similar ascription of power to a poet’s selection and organization of what we might loosely term word sounds:

And what about the sound of words? . . . The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings, which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finally, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them.


8. Studies in psycholinguistics demonstrate the many cognitive functions that implicit prosody plays even in silent reading, from the parafoveal previewing of a homophone speeding the access of an individual lexical item (Charles Clifton Jr., “The Roles of Phonology in Silent Reading: A Selective Review,” in Explicit and Implicit Prosody, ed. Lyn Frazier and Edward Gibson [Berlin: Springer, 2015], 163), to the role of “both global and local rhythmic context guid[ing] segmentation and lexical access” (Mara Breen, “Empirical Investigations of Implicit Prosody,” in Frazier and Gibson, Explicit and Implicit Prosody, 185). Importantly, at multiple levels of phonological representation, implicit prosody seems to play an early role in our processing of language, ranging from our ability to access lexical items (Clifton Jr., “Roles,” 163) to our use of prosody to interpret syntactic relationships among constituents even before the content of these constituents is available (Eva Fernández and Irina Sekerina, “The Interplay of Visual and Prosodic Information in the Attachment Preferences of Semantically Shallow Relative Clauses,” in Frazier and Gibson, Explicit and Implicit Prosody, 258).

Indeed, Frost’s musing in his Notebooks—“The sentences must spring from each other and talk to each other even when there is only one character speaking Self repartee” (Robert Frost, The Notebooks of Robert Frost, ed. Robert Faggen [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2006], 45; spacing as in original)—bears significant parallels with empirical findings that while silent readers can recognize the contents of individual propositions without the benefit of prosodic information, implicit prosody facilitates our global comprehension of passages and helps silent readers make inferential judgments about relationships between propositions (Katy Carlson, “Clefting, Parallelism, and Focus in Ellipsis Sentences,” in Frazier and Gibson, Explicit and Implicit Prosody, 77).

9. Whereas poets speak simply of prosody, that is, of the versification of a text, psycholinguists distinguish between explicit and implicit prosody. Explicit prosody refers to the production and analysis of prosodic contours in actual speech, whether “read speech,” “spontaneous speech,” or “laboratory speech.” Shari Speer and Anouschka

10. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 663. Subsequent references are given as CPP.


14. *Dénouement*, first recorded by the *OED* in 1752, was anglicized in pronunciation by 1922, the date of the poem. Both the 1933 edition of the *OED* and the 1934 2nd edition of *Webster’s New International Dictionary* give only the pronunciation with accent on the second syllable. Later Merriam–Webster’s and other American dictionaries show a return to a first variant closer to French, with primary stress on the final syllable and secondary stress on one or both of the first two syllables. In his eccentric pronunciation, Stevens was ahead of his time.

15. Here and elsewhere, an underline indicates syllables that, through standard allowances (e.g., elision or the reduction of sonorant sequences), count as a single metrical position. Also, one might note that current Merriam–Webster’s dictionaries show word accent only on the first syllable of *ambiance*, with no stress on the final two syllables—and for one variant, elision of the last two syllables (as in the preceding word *linear*). Yet in this line the final syllable, *-ance*, fills a strong position. This, of course, is not an unusual metrical variation in English poetry; and the variation between French and English doublets such as *honour* and *hónour* dates back at least to Chaucer. Stevens’ play here with the stress patterns of English words supports his well-known statement that “French and English constitute a single language.” Stevens, *CPP*, 914.


17. Ibid., 82–85, 82.


20. Ibid., 681.

21. Ibid., 675.

22. I follow linguist Anthony Fox in distinguishing *stress* and *accent*. Accent "refer[s] to the linguistic phenomenon in which a particular element of the chain of speech is singled out in relation to surrounding elements, irrespective of the means by which this is achieved" (*Prosodic Features and Prosodic Structure* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 115). Stress accent or accented syllable refers to the presence of accent on a syllable, i.e., what is commonly "referred to as ‘word-stress’" (145). Pitch-accent refers to the superordinate presence of melodic accent, or pitch, upon a syllable that has already
received prominence, i.e., stress accent, at a lower level (115). I use the term *melodic accent* because *pitch-accent* is better known to linguists than to critics, who might use *pitch* and *accent* distinctively.

23. Frost, CPPP, 55; emphasis added.

24. Ibid. For a parallel example in this poem, compare Mary’s famous outcry, “Don’t, don’t, don’t, she cried” (56) to Frost’s comment to Sidney Cox apropos of the vital sentence: “You recognize the sentence sound in this: You, you—! It is so strong that if you hear it as I do you have to pronounce the two you’s differently” (681). By his own desiderata, Frost’s meter succeeds when it forces distinctive variations in melodic accent, not lexical stress.


26. Consider these conventional underlined examples from Stevens’ verse, none of which diverges significantly from canonical metrical practice from Shakespeare forward:

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The ephemeral blues must merge for them in one.       (Stevens, CPP, 12)
  w  s  w  s  w  s  w  s  w  s

The impossible possible philosophers’ man.         (Stevens, CPP, 226)
  w  s  w  s  w  s  w  w  s

The inanimate, difficult visage. Who is it?        (Stevens, CPP, 336)
  w  s  w  s  w  s  w  w  s
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27. Frost, CPPP, 670.


29. For example, we find the statement that “Any study investigating sentence-level implicit prosody will likely have to deal with such individual differences” and the conclusion that “it may not be possible to study sentence-level implicit prosody without recourse to participants’ overt prosody.” Speer and Foltz, “Implicit Prosody,” in Frazier and Gibson, Explicit and Implicit Prosody, 283. For a succinct, careful restatement of why “Such individual differences may be the reason why studies involving word-stress manipulations have so far yielded more consistent results than studies involving sentence-level prosodic phrasing regarding both the existence of an implicit prosodic contour generated during silent reading and information about what this implicit prosody may sound like,” see 283.

30. At issue here is how we are to understand Frost’s well-known statement “Never if you can help it write down a sentence in which the voice will not know how to posture specially” (Frost, CPPP, 666): Does Frost seek to delimit for the reader’s voice or only for the writer’s not only which word is the most salient in a linguistic string but also which pitch pattern is the most pertinent? In short, should each line of his verse tell us how to comb each word “into the . . . single one of its meanings intended” (Frost, Notebooks, 60)?


35. Ibid., 687.


38. Williams, *CP*, vol. 1, 73.

39. Ibid., 73, 80.

40. Ibid., 372.

41. Ibid., 352.

42. Ibid., 73.

43. Ibid.


47. Frost, *CPPP*, 36; emphasis added.


49. Ibid., 290.


51. Ibid., 688.


56. Ibid., 308.

57. See Parini, *Robert Frost*, 323.


60. Frost, *Yale Series of Recorded Poets*.

61. See Frost, *CPPP*, 854, for example.


63. Ibid., 60. See also Frost on "the Os and Oh’s of a play of Shakespeare" (165).
67. Frost, Notebooks, 405.
68. Ibid., 124.
69. Stevens, CPP, 901.
70. Frost, CPP, 666.
72. Chuck Clifton, Jr. recounts several psycholinguistic experiments presenting empirical evidence that (human) subjects who were primed by listening “to the supposed author of a written text, speaking aloud, before they read the text” then “mirrored the presumed actual voice of the source of the written material” when they read this material. Clifton Jr., “Roles,” in Frazier and Gibson, Explicit and Implicit Prosody, 169.
73. Chatman’s well-known study comparing the recordings of seven speakers to Frost’s own recorded reading finds that many of the readers make important errors in reciting Frost. In particular, several readers crucially misread the penultimate line “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows” (Frost, CPP, 26), choosing to emphasize the verb is, as in the idiom The fact is . . ., rather than emphasizing the noun fact, as Frost does. Chatman comments, “One can obviously misinterpret a poem—and I don’t mean ‘richly’—by using an inappropriate intonation pattern. This is not merely a question of emphasis; intonation patterns alone can distinguish a meaningful and sensitive performance from a trivial one.” Seymour Chatman, “Robert Frost’s ‘Mowing’: An Inquiry into Prosodic Structure,” Kenyon Review 18, no. 3 (1956): 431.

Robert Newdick reports Frost’s alleged displeasure “when some one told him, once after hearing him read his poems, that now they knew how to read them right, because they had heard his voice.” Newdick continues, “Yet even Carl Van Doren has confessed that when Frost once read a poem to him: ‘the sound of his voice for the first time explained his poetry to me.’” Newdick, “Sound of Sense,” 298.
74. For cognitive studies, see Frazier and Gibson, Explicit and Implicit Prosody.
75. Perloff, “Return,” 137.
77. Hoffman, Frost and Politics, 37.
79. Frost, CPP, 681.
81. Frost, CPP, 308.
84. Cruttenden, *Intonation*, 120.
86. Of course, neither Frost nor Stevens nor almost any other poet really thinks that the lexical content of a poem functions only as sound. But the research described above suggests both the primacy and insufficiency of sound in poetry.