

# A melancholy dualism mind and matter in the early poetry of Robert Frost

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A MELANCHOLY DUALISM:

MIND AND MATTER IN THE EARLY POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

by

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts (Honours) in  
the Department of Language and Literature, Faculty of Military  
Studies, University of New South Wales at Duntroon.

1978



This thesis is my own work and has not previously been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

.....

C.A. Jones

## PREFACE

Frost's early verse was chosen for study because it reflects the poet's true mood at the time of its writing and does not suffer from his later need for a commercial image.

The early verse is taken as that included in Frost's first three books, *A Boy's Will*, *North of Boston*, and *Mountain Interval*. Not all of the early poems, however, feature in these books. Of the omitted poems, "The Ax-Helve", from *New Hampshire*, and "The Subverted Flower", from *A Witness Tree*, have been included in this study because of their special qualities. Owing to the unavailability of the original individual books of verse, all poems have been taken from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem, 1971.

Throughout this thesis American spelling, where quoted, has been left unchanged. Similarly, the grammatical errors made by the poet and others in their correspondence have been left unaltered to avoid delays and what Frost would perhaps have called detractions from "the sounds of sense".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank all the individuals who helped me to prepare and complete this thesis. My supervisor, Associate Professor W.H. Wilde, guided and encouraged me throughout and I doubt whether this thesis would have been finished without his painstaking efforts on my behalf. For any shortcomings, however, I take sole responsibility.

I extend my gratitude to the other members of the Department of Language and Literature at the Faculty of Military Studies. Associate Professors E.R. Bryan and J.T. Laird, and Mr. B.G. Andrews played important roles in my academic development prior to my attempting this thesis. The late Professor G.K.W. Johnston gave impetus to my initial research, while Associate Professor Elaine Barry of Monash University helped me formulate my topic with her timely advice.

I am also grateful to the Department of Defence (Army Office) for providing the opportunity to undertake this study.

## PORTRAIT OF FROST

*Physically, Frost has the solidity of the close-sodded native soil. He stands about five feet nine, and you are aware at once of his strong-armed, full-chested, rugged build. In his old clothes he looks bigger than he actually is. When approached in the garden, he appears to loom; but when dressed up, he shrinks to medium height. Close up you notice the full, thick, muscular, workmanlike hands, the backs of them rough, the thumb large, the fingers long, the tips blunt, the nails wide and thick - firm fingers to grasp an ax, strong shoulders to start the swing, muscular forearms to follow through. His practical truths are the tougher, you think, recalling Thoreau, for the calluses on the broad, well-lined palms. His blue eyes, which are rarely measuring, nevertheless take you in. He looks, listens, appraises. And he sizes up memorably, saying, "I see what I see".<sup>1</sup>*

1. Reginald L. Cook, *The Dimensions of Robert Frost* (New York, 1958), p. 11.



ROBERT FROST - 1915

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## INTRODUCTION

And God has taken a flower of gold  
And broken it, and used therefrom  
The mystic link to bind and hold  
Spirit to matter till death come.

"The Trial by Existence"

To state the problem fully and exactly —  
that is to say, to expound the terms  
'Matter' and 'Mind' to the point at which  
there can be no possible ambiguity as to  
what we are talking about — would be to  
solve it...<sup>2</sup>

Whately Carington

2. Whately Carington, *Matter Mind and Meaning* (London, 1949), p.1.

## INTRODUCTION

This study examines a melancholy dualism in the early poetry of Robert Frost. It considers Frost's poetic vision of spiritual man's place within a material universe. It was a vision complicated by the ambiguities of mind and matter, and by the contradictions within the poet's character. Nevertheless, Frost's approach to the problem of man having to exist within an alien environment was simple and effective. He took a group of people whom he knew well (the Yankees of New England) and concentrated on portraying their individual struggles. In most cases these struggles have a universal application.

In his approach to the mind-matter problem, Frost has become known as both a terrifying and a whimsical poet. Lionel Trilling<sup>3</sup> and M.L. Rosenthal<sup>4</sup>, for example, see Frost as a poet who faced the harsh realities of daily life without attempting to attenuate them. Trilling, with his statement "I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him, if it makes things any easier, a tragic poet",<sup>5</sup> sees a writer who tells the truth no matter how frightening it may be. Yet Trilling also sees something oddly reassuring in this bleak truthfulness and writes "surely the people in Mr. Frost's poems can only reassure us by their integrity and solidity."<sup>6</sup>

The school led by J. Donald Adams thinks of Frost as a man who accepted the material universe for what it is and was not afraid. They see him passing off life's horrors with either a stoic shrug or a whimsical smile. To an extent, in his speech in Amherst in 1963, J.F. Kennedy summed up how this school could regard Frost as both optimistic and affirmative by saying "If Robert Frost was much honored during his lifetime, it was because a good many preferred to ignore his darker truths."<sup>7</sup>

Frost's early work, however, exhibits neither a terrifying aspect, nor a whimsical one. The poet refuses to accept Emerson's

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3. See Lionel Trilling, "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode", *Partisan Review*, Vol. 16 (Summer, 1959), pp. 445-52.

4. See M.L. Rosenthal, "The Robert Frost Controversy", *Nation*, No. 188 (20 June, 1959), pp. 559-61.

5. Trilling, op.cit., p. 451.

6. Ibid.

7. Philip L. Gerber, *Robert Frost* (New York, 1966), p. 139.



"cheerful Monism", but instead calls his vision a "melancholy dualism". With it he examines the failure of love and communication. The spiritual conflict, despair, and isolation experienced by man on earth, and his fanciful metaphysical notions, are combined in a poetic treatise that yearns for final answers but does not supply them.

"Love", the first chapter of this thesis, deals with Frost's concern with the humble and the everyday. The poet used simple domestic imagery, inherited from the earlier American literary tradition, to convey his theme that spiritual man must attempt to relate to his material surroundings. To help him with this task man must seek the aid of those closest to him; in most cases this is the spouse. Thus, the need for understanding and respect between the sexes becomes a major issue for scrutiny in this chapter.

In his attempt in "Love" to relate the subjective world of the poem to the objective world of experience, Frost is seen as a "commonsense Kantian". He shows that there is a clash between self-determining man who refuses to go with "the drift of things" and nature, whose worth only exists in relation to human thoughts. The spiritual unease generated by this clash Frost thought exacerbated by the lack of harmony between the sexes caused by man's "outer" nature being antithetical to women's "inner" need.

Spiritual turmoil in Frost's early poetry is examined in Chapter 2, entitled "Conflict". Sexual aggression and irrationality feature as a theme founded largely on the poet's own love-hate relationship with the women in his life, namely his mother, his wife, Elinor, and his sister, Jeanie. Thus, despite the poet's denial of a personal involvement in his early verse and his increasing efforts to obtain objectivity, there remains a need to understand his formative period. It was a time when he saw the struggles of opposing forces embodied in the sexes as a projection of their individual survival mechanisms.

The inflexible value system by which man must exist on earth is portrayed in the poet's examination of the smallest social group, the husband and wife, in the context of universal domestic tragedy. Traditional emotional repression by the male is weighed against a contrasting "over expression" of grief by the female. This conflict is conveyed for the reader's judgement in a language that is earthy,

common and real, yet also patterned and artistic. At times, however, even Frost became carried away with artistic purpose and in poems such as "Snow" it is possible to discern how the overly intellectual use of language can effectively dampen the emotional theme of conflict.

In the chapter on "Communication" the gap between a poet's vision and his ability to express it becomes apparent. The theme of "Communication" is Frost's idea that people must relate spiritually or perish in a cold, physical world: people must be prepared to listen and try to understand the inner needs of others. This idea is complicated by excessive idealism that tends to drive men on to personal, unattainable goals. The poet thought that man must sacrifice a degree of individuality in order to relate on a universal plane with others. He also knew that, paradoxically, individuality is often man's most prized quality; it causes him to seek privacy, frequently at the cost of spiritual communion with his fellows.

Sometimes barriers are needed. In this regard Frost wondered if one can relate two goods such as charity and the need for privacy, or balance mercy with justice. The examination of this topic is complicated by the poet's own paranoid fear of strangers often evident in the early poetry dealing with communication.

Because many of Frost's themes grew out of his Puritan inheritance, it is understandable that he should feel a sense of spiritual isolation at what he saw as the loss of the traditional values of the New England culture. Chapter 4, "Isolation", deals with this sense of spiritual aloneness and the poet's escapist attraction to dark places. Images of deserted or empty houses impart a nostalgic air throughout his early verse.

The poetry of isolation is to some extent an example of an individual searching for himself within the ruins of his cultural heritage. On a broader plane it also encompasses the universal theme of the melancholy doubt man has about the sense of isolation brought by death and the uncertainty of a spiritual afterlife. Frost's poetry of isolation often depicts a man alone. This reinforces the notion that those who are spiritually isolated have a more intense fear of death and less faith in what comes after.

Chapter 5, "Despair", examines the poet's awareness of the role played by nature in frustrating man's spiritual desires on earth. Man is shown despairing over what he is compared to what he might be, and his lack of ability to dictate his own fate. Chapter 5 also explores the poet's conception of the extent of the sacrifices a person can endure before total spiritual collapse occurs. It is here, especially, that one can judge the tender affinity the poet had for his subjects.

Chapter 6, "Fact and Fancy", examines Frost's early poems on the theme of other-worldliness. Intuition is seen by the poet as inadequate for some problems in life, while at other times bare facts alone seem far short of being able to obtain a solution to the metaphysical problem of man's ultimate spiritual fate. Frost sees a fine balance needed between man's experience and his instincts; between fact and fancy.

In the world of New England where mental progress seemed to be outstripped by material progress, Frost tried to balance the two extremes of factual awareness and pure fancy. The botanist side of him was constantly at odds with his imagination which sought to believe that man could determine his own destiny in its entirety. Objective fact is shown to temper spiritual idealism, but never completely stifle it. This idealism, however, is only retained at the cost of disillusionment and melancholy doubt to its holder. The poet shows that, ironically, only by physical labour can man retain his spiritual dignity in a material world. This belief seems prominent in the poetry of fact and fancy. Work gives a man time to ponder and also a sense of purpose in life. It gives him a chance to keep his metaphysical speculations within a realistic setting.

In Chapter 7, "Environment", one can recognize the poet's scepticism about the existence of God and his ability to control the material universe he supposedly created. A melancholy vision shows the drama of spiritual man in an indifferent cosmos, while the power of the physical environment seems to crush man's aspirations in life. To survive, man must seek the reasons behind his value judgements to ensure they are sound and provide strength of will to withstand spiritual doubt.

Frost believed moral integrity is best examined in simple, unintellectual settings such as that readily provided by the natural environment of New England. The poet was saddened by the attack on this natural setting by another type of materialism, that of the values of the urban and industrial world. These new materialistic values made it even more difficult for man to gauge his spirituality. The work of science, therefore, complicates the poet's overall theme of spiritual man in a material universe. His dual vision at once incorporates the passion and idealism of the visionary together with the realism and practicality of the scientist.

But there has been delay enough in entering into this attempt to examine the early poetry of Robert Frost. So in the words of J. Alfred Prufrock:

Oh, do not ask, "what is it?"  
Let us go and make our visit.

## CHAPTER I

LOVE

"I'd like to know  
If it is what you wanted, then how much  
You want it for me".

"In the Home Stretch"

The significance of man's outlook varies according as he sunders himself into spirit and flesh, into understanding and sensuality, into soul and body, into duty and inclination... he must always be setting himself in opposition to himself. There is no human existence without cleavage. Yet he cannot rest content in this cleavage. The way in which he overcomes it, the way in which he transcends it, reveals the conception he has of himself.<sup>1</sup>

Karl Jaspers

1. From Stuart Holroyd, *Emergence From Chaos* (London, 1957), p.113.

Dualism, to Frost, implied a binary pattern characterized not by a complementary thesis and anti-thesis resolving into a synthesis, but more by a system consisting of the contention of two basic opposites. Accordingly, no attempt is made by the poet to unite the opposing values of spirit and matter in his love poetry; instead the two are shown, after determined effort on the part of man and woman, to exist harmoniously. Each opposite value, however, always retains its individual identity; there is no indulgence in the Emersonian fantasy of an ultimate blending. In his love poetry Frost adheres to the belief that a life force cannot be accounted for in purely material terms. In a physical universe there also exists the force of the mind or spirit. Only man can supply this spirit, without which the greatest beauty means nothing since it cannot be appreciated.

In *Walden* Thoreau postulates that another element besides matter and spirit exists. It is an element upon which the spirit depends for its existence, and is symbolized by the sun imagery so abundant in that book. Frost, however, was uncertain about this third quasi-religious element. Dependence on a deity or on religious doctrines helps bolster spiritual values and Frost saw this detracting from the fundamental transcendental teachings of his literary antecedents on the self-reliance of man. The poet denied that to represent spirit and matter as incongruous prevents the possibility of a harmonious relationship between them. A dualist system of thought, to him, enabled a reflection of the internal dissidence that is intrinsic to mankind. A philosophic delight in opposites was enjoyed by the New England poet, who saw any other mode of thought as ignoring

so superciliously the strain we may have been  
under for years trying to decide between God  
and the Devil, between the rich and the poor  
(the greed of one and the greed of the other),  
between keeping still about our troubles and  
enlarging on them to the doctor and—between  
endless other things in pairs ordained to  
everlasting opposition.<sup>2</sup>

Frost expounds this dualistic philosophy by rooting his love poetry in an awareness of the ambivalence of the human soul. He demonstrates a deep understanding of the crucial struggles of man to

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2. Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph 1915-1938* (New York, 1970), p. 413.

develop his spiritual feelings in relation to a material universe. Many people, to Frost's way of thinking, fail in the attempt to equate their spirit to the theorem of surrounding material nature. This led to a melancholy battle in his poetry in which man and woman are torn between the heart and the mind, between the body and the soul.

Man, to Frost, has to survive on his own merits and on the strength of his own character in the middle of an alien and, if not altogether hostile, certainly indifferent universe. In an examination of the dual forces of spirit and matter in his love poetry, Frost succeeds in showing that the traditionally contentious values of philosophy can co-exist, yet also retain their individual properties. Thus in the dramatic narrative "The Generations of Men", matter forms the background for a couple's struggle of moral decision. A situation is presented where spirit and matter are juxtaposed, yet with each retaining its individual force. This enhances the reader's awareness of the reliance of one on the other.

In this poem the Stark clan are shown to gather at Bow, a typical Yankee "rock-strewn" wasteland town, where the farming is unproductive. By meeting at a cellar hole, all that remains of the house from whence they originated, they aspire to fathom some meaning from the past. It is as if their own limited life spans could be increased by the addition of the past years of those long dead.

Nature intervenes, however, in the form of inclement weather to ruin the Stark clan's best laid schemes. Only a boy and a girl, distant cousins, idle down to the cellar hole to dangle their feet amid raspberry vines and discuss family origins. It is significant that only the two with the potential to be discerning in their knowledge of the past have the ability to overcome nature's impositions.

In "The Generations of Men", Frost acknowledges man's spiritual need to belong to a family and to identify with a home. He also realises that, although the sequence of generations of a family can represent man's progress on earth, the subject of heredity can be taken too seriously; he therefore injects a jocular note into his poem. Beneath this humorous irony, however, a more insidious meaning can be detected.

The young girl in this poem is amusing in her overzealous desire to prove, despite her changed name, that she is a close descendant of the original Stark clan. She reflects a melancholy trait common to mankind; the desperate need to identify with some aspect of the past as defence against the transient nature of life.

A dual concern is displayed in "The Generations of Men": the preoccupation of certain people with the false notion of the value of heritage;<sup>3</sup> and the love that two distant cousins find for each other. On the subject of heredity, Frost employed the ennobling influences of folk-lore and ancestry to develop a means of evaluating his New England characters. The poem therefore becomes a projection of both the visionary poet and the serious thinker.

Many sombre questions are raised in the cautious unravelling of "The Generations of Men" with its hints of regional remembrance and delicately infused irony. The possibility that madness may result from inbreeding surrounds the juxtaposition of the two functions of love: romance and reproduction. Both these functions are manifest in the actions of the teasing and flirtatious boy. Pretending to be guided by the voice of his "Granny" "'(Nine times removed. Correct me if I err)'", the boy uses his romantic inclinations to further his plans to court and marry a cousin and thus continue the family line at its place of origin.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Frost tended to resent his ancestry, "I was forever being told what a great ancestry I had come by—". He particularly disliked the memory of Major Charles Frost, an Indian fighter, who was ambushed and killed on 4 July 1697 by the very people he so mercilessly persecuted. See Louis Mertins, *Robert Frost: Life and Talks - Walking* (Norman, 1965), pp. 29-35. There is a strong possibility that the real Stark clan was known to Frost and that he was aware of their ancestry. It is also likely that the town of "Stark" in New Hampshire marks the setting for this poem.

4. The boy's speech is made rich with wit and imagination. Colloquial rhythm gives it an odd arrest and flow. Amy Lowell claims that Frost "has no ear" for the "peculiar tongue" of New England. Gerber *op.cit.*, p. 119; however, Frost never pretended to be a dialect poet and said "They call me a dialect poet....Not so you'd notice it. It was never my aim to keep to any sort of special speech unliterary, vernacular or slang". Gorham B. Munson, *Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense* (1927) (New York, facsimile ed., 1967), p. 90. Frost claimed that dialect tended to attract too much attention to itself and this detracted from the poetry. For further discussion on Frost as a dialect poet see John F. Lynen, *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (New Haven, 1960), pp. 80-107.



In "The Generations of Men" Frost questions man's capacity to make reasoned moral judgements. The male cousin, at least, is not a sheep to follow blindly, on pretence of tradition, all advice handed down from the past. He has the courage to make his own decisions and disagrees with his "Granny" whom he imagines to say "'There ain't no names quite like the old ones...'" As far as he is concerned too much emphasis is placed on heritage, rather than on sorting the worthy ideals from the mass of dogma handed down from one generation to the next.

The girl, however, has to be persuaded that carefully selected ideals are more important than merely being an organic part of a family tree, as close to the root (in this case the name of Stark) as possible. It is this common belief in ideals that brings the two cousins together rather than the fact that both bear the Stark birthmark on their breasts. Yet the uncertainty remains as to how many people have a similar capacity to be selective in their use of past experience to temper present fact in order to make sagacious moral judgements. The accumulation of such doubts casts a gloomy shadow on what would otherwise be a poem of hope for the future.

An appeal of American poetry, and of Frost's in particular, is its attempt to deal with everyday life and ordinary men who are involved in the pressures of a contemporary society. This appeal for "the humble" in American literature evolved from the Transcendental movement which in turn was partially indebted to Wordsworth. In his "Preface" to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth wrote,

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity ... and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be ... more forcibly communicated.<sup>5</sup>

The Transcendental movement assumed that its primary task was the creation of a national poetry which dealt with everyday domestic

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5. Charles Norman, ed., *Poets on Poetry* (New York, 1962), p. 138.

issues. The Transcendentalists considered that a literary aim should not be limited to presentation of the unusual. Emerson, their leading figure, demonstrated to Frost that poetry is not merely a question of special content, but of special vision on the part of the poet. The courtly muses of Europe were condemned by Emerson, who exalted America as the land of the "near and the common". Emerson restored to the common man all rights of art and culture with statements such as "I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic ... I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low."<sup>6</sup>

Emerson was supported in this revolt by Thoreau, who asserted that American life must be without encumbrances and that the national literature should reflect this simplicity. It is not strange, then, that Frost, familiar with both the Emersonian and the Transcendentalist influence, should have a powerful element of domesticity in his poetry. This spiritual need for family and home is particularly strong in his love poetry.

In "The Death of the Hired Man", Silas, the tired old hired hand, sees the home of the couple, Warren and Mary, as his final resting place. The couple are under no obligation to admit Silas, except the universal, but often ignored, obligation to a fellow member of the human race. Silas is taken into their home, however, just as the couple took in the hound that came to them "'worn out upon the trail.'" It is an action that is typical of the spiritual warmth they display towards all living creatures, irrespective of material worth.

Silas is a complete failure in a materialist society, but he manifests a concern for others that is readily acknowledged by Warren who says, "'I can't think Si ever hurt anyone.'" Silas's spiritual values, his need for independence and for a home where people love and respect each other regardless of financial status, are effectively juxtaposed with the harsh material values of society personified by his banker bother. Mary, whose nature will not allow her to condemn the banker outright ("He may be better than appearances") realises that such a man will have no time for Silas. She knows that the decrepit hired man is "'just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.'"

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6. Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931) (New York, Doubleday ed., 1953), p. 133.

The homeless aspect of the modern industrial world, a world that was rapidly engulfing the rural areas of Frost's beloved New England, lends poignancy to the theme of man's spiritual attachment to the home. Warren and Mary, a rural couple, understand that the function and importance of a home cannot easily be assessed yet they attempt to define it aphoristically. Warren says "'Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.'" Mary defines home differently. She says "'I should have called it / Something you somehow haven't to deserve.'"

In all probability Frost acquired a liking for the aphorism from Emerson and the Transcendentalists, but in his own use of aphorism, he attempted, not only to create memorable definitions, but also to render a more vivid distinction between the sexes,

In "The Death of the Hired Man" that I wrote long, long ago ... I put it two ways about home. One would be the manly way ... the man's feeling about it. And then ... the feminine way of it, the mother way. You don't have to deserve your mother's love. You have to deserve your father's. He's more particular.<sup>7</sup>

Such a clear delineation of the sexes helped the poet to depict, in simple terms, the most complex human emotions.

Awareness by the poet of the apposition of joy and sadness enabled a greater credibility to be imparted to the melancholy theme of conditional happiness occurring only after spiritual suffering. To make his literary proposition more viable Frost employed synecdoche,<sup>8</sup> where, in a dualistic vision of the world, an entire system could be represented by a mere particle of it. He sought to represent his melancholy exposition of life by taking only a slice of it, that of his New England experience, and presenting it with a passion devoid of sensuality; by making it sensuous rather than sensual.

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7. Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost: On Writing* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1973), p. 45.

8. Frost said, "I might be called a Synecdochist; for I prefer the synecdoche in poetry—that figure of speech in which we use a part for the whole." James D. Hart, *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* (New York, 1948), p. 264.

The marriage dialogue, "In the Home Stretch", provides a good illustration of the poet's early attitude of conditional happiness only after spiritual sacrifice. The woman of this poem has made a vow that despite her own vision of fear and trepidation for the future, her husband's life-long dream of rural happiness should come true. Throughout the poem her decision to surrender her own needs to those of her husband is strengthened by a maternal love integral to her character. Unselfishly she sends the removal men home before it gets dark, even if it means placing her prized walnut bureau "on top of something that's on top / Of something else..." Concern for her husband, Joe, is equally evident in her kindly declaration

"I know this much:  
I'm going to put you in your bed, if first  
I have to make you build it..."

In another marriage dialogue, "The Death of the Hired Man", the role of Frost's universal mother figure is filled by the young wife, Mary. Like many of Frost's women, Mary is closely associated with domestic images and country ways. Gentle nature surrounds her in the form of morning-glories and she is linked to the feminine symbol of the moon, with its role in the poem of holding darkness at bay,

Part of a moon was falling down the west,  
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.  
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it  
And spread her apron to it...

All of this fortifies Mary's maternalism, which Frost believed to be the supreme feminine quality that stands against adversity.

The spiritual strength displayed by the woman of "In the Home Stretch" is similarly related to the feminine lunar symbol. When the poem opens it is to a dark world under a new moon; this directly corresponds to the woman's bleak outlook following a house removal from "lighted city streets" to "country darkness". But there is the impression that, as time progresses, the moon's light will grow brighter, as will the woman's future. Strength of character and self-determination will carry her through in true existentialist fashion. Her spirit becomes fused with the gay flames of the kitchen stove (itself a symbol of domestic security) that "danced in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling" of the new house, "As much at home as if they'd always danced there."

Often it is the isolated moments of domestic life, such as a house moving, that comprise the subject-matter of Frost's love poetry. The poet is neither eclectic nor allusive in his method of presentation; there are no generalizations that lack a direct involvement with the topic. Love is suggested purely by an understanding of the difficulties it creates. Some poems, those of *A Boy's Will*, deal with the personal experience of love in domestic situations, while others, those of *North of Boston* and *Mountain Interval*, concern themselves with love as seen by a poet experienced in sensitive observation of the daily lives of those around him.

Much of Frost's success in converting his observations into poetry stems from his skilful use of domestic imagery. The poet made good use of his knowledge of the works of earlier Puritan writers, whose influence still lingered in the smaller towns and rural areas of New England. Puritan verse, Frost discovered, resounds with the joys and sorrows of experiences that are universally familiar, as well as being tinged with the melancholy cynicism of a sombre religion. In Puritan literary works the "Mysteries of God" are brought down to the language of the ordinary man. A "convent theology" background caused the Puritans to regard themselves as a community with a common experience; thus they wrote, not for the sophisticated critic, but for the ordinary reader.<sup>9</sup>

With such antecedents it is not surprising that the homeliness of Frost's love poetry impacts powerfully on the emotions of the reader. The numerous incidents from daily experience help the reader to associate himself with the various personae. Domestic imagery enabled Frost to prevent sentiment from becoming greater than a situation warranted, as in the case concerning the married lovers of

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9. When discussing the writings of Puritan John Wilson of Boston, Cotton Mather wrote "If the curious relished the piety sometimes rather than the poetry, the capacity of the most therein to be accommodated, must be considered." Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Book III, part I, chapter iii, section 1 (Hardford ed., 1855). From Kenneth B. Murdock, *Literature and Theology in Colonial New England* (1949) (New York, Torchbook ed., 1963), p. 143. The work of Emily Dickinson provided further testimony that even the simplest commonplaces in life could be vitalised in poetry; it also served as a connecting link to the early Puritan verse. Frost regarded Dickinson as "the best of all the women poets", and gave Elinor White a gift book of Dickinson's poetry during his school days. Mertins, op.cit., p. 385.

"In the Home Stretch". In this relationship of age, the spiritual sacrifice displayed, especially by the elderly wife, is shown to be no less demanding and intense than that mirrored by youth.

Though by no means tragic or terrifying, "In the Home Stretch" is made poignant by a woman's melancholy regret for what was in the past,

"And bang goes something else away off there.  
It sounds as if it were the men went down,  
And every crash meant one less to return  
To lighted city streets we, too, have known,  
But now are giving up for country darkness."

Only her spiritual fortitude enables a slim hope of future happiness to exist; but it is a hope that is paid for by present surrender to acceptance of a future filled with melancholy foreboding. There is nothing sentimental in the portrayal of the woman's emotions of "homesickness" and "lovesickness", which combine to plunge her headlong into a spiritual chasm. "In the Home Stretch", in this respect, illustrates exactly what Frost meant when he remarked to Louis Untermeyer in a letter on 1st January, 1916,

A poem is never a put-up job so to speak. It begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness. It is never a thought to begin with. It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness. It finds its thought and succeeds, or doesn't find it and comes to nothing.<sup>10</sup>

Frost was not a religious poet in the sense of believing that man lived a Puritan-like predestined life, or had easy access to the benevolent help of an omniscient, all-protecting deity. He was not against using religious imagery to enhance the spiritual overtones of some of his early verse. In "Waiting" from *A Boy's Will*, religious imagery is employed effectively to highlight the young man's musing about love amid the "tall haycocks lightly piled" in a "stubble field". The persona moves "spectre-like" into this natural setting, "From which the laborers' voices late have died," to dream sadly and indulgently of a "memory of one absent".

The youth's feeling of nostalgia for his lover is enhanced by an ability to observe nature, "I dream upon the nighthawks peopling

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10. Thompson, *Years of Triumph*, p. 65.

heaven,/ Each circling each with vague unearthly cry". Material nature's creatures are placed in a position where they represent souls on their spiritual journeys; thus spiritual and material objects are intermingled yet retain their individual qualities. The physical, life-and-death struggle of the hawks and the bats is divorced completely from the young man's tranquil sorrow. Only through his vivid imagination can they "live" and represent what they are not. As far as Frost was concerned, then, nature might as well not exist if it cannot be appreciated and made to serve man's spirit. In this case it is for the conjuring of a memory.

In "Waiting" it is obvious that Frost had not yet attained his own particular speech; it lacks what Amy Lowell calls "the clean-cut vigour of his later work".<sup>11</sup> Yet there are notable features about the poem, such as Frost's juxtaposition of the natural elements of the moon's soft glow with the sun's fading brilliance, to create an eerie twilight setting alive with spiritual presence. Most important of all is the evidence, even at this early stage, of an acceptance of the nearness of the sorrow of separation to the bliss of togetherness.

Both "Flower-Gathering" and "In a Vale" display a similar melancholy acceptance. As a young man, the poet went on many botany expeditions even during the period of his honeymoon, some seven months after his marriage. Frost wrote "Flower-Gathering" in a vain attempt to expiate his guilt over leaving his wife, Elinor, alone at such a time while he went for long rambling walks in pursuit of his hobby. "Flower-Gathering" is not about a man's love for flowers, but about the love between a man and a woman of which the flowers are a physical symbol. To the man they represent payment for his absence, an atonement for the loss of his love "For the ages of a day". To the woman they represent material insignificance beside an all-encompassing spiritual love.

Two contrasting scenes comprise the opening of the poem: morning departure, and evening return. An emotional atmosphere is created by the fusing of the opposites of day and night, light and dark, going and returning: between these opposites elapsed time is

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11. Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (New York, 1917), p. 101.

established. The youth is sad to leave his lover who has accompanied him for part of his journey, an action that serves only to exacerbate the loneliness of parting. When he returns the youth is greeted by his lover's silence which prompts him to ask her two questions,

Do you know me in the gloaming,  
Gaunt and dusty gray with roaming?  
Are you dumb because you know me not,  
Or dumb because you know?

Has she forgotten him after his absence, he wonders, or is she silent because of the abundance of emotion felt at his return? Frost did not furnish a specific answer to explain the reason for the girl's reticence. All that is learnt is that she focuses her complete attention on the youth. Man and nature are set in apposition, with man emerging triumphant. It is a hollow victory since the youth's grief persists with the confirmation of his suspicion that the flowers he bears can in no way atone for his absence.

"In a Vale" exhibits a similar desire for the spiritual independence gained by wandering freely in nature, mentally or physically. It is a strange need involving a paradox where the craving for the intimacy of love and insight is balanced by the objective desire for the solitude that the youth needs in order to gain accurate perspective for his vision.

Enhanced by the power of nature in the form of the beauty of the flowers and the plaintive melody of a bird's song, the youth's mind conjures poignant images of a past love affair. Frost displays a Longfellow-like quality by combining the youth's imagination with natural experience; he presents a dual vision of the metaphysical question of the origin of things. In his vision the poet traced the lines of the Transcendentalists, through the European Romantic movement on to the new philosophy in Germany as advanced by Kant for whom he developed a respect.<sup>12</sup>

Kant wrote his *Critique of Pure Reason*, not as a piece of constructive metaphysical thinking, but more as a means of eradicating existing errors that impeded progress in the field of metaphysics.

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12. Frost said, "We'd be hard put to it to show an intellect in our day the equal of Aristotle's or Immanuel Kant's". Mertins, op.cit., p. 62.



The work imposed a scepticism toward eighteenth century philosophy and divided knowledge into three realms: the world of sensual apprehension; a rational understanding of the world of appearances and the world of truly "real" things; and the world of transcendental reason which can be approached only through moral law since it cannot be known empirically or rationally.

The last realm of knowledge, transcendental knowledge,<sup>13</sup> Kant saw as a critical or reflective type. It is knowledge of what is logically prior to experience (*a priori*) and is distinguished from "transcendent" knowledge which is knowledge of what goes beyond all experience to the "thing-in-itself".

Where a thing eventuates that is not produced by an empirical act of synthesizing, Kant postulated, it must depend on a transcendental, or *a priori*, one. When assuming the existence of both mind and matter Kant defined certain *a priori* conceptions as an overall condition. These conceptions he classified under the faculties of Transcendental Reason, namely: quantity, quality, relation and modality.

Frost regarded it as his task, as a "commonsense Kantian", to relate the apparently autonomous world of the poem to the bigger and grander world of a catholic human experience. In the poem "In the Vale," the human mind is given the role of interacting with nature to construct a phenomenal world of experience ripe for metaphysical investigation. Like Kant, Frost believed that the physical world exists only in relation to human sensibility and human thought. Therefore reality exists in the minds that share the same thoughts.

The youth's thoughts from "In the Vale" appear to contain a memory of a spiritual being who seems to emanate from the same

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13. It is a matter of conjecture as to why Kant called this "transcendental" knowledge. In Kant's era the word had a vague definition that was more or less equivalent to "metaphysical". The word "transcendental" may have been derived from the schoolmen who spoke of certain concepts: *ens*, *res*, *aliquid*, *unum*, *verum*, *bonum*, as both *transcendentia* and *transcendentalia*, on the ground that they were transcendent categories. H.J. Paton, *Kant's Metaphysics of Experience Vol. I* (1936) (London, 1970), p. 230.

metaphysical source as physical nature's creatures,

Before the last went, heavy with dew,  
Back to the place from which she came—  
Where the bird was before it flew,  
Where the flower was before it grew,  
Where bird and flower were one and the same.

The reality of love comes from a place where both spirit and matter share a common heritage. No attempt is made by Frost to give this place a religious name such as "heaven". The poet was too inured with religious uncertainties to be lured into making such tenuous claims.

To some extent the physical world abets the youth's metaphysical quest for the origin of his love. This concurs with Kant's declaration that the external world must confirm man's knowledge, and not the other way around, as had previously been assumed. Frost found it difficult to bridge the gulf that separates phenomena and noumena in the material world, and, in the philosophic realm, that gap between idea and object. He characteristically saw the human mind as completely individual, therefore differing qualitatively from the phenomenal world of ideal experience that all men attempt to share. It is difficult, then, to define origins by searching for a metaphysical reality that is common to all minds. It seemed logical to the poet, to leave the result of the youth's metaphysical quest in a shroud of vagueness.

Man, to Frost, is not born for the joys of final answers and continuous love. "In a Vale" demonstrates that a youth's sensitivities, which allow happiness, also hold a potential for great sorrow. It is an accurate indication of the melancholy outlook of the poet, that the young man is presented in a mood of wistful longing rather than in the throes of the joy traditionally seen as synonymous with youth.

A clear distinction is made in "The Death of the Hired Man" between the physical and spiritual hardships that people may suffer. Concern is displayed for man's soul rather than for his physical existence. The poem's dramatic impression lies not in the physical condition of Silas, but with the effect that that condition and his eventual death have on the couple. Death, to Frost, is an everyday occurrence, and is not in itself tragic. The reader is even forewarned of its presence by the title of the poem. Grief caused by spiritual suffering, however, is enduring, since it is of the mind, which has no

physical bounds and limitations. This spiritual suffering is what preoccupied Frost to the point of melancholy.

Something akin to a Wordsworthian ability is noticeable in Frost's blending of visionary and social tones in his love poetry. Tone is one of the poet's most prized poetic gifts for it allowed a profound differentiation to be made between the sexes and also between the opposing values they embody. Tone adds poignancy to particular situations and is an invaluable asset to a brand of poetry which otherwise allows little variety of character or situation.

When the young couple, Warren and Mary, discuss their differences over Silas's return, their voice tones are shown to be as opposed as their points of view over a particular social problem. But as their views merge, because of the love and respect they accord each other, so do their voice tones. Frost was enthusiastic in his use of tone to silhouette the contentious forces outlined in his poetry; he stated, "When I say poem, tone is the main thing," and, "A dramatic, expressive tone merges the form and content."<sup>14</sup> In a letter to John T. Bartlett on 30th May, 1916 Frost wrote, "There are tones of voice that mean more than words. Sentences may be so shaped as definitely to indicate these tones. Only when we are making sentences so shaped are we really writing."<sup>15</sup>

Mary's begging, explanatory tone that states her gentle convictions about Silas is specifically made to contrast with the initial caustic abruptness of Warren's speech. Mary's sentences are full of the hesitant pauses of someone trying to express difficult emotional thoughts. Frost mused that if such tones of speech were heard through a closed door, an idea of the exchange could be gained. It was what he called "the sounds of sense": "An ear and an appetite for these sounds of sense is the first qualification of a writer, be it of prose or verse. But if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre."<sup>16</sup> It is important,

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14. Eric W. Carlson, 'Robert Frost on "Vocal Imagination: The Merger of Form and Content"', *American Literature*, Vol. 33 (January, 1962), pp. 520-521.

15. Lawrance Thompson, ed., *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (London, 1965), p. 204.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

then, when endeavouring to predict where the poet's sympathies lie, to keep in mind that it is mainly Mary's voice that points to the background of Silas; it is her tender tone that highlights his spiritual values and overcomes the initial voice of materialism embodied in Warren.

Frost was not the first to capture depth of feeling in tone and speech rhythm. Early Puritan poets, such as Taylor, constantly used speech tones to obtain impressions of discreet discourse. Nevertheless, what is largely to Frost's credit was his ability to use his prime poetic gift to consolidate a nebulous, emotional language.

In the love sonnet, "Meeting and Passing" from *Mountain Interval*, the achievement of a definite form by use of tone assures comprehension of what would be otherwise a language jumbled by emotion, viz:

"Afterward I went past what you had passed / Before we met, and you what I had passed." Thus a youth's melancholy feeling, that his gazing on intermingled great and small footprints in the sand will be the nearest he will come to fulfilling his love, can be given full and concrete expression.

Frost was no less intrigued by the correlation of matter and spirit in poetry than was Emerson. According to Grant, Emerson used his poetry mainly for the exploration of nature and his own consciousness in an attempt to discover the vital link between spirit and matter.<sup>17</sup> A similar dualism is explored in Frost's love poetry, in the form of the battle between heart and mind.

This eternal struggle of the opposing forces of heart and mind is well illustrated in "The Death of the Hired Man", where man's rigid sense of justice is pitted against woman's natural mercy. To Frost, "the opposite of justice is not injustice, but mercy."<sup>18</sup> At the anniversary of his being twenty-five years a published poet, Frost gave his address on "Opposites" and crystallized his view on opposing values.

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17. Emerson termed himself: "a dear lover of the correspondences between soul and matter". Douglas Grant, *Purpose and Place* (New York, 1965), p. 101.

18. Reginald L. Cook, "Robert Frost's Asides on his Poetry", *American Literature*, Vol. 19 (January, 1948), p. 357.

In the address Frost claimed that he envisioned not opposites of good and evil, but conflicting extremes of good, such as justice and mercy. To R.P.T. Coffin he remarked, "Justice and mercy stand each other off and the present stands up between them ....They are like two hands that by first tightening and then loosening the double string between them they make the tin buzzer buzz like a little buzz saw." The poet later added "In different times, one quality gets the upper hand, and then its opposite; and the world is torn between extremes of good."<sup>19</sup>

Just such a "tear" occurs in the humble provincial world of Warren and Mary where justice and mercy are set in balance with no clear case for which should weigh the heavier. Female love is shown in the poem to be a positive force and therefore antagonistic to male reason, which becomes a negative one. Eventually it is Mary's ability to sacrifice and love that sets her as gentle victor over the cold, material reservations of Warren.

Warren's character is a conglomerate of harshness and softness that manifests the universal duality of mankind. The choice between the two extremes of good, namely justice and mercy, is a difficult one for Warren. His soft, spiritual side must wrestle for dominance over his harder side bred on Yankee material practicality. To Frost, experienced in the psychological make-up of the New Englander, "the Yankee mind was traditionally a mind of wrestlers. The Yankee mind, for hundreds of years, had been wrestling with angels and devils, and it could not take life lightly ... the tough-minded Yankees were still wrestlers."<sup>20</sup> Warren is tough-minded at the beginning of the poem. Like Silas he is a New Englander with a stubborn sense of pride. Warren's pride, however, is slighted by his poverty which prevents him from paying fixed wages to his labourers. Furthermore, his sense of justice is outraged by Silas's desertion at harvest time when he was most needed. Justifiably angry, Warren swears

"But I'll not have the fellow back," he said.  
 "I told him so last haying, didn't I?  
 If he left then, I said, that ended it."

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19. Elizabeth Isaacs, *An Introduction to Robert Frost* (Denver, 1962), p. 69.

20. Van Wyck Brooks, *New England: Indian Summer 1865 - 1915* (New York, 1940), p. 512.

But Silas does come back the next winter. This frustrates Warren to such an extent he can only gasp, "'I'm done.'"

Because Warren loves and respects Mary, he grudgingly listens while she embarks on her calm persuasion with the characteristically considerate statement about Silas, "'Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you'". A rhythmic interplay is established in the poem between male and female, experience and understanding, the remembered past and the actual present. Battle-royal in the form of dialogue commences between the sexes and the opposing values they embody. It is a battle in which Warren finally learns to swallow his pride and allow the logic of materialism to be transcended by his own latent spiritual warmth.

Frost often employed the lyric mood in his early love poetry as an expression of self-discovery, even of psychological self-education concerning his relations with other people and nature. His bountiful love of fellow man and natural things is divided equally, and is characteristically pragmatic after the fashion of the Yankee farmer. Such a lyric mood is employed in "Rose Pogonias"<sup>21</sup> to create an impressionist scene of a tiny, self-contained space that is isolated from the rest of the physical world. In this space Frost, the true persona of the poem, attempted to discover a relationship between man's eternal spirit and transitory physical nature.

The "thousand orchises" of "Rose Pogonias" represent the aesthetic way of life of the young man of "A Boy's Will" and of Frost himself. In a letter to Sidney Cox, whom he met while teaching in Plymouth, New Hampshire, in 1911, the poet wrote, "I like flowers you know but I like em wild, and I am rather the exception than the rule in an American village. Far as I have walked in pursuit of the *Cypripedium*, I have never met another in the woods on the same quest. Americans will dig for pears and beans and such like utilities but not if they

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21. Silvia Clarke, a family friend, claims "Rose Pogonias" developed from a trip to the woods north-west of Derry when Frost and Edward Pettee discovered a bed of orchises. Mertins, *op.cit.*, p. 97. Lesley Frost, however, mentions several earlier visits by the Frosts to areas where rose pogonias (known locally as "snakesmouths") could be found. See Book IV 1906-1907, note 8 July 1906, p. 3., and Book VI 1908-1909, note 8 June 1908, pp. 1-2. Lesley Frost, *New Hampshire's Child: The Derry Journals of Lesley Frost* (Albany, 1969).

know it for posies."<sup>22</sup>

Obviously, then, Frost was aware of the strong materialist element that had subverted the personalities of the subjects of his poetry and this added to his melancholy disposition. Hence little of the traditional gay and cool freshness of flower imagery is present in "Rose Pogonias". Instead, the "stifling sweet" odour of the flowers combines with the "heat" of the sun in an endeavour to oppress the physical position of the persona.

The youth, unlike many of the Yankees of New England, tends to find spiritual bliss in nature rather than physical pleasure and material gain. Even so, he is forced to accept that humanity is not all-powerful in the material universe. Like the seemingly perfect flowers, which even at their best are in a process of decay, the youth realises that man is also in part but a physical object and so eventually must die.

Despite all this melancholy reflection on the transitory nature of material objects, the youth is aware that his spirit, presented in terms of religious imagery, has the chance to persevere. He realizes that the pogonias only achieve a worth through his appreciation of their physical beauty. In this way a juxtaposition of material awareness and spiritual love is accomplished. A dual vision of sense and emotion is presented as the poet's final answer to achieving a balance to an otherwise physical and aesthetically valueless universe.

Nowhere in Frost's love poetry are man and woman presented as an Emersonian unit. A reconciliation is the closest the sexes come to merging their differences. But even this reconciliation is a reward only for those with the fortitude to endure spiritual suffering. Although sacrifices are great among Frost's men and women, the sadness of the poetry lies not in their eventual physical doom, but in the pathos of the various incidents of their spiritual sacrifice before eventual reconciliation can be achieved.

Contrary to popular belief it is not always Frost's males who have the cool, reasoned judgements on things. In "The Death of the

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22. Thompson, *Letters*, pp. 71-72.

Hired Man", sex roles are reversed and it is the female who, because of her more rational understanding of the situation, leads the way to reconciliation through love. The action of the poem is set on the porch of the couple's home, with little movement occurring other than the dramatic see-saw dialogue of the male and female exchanging opposing points of view about material worth and spiritual love.<sup>23</sup>

Where no black and white case exists for right and wrong, man must suffer making a choice from an existing grey dualism. Warren, with Mary's help, is able to overcome this "ordeal by choice". Yet he still tries, in the manner of many of Frost's male characters, to hide his softer feelings by a gentle mocking. He tries unsuccessfully to cover his "unmasculine" grief, not at Silas's death, because no-one is aware until the very end that the hired man has died, but at Silas's spiritual values that are unable to understand, or exist in, a materialist world. The defence-mechanism shell of "reaction formation" gruffness, however, needs but a gentle spoon, wielded by Mary, to crack it.<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes the ordeal of choice must be made implicitly and secretly without the benefit of spiritual help from others. This is the case of the elderly wife of "In the Home Stretch", who succeeds in suppressing her own fears in order to uphold her husband's dream. In this sacrifice the woman recalls to the reader's mind Thoreau's words that "We should have no reserve; we should give the whole of ourselves to that business ... there can be no true love, even on your own side, without devotion; devotion is the exercise of love, by

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23. In this method of presenting dramatic action Frost falls under the influence of the "static" drama, a radical concept proffered by the symbolist school of which Belgian playwright, Maurice Maeterlinck, was a leading figure. Maeterlinck thought absence of action to be a more profound sort of realism that evoked "a deeper, more human, more universal life." John Gassner, *Form and Idea in Modern Theatre* (New York, 1956), p. 106. But whereas Maeterlinck's characters, such as those in *La Princesse Maleine* (1899), were mere ciphers, passive and often nameless victims of fate, Frost's are shown as fully self-determining. Perhaps Frost was also influenced by Chekhov, who was also an exponent of static action. Hiram Moderwell, "The Theatre of Today" (1914), pp. 190-193. From Gassner, op.cit., p. 107.

24. On "reaction formation" see Calvin S. Hall, *A Primer of Freudian Psychology* (New York, 1954), p. 92.



which it grows".<sup>25</sup>

There is no doubt that the ordeal of choice lends a melancholy air to Frost's love poetry. Yet the woman of "In the Home Stretch" does her utmost to hide her true feelings of sorrow and regret from her husband. She tries to avoid expressing morbid thoughts on domestic drudgery and cleverly avoids Joe's probing question, "And yet you think you like it dear?" In his anxiety for his wife to like her new home, Joe recalls to the reader's mind Thoreau's words that "Ignorance and bungling with love are better than wisdom and skill without."<sup>26</sup> He asks his wife, regarding their move

"I'd like to know  
If it is what you wanted, then how much  
You wanted it for me."

In the above question Joe captures unknowingly the motive for his wife's selfless action: she has realised that without self-sacrifice there could be no reconciliation and chance of eventual happiness. Once the woman has made the decision to support her husband nothing can sway her determined stand. By saying "Its seeming bad for a moment makes it seem / Even worse still, and so on down, down, down" she attempts to soothe Joe's conscience, which is uneasy after he causes her to move home. Joe is told by his sagacious wife, who refutes Aristotle in the process, that he searches

"For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.  
Ends and beginnings - there are no such things.  
There are only middles."

It is in these lines that the woman's sad resignation is clearly evident.

Throughout Frost's love poetry, man, the "outer" instinct, is tied to woman, the "inner" instinct, by love. The uneasy anguish of the "outer" male craves for the "inner" domestic security offered by the maternal female. A duality of attraction and rejection exists. Man, besides desiring a spiritual integration with his lover, also wants a physical independence that comes from free association with nature.

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25. Wendell Glick ed., *The Recognition of Henry David Thoreau: Selected Criticism Since 1848* (Ann Arbor, 1969), p. 83.

26. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), Signet Classic (New York, 1961), p. 245.

This paradoxical need of the "inner" and "outer" of man's character is illustrated in "Reluctance", where a dramatic tension is created between the "outer" sadness that a youth feels for the end of a season, and the "inner" sadness suffered over the end of a love affair.<sup>27</sup> With this poem come some of Frost's strongest images of death. The oak tree that keeps its leaves longer than any other must eventually, as autumn proceeds, also let its leaves fall to "be huddled and still", like dead men in the snow. Whereas nature accepts the inevitable end of a season, it seems treasonous for man to do so. The question arises, is it right for man

To go with the drift of things,  
To yield with a grace to reason,  
And bow and accept the end  
Of a love or a season?

Self-determining man who does not want to accept "the drift of things" clashes with the inevitable cycle of life, symbolized by the ever-changing seasons. The poem becomes a quasi-dramatization of man's existentialist unwillingness to accept mildly what is predestined, either in physical nature, or in spiritual love. It is sad to discover that such rebelliousness against the forces of spirit and matter is in vain. Man's melancholy struggle is preferred, however, to the childlike trust displayed in an omnipotent deity that manipulates man's emotions for his own ends, as depicted in the earlier "A Prayer in Spring".

It is evident, then, that in his love poetry, Frost sees the spiritual struggle of his characters as a melancholy one. He remains seemingly uncommitted in his verse, although numerous hints are given that it would not be a struggle that he himself would readily give up simply because of the hardship involved. The poet felt that the traumas arising from the sacrifices needed to appease opposing values, can sometimes be surmounted and a provisional happiness attained.

It was this dual vision of the nature of things, the ability to

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27. The love affair to which "Reluctance" refers was that between Frost and Elinor White (later Elinor Frost). The end of this particular affair with Elinor precipitated Frost's journey into Dismal Swamp. See Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years 1874-1915* (London, 1966), pp. 173-89.

understand how contentious values can and must co-exist in the universe, that enabled Frost to capture the intensity of the emotional struggle involving sacrifice, understanding and respect. All of these qualities have to be displayed selflessly at the crucial time before even a hope of happiness can be held. Such tenuous hope may not be much, but to Frost at the time of writing his early love poetry, it was all that existed.

## CHAPTER II

### CONFLICT

"A man must partly give up being a man  
With womenfolk ..."

"Home Burial"

Spiritualism and materialism both have their foundation in our nature, and both will exist and exert their influence. Shall they exist as antagonist principles? Is the bosom of Humanity to be externally torn by these two contending factions?... Here then is the mission of the present. *We are to reconcile spirit and matter ....Nothing else remains for us to do.*<sup>1</sup>

George Ripley

1. From Charles Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago, 1953), p. 115.

Throughout his early poetry Frost tried hard to hold the powerful forces of mind and matter in equilibrium. A philosophic dualist, Frost liked to stress that man has two distinct natures, one physical and the other spiritual. These opposing natures he saw following different courses, thus opening up an ideological breach into which mankind seemed to be swallowed. Further complications arose from the varied spiritual outlooks of men and women. This variance the poet saw exacerbated in a finite universe by physical limitations such as death. These are imposed on man and often his mind will not accept them. Frost judged the different survival mechanisms employed by the two sexes to counter these limitations the main source of rupture in the spiritual union between a man and his wife.

In his poetry of conflict Frost specifically examines the spiritual variances between the sexes. It seems initially that he is on the side of the male point of view, but it soon becomes evident that both arguments have their strengths and weaknesses, that there is no "right" way. Much of the pathos implicit in the poetry of conflict lies in the fact that one sex cannot understand why the other holds his or her point of view. The poet recognized this universal lack of spiritual awareness as particularly prevalent in daily life.

In many ways Frost was a pessimist. He found that physiological, psychological and social stresses build up within a society, such as the rural culture of his beloved New England. These led to crises that generate spiritual unrest between man and woman instead of a desired harmonious relationship. In a letter to R.P.T. Coffin, Frost contrasted his mood with the melancholy disposition of a fellow New England poet, E.A. Robinson, "We two were close akin up to a certain point of thinking.. We only parted company over the badness of the world. He was cast in a mould of sadness. I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist".<sup>2</sup> Despite these words he was closer to his rival than he cared to admit. He knew, partially from personal experience and partially from observation, that strong ideological differences could exist between the men and women of New England, and that this was but a reflection of mankind in general. The poet's pessimism was largely a product of this ideological discord.

Because of Frost's proximity to the subject of his poems, it is difficult to separate his personal life from his poetry. There is a

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2. Isaacs, op.cit., p. 98.

clash between his not wanting to lose objectivity by bringing his own numerous private griefs into the open and his feeling that poetry must record the struggles within a poet's soul. Both Frost's personal and poetic lives are marked by contradiction and paradox. Personal thoughts that longed for finality, for something to believe in without qualification, seldom reached in the poetry beyond a dual vision where both sides of a problem were weighed equally, making final resolution an impossibility. This dual awareness is evident in the poetry of conflict where no one spiritual approach can be regarded as the finite solution to the various philosophic issues raised.

Exactly how much a poet's private life can be associated with his work, especially with his early work, is difficult to determine.<sup>3</sup> Frost, however, wrote from everyday events either experienced or observed. Thus many of his own spiritual clashes with the women with whom he was closely associated in the early years, such as Elinor, his wife, or Jeanie, his sister, are relevant when examining the sentiments expressed in the poetry. In his early poetry of conflict Frost displays a strong feeling of rivalry between the male and female. He himself felt threatened in his formative period as a poet by Elinor, his co-valedictorian at High School. So intense was Frost's jealousy of his wife that she was forced to suppress her poetic impulse. In all probability the poet's feelings were a reflection of the chronic lack of self-confidence he felt in his early years at Derry.<sup>4</sup>

Marital sparring, then, was well known to Frost and perhaps this is why the heartaches it brings are captured so well in his poetry of conflict. Frost knew that in moments of deepest human emotion it was not always easy to remain rational. Thoreau remarked that "The violence of love is as much to be dreaded as that of hate"<sup>5</sup> and Frost proved him right by his unfair condemnation of his wife, a legacy of

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3. Hugh Sykes Davies, "Psychoanalysis and Literature", *The Open University Audio Tapes*, A100 09/10 (1973). Also see Don Geiger, *The Dramatic Impulse in Modern Poetics* (Baton Rouge, 1967), Ch. V, "The Poem's Speaker as the Poet", pp. 84-106, and Ch. VI, "Dramatic Theory and the Poet's Biography", pp. 107-25.

4. In the "Preface" to Robinson's *King Jasper*, Frost wrote "Two fears should follow us through life. There is the fear that we shan't prove worthy in ourselves. That is the fear of God. And there is fear of man: the fear that men won't understand us and we shall be cut off from them." Thompson, *Years of Triumph*, p. 420.

5. Thoreau, *A Week*, p. 236.

his own sense of inadequacy and failure, "Elinor has never been of any earthly use to me. She hasn't cared whether I went to school or worked or earned anything. She has resisted every inch of the way my efforts to get money. She is not too sure that she cares about my reputation. She wouldn't lift a hand or have me lift a hand to increase my reputation or even save it."<sup>6</sup> In moments of cooler temper, Frost had a melancholy awareness of his own spiritual shortfalls in regard to his relationship with Elinor, "Evil clings so in all our acts that even when we not only mean but achieve our prettiest, bravest, noblest best we are often a scourge even to those we do not hate. Our sincerest prayers are no more than groans that this should be so."<sup>7</sup>

The words, "Now, in my own relations with my wife, I know I have been guilty of the same evil action",<sup>8</sup> highlight the poet's self-knowledge of the love-hate relationship that helped foster his dual vision. Such relationships he considered a universal phenomenon between the sexes. The complexity of the poet's marital relationship is apparent when, after speaking acrimoniously about his wife at one moment, he could state, "She was my greatest critic. I suppose an imperfect line, or flesh and beauty spoiled, hurt her worse, both physically and spiritually, than I ever knew. This was the only goad I needed - her opinion, ... How could I ever dedicate one of my books to anyone else? She always showed her mind and heart the perfect judge of art."<sup>9</sup> Words such as these indicate that Frost was to a certain extent the victim of his moods and passions; consequently one must be wary of accepting blindly his comments made on other subjects. About his spiritual attachment to his wife, however, his novelist friend, Harvey Allan, made the observation that when Elinor died Frost was like "a great and powerful figure without the control of its flywheel".<sup>10</sup>

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6. Written in a letter to Louis Untermeyer 7 November 1917. Thompson, *Years of Triumph*, p. 115.

7. Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 585.

8. Ibid.

9. Mertins, op.cit., p. 229. The book referred to is *Mountain Interval* in which it is written, "To You Who Least Need Reminding".

10. Kathleen Morrison, *Robert Frost: A Pictorial Chronicle* (New York, 1974), p. 5.

Spiritual harmony between the male and the female, then, is something for which the poet craved but, like the characters of his poetry of conflict, was unable to achieve. In "The Subverted Flower" his only poem dealing with physical lust, the poet examines an extreme case of spiritual antagonism between the sexes. The poem, apparently written in 1913, but not published until after Elinor's death, shows in turn both the male and female as base animals, the victims of their physical passions.<sup>11</sup>

Action in "The Subverted Flower" is centred on the enigmatic story of a young man who lashes his palm with a flower, the symbol of nature's beauty and purity, and assumes that his female companion is similarly sexually stirred. He only succeeds in frightening her, however, and the main force of the poem is found in the exactness of the portrayal of the girl's repugnance at his sexual advance.

Sex, ideally, is a combination of both the physical and the spiritual. In "The Subverted Flower" the man's physical passion and the girl's prudish reserve are both extremist, uncompromising views which, unfortunately, fail to meet the criteria necessary for a harmonious relationship. Not surprisingly their brief encounter terminates in bitterness rather than bliss. The poem opens at the critical moment of a lover's quarrel wherein a young man's sexuality is seen first in terms of flower imagery as a beautiful thing, but soon becomes linked to violence with the lashing of his palm with the flower. Because she exists on a different spiritual plane, the girl is prevented by way of her ignorance or cruelty from understanding the male's approach, "she was either blind or wilfully unkind",

...  
 ... what she could not see  
 Was that the flower might be  
 Other than base and fetid

The point is made that physical passion is not necessarily a bad thing provided it is associated with spiritual love. Unfortunately, such love seems beyond the reach of the girl's inflexible value system.

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11. Frost told Lawrance Thompson that he could have included it in *A Boy's Will*. Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 512. The poem, however, could well be based on memories of Jeanie, who found the facts of birth, love and death physically revolting, rather than on memories of Elinor.



She has prejudged the man as a beast, "Like a tiger at a bone". Ultimately, such views, coloured by narrowmindedness, are self-destructive, as the poet shows by portraying the girl in an even baser manner than she originally viewed the male. The reader cannot but pity the girl after reading the lines

Her mother wiped the foam  
From her chin, picked up her comb,  
And drew her backward home.

When focusing his vision on the discord between the men and women of New England as an example of the universal conflict between the sexes, Frost was concerned mainly with the question of social conflict. He saw that through examination of a particular group of people such as the Yankees with whom he was familiar, and who had a distinct set of social values, it was possible to cast light on the question of the opposing philosophic attitudes of the sexes in general.

Social conflict starts with the family, the smallest organized social group. Frost chose to keep his study simple by dealing with subjects interacting within the family and the domestic context. In particular, Frost was concerned with the two pillars of the family, namely the husband and wife. Clashes between a man and his wife are often based on complex and intangible causes involving a variety of opposing goals, perceptions, expectations and instrumental acts. It was to the fundamental misunderstandings of each sex to the other's philosophy of life that Frost applied his dual vision. Both a personal and an objective experience enabled him to realize that spiritual collisions over attitudes towards particular daily events in life could be the cause of much recrimination.

Particular issues of disagreement in marriage are, in part, determined by the surrounding culture. This was especially so in Frost's New England, with its strongly patriarchal society and its tradition of female suppression. If marriage within such a rigid culture could illustrate spectacular gains made by compromise and reason, then it could also highlight the wretchedness that results when opposing personal beliefs are allowed to exist untempered. There is no room for the total victory of a personal ideology in a relationship that calls for the co-existence of two souls in harmony.

The lyrical ballad, "Wind and Window Flower", is a very early illustration of the complete pessimism of the young poet on the question of achieving harmonious interchange between the sexes. In this beautiful but sad poem, the winter wind is personified as the male spirit, while the window flower becomes the female. The gulf between the two images reflects the poet's melancholy belief that the spiritual break between the male and the female can never be bridged,

He was a winter wind,  
Concerned with ice and snow,  
Dead weeds and unmated birds,  
And little of love could know.

The female, however, is connected with "the firelit looking-glass/  
And warm stove-window light". Thus the chances of their co-existence seem slim indeed.

The fickle masculine character, cold, vague, and restless (so close to the poet's own when the mood struck him) is played against the settled warmth of the security-loving female who is juxtaposed with the caged yellow bird to show that the price of security is also high. There can be no easy reconciliation of such total opposites, and in a transitory world there is no time for lengthy assimilations,

But the flower leaned aside  
And thought of naught to say,  
And morning found the breeze  
A hundred miles away.

Besides being interesting as an uncomplicated example of Frost's early views on the theme of sexual conflict, "Wind and Window Flower" also presents the reader with an insight into the poet's intensely emotional period prior to the printing of *A Boy's Will*. The lyric form of this poem is suited to convey accurately both the deep emotion and the private perceptions of the poet during his period of spiritual formation. It also presents the imaginative apprehension of the poet during his period of self-doubt.

Since the lyric form is directly connected to the state of mind of the writer, the images of poems such as "Wind and Window Flower" are presented in an immediate relation to the poet himself. They are an overflow of his personal feelings; processes of his vivid imagination.

In short, they become the vehicles for his state of mind. It follows, then, that an understanding of the contentions of Frost's life must be relevant when it comes to the consideration of his early verse, in particular his poetry of conflict.

Frost had no doubt that spiritual compromise is the key to a happy existence for man on earth. A dual vision in this regard enabled the poet to recognize the worth of opposing philosophies of life. It also led to innate restlessness bred of the uncertainty about which particular brand of philosophy to follow. The problem is, as Frost himself discovered, there is a very fine line between the agony of uncertainty and the spiritual bliss that a balance of opposing values can provide. In a marital relationship such compromise is essential, but to Frost's melancholy vision, seldom achieved.

The poet's ability to view things in dualistic terms was, in part, learned from Emerson<sup>12</sup> who had the habit of stating his ideas in opposites,<sup>13</sup> "Everything in nature is bipolar, or has a positive and a negative pole. There is a male and a female, a spirit and a fact, a north and a south. Spirit is the positive, the event the negative. Will is the north, action is the south pole."<sup>14</sup>

Emerson, a philosopher of far-reaching sympathies and cautious judgement, was able to break away from the old patterns of thought into a new intellectual climate that held an appeal for Frost. There is, however, a vital difference between the two New Englanders.

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12. Frost's admiration for Emerson is evident in his statement made in his acceptance speech of 8 October 1958, when the American Academy of Arts and Sciences awarded him the Emerson-Thoreau medal, "I should like to make myself as much of an Emersonian as I can." Robert Frost, "On Emerson", *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 88 (Fall, 1959), p. 712. Furthermore, in a letter to his daughter, Lesley, dated 25 January 1919, Frost wrote, "The French teacher is a great Emersonian, as am I also." Arnold Grade, ed., *Family Letters of Robert and Elinor Frost* (Albany, 1972), p. 45.

13. "All the universe over", wrote Emerson in his journal (1842), "there is just one thing, this old double". R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1955), p. 24.

14. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Four Volumes in One* (New York, 193?), p. 301.

Whenever the demands of the opposites became too insistent for Emerson, resulting in a threat to his harmonious and optimistic vision of the universe, he could escape into a blind transcendental mysticism. This was something the pragmatic Frost refused to do.

Frost had little sympathy for weakness in the face of influences disruptive to a particular poetic vision, even if it meant becoming pessimistic in terms of an overall spiritual outlook. The poet accepted the sad fact of life that there can be two totally opposing points of view on a particular subject or event. Both could be equally valid, yet unsatisfactory, because they prevent the spiritual harmony that comes from two people sharing the burdens of life's problems together. In an elucidation of his vision, Frost highlights the need for, but mourns the absence of, the equipoise that spiritual understanding can bring.

The marital relationship as handled by Frost is a way of showing how his subjects, the Yankees of New England, have the universal failing of being unable to develop flexible, and therefore sustaining, spiritual values amid a material cosmos. The dramatic narrative "Home Burial" from *North of Boston* deals with such a tragedy resulting from too rigid a value system.

In "Home Burial" two people are depicted as being unable to appreciate or even understand each other's approach to the death of their first born child. The male in the poem reflects the poet's own struggle with his conscience over similar problems. Grief, and ignorance of its effects caused by years of emotional repression by the male, features strongly throughout the poem. The opposing forces of the need for freedom of expression of grief on one hand, and the need for self-preservation by the emotional escapism based on stoicism on the other, are presented with equal weight by a poet who wanted to leave the final choice to his reader.

Frost insisted that the original idea of "Home Burial" came from the marital estrangement of Nathaniel and Leona Harvey after the death of their first born child at Epping, New Hampshire, in 1895. Yet the theme must also have recalled to the poet's consciousness poignant memories of the death of Elliot, his own first born child, at the age of four in July 1900. The poet was heard to say that this particular

poem was too sad for him to read aloud, a remark that indicates some kind of deep personal involvement. The death of Elliot from *cholera infantum* caused the poet to blame himself for what he judged to be "neglect tantamount to murder". This burden of self-imposed guilt became the cause of acrimony between him and Elinor, much the same as that depicted in the poem.

Distaste for making poetic capital out of private grief<sup>15</sup> prompted Frost to deny any personal involvement in his poems, especially those which were printed after *A Boy's Will*. He preferred to portray a sense of personal loss in a general way that could be seen as universal to mankind. This could best be achieved by a response to common events in life. Frost believed that it is the sum of these that comprise man's destiny. Clearly, then, he was not concerned with the magnified characters and events of the Romantic tradition where human relationships had to be elevated on the social plane to be considered important, nor with the over authoritative personae favoured by Classicism.

As early as his school-teaching days, the poet's love of the ordinary daily events of life is evident. While a teacher he continually stressed that the most interesting essays a student could submit were those based on facts from common experience, yet uncommon in writing.<sup>16</sup> This piece of wisdom is central to understanding why the poet chose the lowly and unsophisticated rural Yankees to carry his theme of social and sexual conflict.

Like the Transcendentalists before him, the poet closely followed the philosophy coined as "The near and the common". Constantly he chided the educated intelligentsia for sneering at the common people, because from such simple people much could be learnt of spiritual values. Thus Frost diligently observed the lives of the New England farmers who, with their wives, lived around him. But, if New England furnished him with his raw material, the finished product is universal rather

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15. Frost said, "The objective idea is all I ever cared about. Most of my ideas occur in verse .... I keep to a minimum of nice stuff (personalities) in any poet's life and works". Hyatt H. Waggoner, *American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present* (Boston, 1968), p. 315.

16. See Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 331.

than parochial. The Yankees achieve great significance in their uninhibited struggles to resolve problems of conflicting philosophies within the constraining forces of a culture based on materialist values and a universe indifferent to the needs of mankind.

As with many of the other dramatic dialogues, "Home Burial" is concerned with what can best be described as "domestic tragedy". A bourgeois drama of conflict is presented whereby ordinary men and women suffer pain and spiritual depression for what they are and for what they feel instinctively in their souls. An ironic situation is created where people seek to destroy each other within the supposedly blissful bonds of marriage.

Frost, however, was not merely a man of psychological insight, but also a sensitive poet who could express the dramatic interchanges between his characters while endeavouring to explain the dictates of their minds. Dialogue was a tool found useful for his purpose. With a suitable language the poet found it possible to convey more convincingly the conversations of his subjects and hence their different spiritual attitude towards the events they discussed.

In his final choice of language, or more specifically, dialogue, Frost remembered Wordsworth with respect as a poet capable of depicting turbulent emotions by simple statements.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Frost went so far as to claim that in the dramatic poems of *North of Boston* such as "Home Burial", he "dropped to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above".<sup>18</sup> To handle clearly the complex theme of sexual conflict which can surround even the ordinary events of daily life, simplicity of language was essential if the focus of the poet's vision was not to be blurred. Therefore, like Wordsworth, Frost aimed to "choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect".<sup>19</sup> He accepted Wordsworth's idea that "the proper diction for poetry in general consists

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17. Frost remarked, "I was after poetry that talked....So, I went to the great poets, from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Coleridge and Wordsworth". Mertins, op.cit., p. 197.

18. Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 434.

19. Norman, op.cit., p. 138.

altogether in a language taken, with due exceptions from ... the natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings".<sup>20</sup>

Frost was also influenced by Emerson in his choice of language with which to convey the conflicting spiritual philosophies of his personae. He stated, "Some of my first thinking about my own language was certainly Emersonian."<sup>21</sup> Thus, when Emerson wrote, "The language of the street is always strong.... Cut these words and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive; they walk and run",<sup>22</sup> Frost paid heed. There always exists, however, the artist's suspicion that common, unshaped speech cannot rise to the requirement of expressing contentious spiritual feelings that seek to transcend the world of physical laws and passions. There remains a need for the artistically shaped "patterned language" that hints at ordinary speech yet is capable of providing the full flavour of the poetic vision.

Diction, then, is important to dramatic dialogues like "Home Burial" because what the husband and wife say to each other in a moment of supreme domestic crisis will determine the future of their lives together and also provide the reader with an insight into their spiritual leanings. They have the chance of reconciling their different approaches to grief through conversation, but spiritual conflict makes it impossible for them to even listen to each other's philosophies, let alone reconcile them.

Ironically, it is the inevitable physical fact of death, something universal to mankind, that sunders the spiritual bond in "Home Burial". The different approaches the male and the female have to the death of the child are something that Frost did not seek to solve. Instead his poem is a dramatization of the couple's desperate attempt to find a basis on which to continue their co-existence. This makes the reader an observer of people who symbolize in their attitudes certain ideas which remain irreconcilable and cause suffering because of it.

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20. M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1953), p. 120.

21. Barry, *On Writing*, p. 52.

22. Gerber, *op.cit.*, p. 116.

Both male and female remain "static" in "Home Burial" in that the event of the child's death occurs without any modification of their inner selves. They show no willingness to attune to each other's defence mechanisms which are thrown up for self protection against the workings of a physical universe unsympathetic towards human sensitivities. Failure to develop emotionally brings a sombre tone to their lives.

It would be difficult to present characters in conflict without a fine knowledge of the male and female psyches and of the instinctive mental postures that members of each sex adopt in order to protect themselves. Frost possessed this knowledge and developed his action accordingly as a portrayal of spiritual forces in collision. Illustrated in the poetry of conflict are the aggression and irrationality that come from spiritual reaction to an unpleasant and unforeseen event beyond man's control.

Although it is important to note that not all of Frost's poems of conflict are quite so melancholy in their outlook, it is significant that the poems of lighter aspect are not as effective in conveying the reality of conflict of the opposing philosophies of the male and female. "Snow", the longest poem written before the masques, is just such an example of where the poet attempts a humorous look at the two differing attitudes held by a husband and wife towards an event they share. In "Snow" humour is fundamental to the characterization and is an important element to consider when dealing with the underlying tensions created between the farmer, Fred Cole, and his wife, Helen.

A half-teasing, half-taunting tone, then, mocks the seriousness of the poem. This approach tends to rob it of the impact that is made by the more poignant poems of conflict. With the loss of the melancholy atmosphere the reader loses much of the emotional impact of two people who fail to reach a mutually respecting relationship. The result is that "Snow" remains less memorable than many of the other poems of similar theme.

"Snow" takes the form of a general academic impasse between the sexes and a lack of a personal element detracts from its overall impact. The poem deals with a fanatical New England preacher named Meserve (a humorous shortening of Me - serve), who shelters from a raging



snow-storm at midnight at the Coles' farm. It has taken the preacher three hours to go four of the seven miles home, yet neither the Coles nor his wife can persuade him to rest for the night in the haven of the young couple's farm. The selfish irresponsibility displayed by the preacher was familiar enough to Frost, who by going off penniless to England with a wife and four children displayed a similar lack of thought about the consequences his personal decision could have on the feelings of others.

In "Snow", Fred and Helen do not succeed in rising above the role of mere mouthpieces for the contentious values they embody and consequently their spiritual clash is somewhat lost amid a background of a violent and threatening nature in the form of a snow-storm. Snow imagery builds up the overall picture of natural force. Despite its force, however, the storm cannot match Meserve's inner fortitude. Perhaps Meserve is more of a success as a character than either of the Coles because he has many of the poet's own qualities. He at least, even if unconsciously, provides hope that man does not always have to bow to the natural elements.

The husband and wife in this poem, as those in "Home Burial", are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate. Rather than consider an alternative point of view, they tend to refute it out of hand; differences are accepted as being unnegotiable. The light-hearted sparring of Fred and Helen to an extent implies the underlying antagonisms that cause the instant dismissals of opposing ideas. Because the two characters are little more than ciphers, "Snow" remains as more of an example of an academic exercise than anything else. This impression is strengthened by Frost's statement that "I have three characters speaking in one poem, and I was not satisfied with what they said until I got them to speak so true to their characters that no mistake could be made as to who was speaking. I would never put the names of the speakers in front of what they said."<sup>23</sup> There are limits, then, to

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23. M.P. Tilley, "Notes from Conversations with Robert Frost", *Inlander*, Vol. 20 (February, 1918), p.116. In his interest in dialogue, Frost was influenced by the Irish playwright Synge, who said, "There are two kinds of language: the spoken language and the written language - our everyday speech which we call the vernacular; and a more literary, sophisticated, artificial, elegant language that belongs to books .... We object to anybody's talking in literary artificial English .... I, myself, could get along very well without the bookish language altogether." John M. Synge, "Preface", *The Playboy of the Western World*. *The Complete*

the impact of a poem which is taken up more with the mechanics of articulation of a conflict, than with the melancholy consequences of it. Because the characters lack depth they are difficult for the reader to identify with, and the tension of a feeling of personal involvement is lost.

To convey his theme of conflict as poetry, Frost employed the medium of blank verse which, according to Amy Lowell, produced lines of "granite hardness" thus making them suitable for the magnitude of their task. Lowell saw the verse as "halting and maimed like the life it portrays, unyielding in substance and broken in effect",<sup>24</sup> while the flavour of the idiomatic American speech is allowed to remain in the spiritual debates of the personae. To Amy Lowell the verse was "So extraordinarily close to normal everyday speech ... that I anticipate some academic person may test its metre with a metronome, and declare that the verse is often awkward in its scansion."<sup>25</sup>

Winters, however, attacked Frost's vision and its presentation in verse as a vague and sentimental feeling. By espousing the Romanticism of Emerson and Thoreau, Winters saw Frost as precipitating a spiritual deterioration among individuals, thus causing a slide in the material status of the nation. Winters regarded the medium of Frost's conflict theme, namely the conversation of three in opposition, as being unpoetic, "But poetry is not conversation....Conversation is the most careless and formless of human utterance; it is spontaneous

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*Works of John M. Synge* (New York, 1935). Barry, *On Writing*, p. 13. Sidney Cox remarks that Frost had a bias towards *Playboy* and Shaw's *Arms and the Man* and that Frost was aware of Synge's experiments in speech. The poet wrote to Cox on 19 January 1914, "Words exist in the mouth not in books. You can't fix them and you don't want to fix them. You want them to adapt their sounds to places and persons and times." Thompson, *Letters*, p. 108. Frost also told Cox, however, that although he admired Synge's work he would never go the extremes of listening to conversations of kitchen maids through the cracks in the ceiling. Sidney Cox, *A Swinger of Birches* (New York, 1957), p. 11. In a letter to L.W. Payne, Jr., Frost also wrote, "I've just found out what makes a piece of writing good (my latest opinion of anything): it is making sentences talk to each other as two or more speakers do in drama". Thompson, *Letters*, p. 427.

24. Gerber, *op.cit.*, p. 98.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

and unrevised, and its vocabulary is commonly limited". He further declared that Frost "is extremely inept in managing blank verse; in blank verse his theory of conversational style shows itself at its worst - the rhythms are undistinguished and are repetitious to the point of deadly monotony."<sup>26</sup>

Winters may well be correct in his opinion that conversation in its pure form is not poetry, but many would disagree with him that the dialogues which express the spiritual tensions between Frost's males and females are pure conversation. It would be more accurate to say that the conversations are artistically moulded by the overall theme and expressed in a blank verse that is well-suited to the varying rhythms of colloquial speech.

Within the family context, where Frost sets his melancholy theme of conflict, the very institution of marriage is seen as an initiation ceremony for the test of spiritual compatibility between a man and a woman surrounded by material indifference. The bride must coerce the male into the responsibilities of marriage while he must abandon his traditional cultural role as the dictator of his own fortunes. As it happens, however, Frost's vision shows that this ideal situation rarely occurs. Instead an "approach-avoidance"<sup>27</sup> conflict is built up within most characters whereby they experience one reaction in agreement to a certain point or stimulus, and yet another in opposition to it.

Meserve is an example of a person who suffers from such an internal conflict which is initially generated from his inability to sacrifice completely the masculine traditions that are ingrained in his soul. Against all sound advice he actively seeks a dangerous situation such as fighting his way home through a raging snow-storm simply to express unconsciously the self-reliant, self-determining element of the masculine spirit. Seemingly the fight is against the physical forces of nature, but in reality it is against the responsibilities and dictates imposed upon him by women.

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26. Yvor Winters, *The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises* (Denver, 1st ed., 1957), pp. 160, 185.

27. See Jeffery A. Gray, *The Psychology of Fear and Stress* (London, 1971), pp. 115-40.

Fred also finds difficulty in sacrificing the masculine tradition, although he is certainly less dramatic in his failure. Perhaps this is why, though he dislikes Meserve for his religious dogma, he is attracted to his irrational struggle against the elements, even against his better judgement. The wilful determination of Helen, who says of Meserve, "'He shan't go - there!'" prompts a playful teasing from Fred. At times, however, this teasing has a frustrated strain about it as is evident when the farmer expresses one of his grievances against women's intrusion into the traditional realm of men,

"Only you women have to put these airs on  
To impress men. You've got us so ashamed  
Of being men we can't look at a good fight  
Between two boys and not feel bound to stop it."

A similar frustration exists between Meserve and his wife. Meserve is described as a man of strong spirit and wilful determination, "'He had the shovel. He'll have made a fight'", whereas his wife is linked to the house and children, as Helen points out when hearing a child crying over the phone, "'Its mother wouldn't let it cry like that,/ Not if she's there.'" Although the woman wants to restrict Meserve's self-determination, it is difficult in the circumstances presented to condemn her actions born of commonsense and a sense of security. It is another example of the poet's being able to see the alternative side of a spiritual conflict. In the case presented in "Snow" it certainly seems as though Meserve's male stubbornness against his wife's sound advice to rest for the night ("My dear, I'm coming just the same ...") is as much to blame for the spiritual tensions between them as her effort to dictate his actions.

In his study of the division of the sexes even after marriage, Frost investigated both the male and female components thought to be inherent in an individual psyche. The "inner" man, or "animus", within the unconscious female is considered a universal phenomenon that can lead to complications in her spiritual makeup, just as the "inner woman", or "anima", element can within a man. Both the animus and the anima, then, produce a disagreeable, irascible effect.

The animus is thought to be particularly at fault because, shaped by a woman's father, it is seemingly a highly rational, independent force, often in direct contrast to the woman herself. It

refuses to be argued with because it believes itself to be right; but it is often right only in a general sense rather than in the circumstance in question. This trait, Frost considered, was what led to the unchangeable and uncompromising spiritual convictions held by many of the women with whom he was acquainted.

Because of complicating factors such as the anima and animus it is difficult for a poet to explain spiritual man in purely finite terms. Frost achieved a greatness in his art by capturing the melancholy doubt surrounding the problem of how persons should conduct themselves towards others during a time of mental stress. The poet's success comes from an awareness that man must suffer because of his lack of control of events in a material universe devoid of sympathy. And the suffering is made all the more poignant by the fact that no ultimate hope can be held for the unknown which lies beyond death. In his recognition of the state of things, Frost followed Emerson's view in "Compensation" that the world was a place where "Men seek to be great; they would have offices, wealth, power and fame. They think that to be great is to possess one side of nature—the sweet, without the other side—the bitter."<sup>28</sup>

In a materially oriented existence where there is life there must also be death. Regeneration invariably breeds disintegration, and good engenders evil. In the poetry of conflict there is a sombre awareness of the ambivalence of the soul that underlies the poet's philosophy and is intrinsic in his work. A metaphysical and transcendental background produces the phenomenon of the double in Frost's art where the struggles of antagonistic forces are seen as a projection of spiritual vexations. Added to these struggles is a sense of tension similar to that evident in earlier Puritan verse where division exists between mankind's basic passions and the restraints imposed upon them by religious beliefs and by society.

In "Home Burial" the approach to grief is examined only in relation to death and the reader is given two points of view - the wife's and her husband's. The woman's idea is to submerge everyday events in grief. She no longer sees herself as her husband's lover,

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28. Emerson, op.cit., p. 69.

or as the mother of a family. There is a collapse of her domestic personality and with it her psychological identity; no longer can she relate to those around her. In forsaking the society in which she operates, the woman wants no more of life, yet remains terrified of death.

The husband follows, somewhat typically, Frost's proffered view that grief should be submerged by everyday affairs, and he seems a good deal more successful at it than was the poet. Traditionally, the essence of the masculine in poetry is reticence about personal emotions which are shown rarely and then certainly not for their own sake.

Similarly in "The Housekeeper", the emotional repression by the male becomes a major feature of the poem and even though the old woman understands both sides of the dispute between her daughter and the farmer, she is just as steeped in the sense of the traditional roles of the sexes. Hence when the farmer is unable to bear the pressure on his soul over the loss of Estelle she remarks "'I never saw a man let family troubles / Make so much difference in his man's affairs.'" In traditional New England society men were supposed to have an "armour-plated" emotional character. If women, in practice, display more phobias and go against what would seem to be the logical pattern of nature, it simply shows that men have been conditioned by society to accept more strain. Sometimes, however, as in the case of the poem, so severe is the pressure on the spirit that cultural influences break down and man makes "'up his mind not to stand / What he has got to stand.'"

Even self pity has its uses, the poet realized, and is sometimes employed even by the male as a weapon in the struggle for existence in an indifferent universe. Despite modern antagonism towards self pity, it still retains a strong emotional force and this was utilized in full by the poet. The farmer who suddenly throws his hoe "'Sky-high with both hands'" is proof enough of this. Passionate bouts of emotion were similarly inherent in the poet's own character causing him to be described as "small-minded, vindictive, ill-tempered, egotistic, cruel, and unforgiving".<sup>29</sup>

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29. James Dickey, *Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now* (New York, 1968), p. 209.

It is conceivable that displays of emotion were mistakenly linked by the poet to evidence of imbalance; hence his desperate but unsuccessful attempts to quash such "dangerous" feelings within himself.<sup>30</sup> Frustration with the discord in life is not easy on those who seek a stable existence. In a letter to John W. Haines on 25 April 1915, Frost wrote, "What I long for is certainties where I have fixed my heart. I am not permitted to be certain of anything. It is the same with my own personal affairs".<sup>31</sup> Dual vision is the product of this uncertainty in life; it is stimulated by Frost's knowledge of his own unstable character and his recognizing the need to control it, 'Men have told me, and perhaps they are right, that I have no "straddle"....That means that I cannot spread out far enough to live in filth and write in the treetops. I can't. Perhaps it is because I am so ordinary. I like the middle way'.<sup>32</sup>

Any professed belief by the poet in the good of masculine emotional repression is, then, perhaps less firm than he would have the reader believe. The inherent dualism in his character which allowed him to express objectively two opposing points of view also caused major doubts as to which would be the correct one. Such internal doubt, Frost knew, allows for a chance of spiritual contact with others, since there is no closing of the mind. "Home Burial" illustrates the domestic disaster that can occur if the mind is not opened to the emotional feelings of others. The sorrow resulting from the disaster is intensified when it involves the two people, namely husband and wife, who supposedly should have the best chance of obtaining spiritual interchange.

Death often has the deepest of all spiritual repercussions in society and Frost's New England was no exception. All living is relative to death, a universal physical absolute. Yet Frost, like Yeats, Keats, and countless other poets, saw the spirit as indestructible,

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30. Such "dangerous feelings" are exemplified by the incident in December, 1896, when Frost was involved in a brawl with a neighbour over a minor domestic disturbance. The result was a fine of ten dollars for assault. See Thompson, *Early Years*, pp. 225-26. The poet's emotions also tended to take control during arguments with Elinor and Jeanie. *Ibid.*, p. 340.

31. Thompson, *Letters*, p. 170.

32. Munson, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

something that could not be restrained by physical fact. Armed with this knowledge he concentrated on examining how the minds of men and women differ in their combat with the struggle of life and death.

"Home Burial" is a poem that moves rhythmically between the opposites of life and death while a suitable relationship between mind and matter is sought. Unfortunately, men and women often cannot bolster each other in the search, but instead, because of the depth of irreconcilable beliefs, drag each other down. This complex metaphysical search for balance Frost inherited to some degree from the Transcendentalists, who believed that man's physical senses could not alone enable him to achieve such an equilibrium. There was a belief that the spirit held something that transcended the physical senses. The Transcendentalist, Parker, believed that "sensationalism produces a lack of ultimate assurance about the facts of the universe".<sup>33</sup> By weighing Puritan moralism and Romantic emotionalism against one another, the Transcendentalists unconsciously paved the way for the realism Frost employed in his poetry.

Concord idealists like Margaret Fuller demonstrated to America that materialism was not the sole answer to happiness in the cosmos, or indeed any sort of answer at all. In a cosmos consisting of the dual forces of mind and matter it was acknowledged that force alone could not furnish the answer to a metaphysical problem. The whole situation regarding the interrelation of mind and matter, then, is complicated firstly by the unwillingness of one force to accept limitations imposed by the other, and secondly by the clash of opposing philosophic approaches to a particular common event.

The very title of "Home Burial" could be a pun in the sense that the woman is being buried by her domestic emotions. On the other hand, the man's desire to protect himself by submerging his grief in everyday events causes him to be insensitive towards his wife's feelings. His domineering attitude helps plunge both to the depths of the chasm that exists between their conflicting approaches to life and death. Little of the wife's mortification is held by the husband when viewing the graves of his relatives,

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33. William R. Hutchinson, *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (Boston, 1959), p. 102.



"The little graveyard where my people are!  
 So small the window frames the whole of it.  
 Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?"

This lack of understanding, together with phrases such as "'Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight'" and "'We haven't to mind those'", complete the husband's view of the acceptance of death instead of the free indulgence of his grief.

In life great harm is often done by people who think that they are doing right. This situation occurs in "Home Burial" where the male attempts to have the grief suffered by him and his wife minimized by occupying his mind with physical chores. Unfortunately, like his wife, who is unable to flee from her fears, the farmer fails to achieve an escape from grief and instead draws the wrath of his wife for his lack of understanding. Angrily she reminds him of his words, "'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build'", which were spoken while his child's corpse lay in the darkened parlour. Such an approach, to the wife, warrants the bitter condemnation "'You couldn't care!'"

According to Fulton, Americans in general, but particularly those of the New England area with their Puritan heritage, are automatically expected by the society in which they live to adopt a stoic acceptance of death, "The expression of grief or sympathy for a death is limited to time and place. The dramaturgy of death moves inexorably to a conclusion - after only three days. Within one week one is expected to be back on the job."<sup>34</sup> The woman, then, is a rebel against the society in which she lives. Frost does not say that she is wrong in her free expression of grief. What he does say, however, is that bitterness can rise within a marriage when the male is unsympathetic to this expression of grief, as when the husband says "'I do think, though, you overdo it a little.'"

The death of someone close does trigger grief, but it can also have a deeper, more psychological effect by engendering a "death

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34. Robert Fulton, "The Sacred and the Secular: Attitudes of the American Public Toward Death, Funerals and Funeral Directions", Robert Fulton, ed., *Death and Identity* (New York, 1965), p. 101. From Richard G. Dumont and Dennis C. Foss, *The American View of Death: Acceptance or Denial?* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 57.

fear"<sup>35</sup> where terror is felt for the spiritual unknown beyond material existence. Death becomes less frightening than the severance of material ties. A fear of the loneliness of death that comes with the separation from loved ones is what terrifies the woman of "Home Burial". The death of her child jolts this fear loose in her mind and she is unable to find spiritual comfort in her husband, who, to protect himself, refuses to face the problem.

The following statement by the woman sums up her death anxiety,

"... The nearest friends can go  
With anyone to death, comes so far short  
They might as well not try to go at all.  
No, from the time when one is sick to death,  
One is alone, and he dies more alone."

To say man dies alone is not really to state a fact but to offer an impression. It seems that there is a difference in the way that one can view dying. Since death plays a significant part in man's stay on earth any statement about it is spoken in a common language and is dependent on common experience. Perhaps, however, it is only inevitable death, such as that which comes with old age, that can be met with stoic courage. The passing of a child who was "sick to death",<sup>36</sup> is a different matter and thus is rebelliously met by the woman.

The full melancholy impact of "Home Burial" appears when the woman's defence mechanisms attempt to relieve her death anxiety by distorting her reasoned judgement by way of displaced aggression. Her frustration is effectively taken from its original source - the death of the child - and directed at another thing or person - in this case her husband.<sup>37</sup> Instead of the woman saying "I cannot understand death or transience", she implies "my husband cannot understand such things". By so doing the woman's conscience becomes clear and she can display grief amid a society that demands its repression.

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35. For a fuller explanation of the "death fear" see *ibid.*, pp. 17-28.

36. It seems that in the poem the baby, like Frost's own first born, died of sickness rather than from accident.

37. See Robert D. Nye, *Conflict Among Humans: Some Basic Psychological and Social-Psychological Considerations* (New York, 1973), p. 4.

The woman is unable to compromise with her husband. Unfairly she labels him a "'Blind creature'" and speaks of his "'rumbling voice"' as if he were a beast. Not surprisingly such action brings out frustration in the man who cries "'Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?'" and then, "'I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed./ I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed.'" If he is to sympathize with his wife's grief, the farmer must first suffer the loss of his masculine identity; he must yield the fierce, individual pride that is synonymous with his concept of manhood, "'A man must partly give up being a man / With womenfolk.'" Unfortunately, however, the husband cannot bring himself to abandon even a small part of his masculine pride.

There can be no happy ending to a poem dealing with such belligerence. "Home Burial" remains Frost's greatest example of a poetic study that furnishes no answer to the problems it raises. The strength of the poem lies in the dual vision with which it was conceived - there can be no ultimate answers in the philosophy of life. Thus "Home Burial" ends with the wife lingering near the door which is neither open nor shut, while the husband desperately threatens her about leaving with the words "'If-you-do!'" the deterring effect of which remains unknown.

In another poem of conflict, "The Fear", Frost examines a clandestine love affair. The poet got the basis for this poem from a story told to him by a family friend, Mrs Lynch.<sup>38</sup> It involves the tale of a local woman who trained as a nurse in Boston, married there, but later fell in love with a patient and fled from her husband. While out walking with his son, Carol, Frost encountered the guilt-ridden woman and this meeting precipitated the poem.

Throughout "The Fear" there is a Puritan-like "domination of black" that creates an atmosphere of foreboding. Broad elementary impressions are contrasted, with dark prevailing over light. From this aura of mysteriousness a world of cruel reality emerges. The cycle of American poetry seems to be displaying once again the darkness of earlier experience. Frost's dual vision counters this somewhat by using a transcendental-like inclination to explore the possibilities of human endurance, rather than indulging in a resignation to fate.

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38. See Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 344.

It is often claimed that fear is a recurring factor in Frost's poetry; certainly this is the case in his poems of conflict. When combined with guilt, fear can lead to wretched uncertainty and even direct aggression. Fear, therefore, becomes a force that is alien to spiritual peace. By creating a hypothetical state of mind out of reactions to certain events, fear can generate great spiritual unease and in this respect fear and frustration are closely linked.<sup>39</sup> It follows that many people caught up with spiritual uncertainty caused by fear of the unknown, are also frustrated with life in a material universe.

In "The Fear" a woman's anxiety and frustration are evident in her not being able to have a settled marital relationship. Her lover, Joel, does not have the feelings of guilt possessed by the woman and therefore cannot understand her unrest. He can afford to be coldly rational in what is a highly emotional situation for the woman. Nevertheless, the woman thinks of her lover and does not lack the courage to face a stranger, encountered in the dark, alone. She tells Joel, "You're not to come", "This is my business." In contrast, Joel displays his insensitivity by saying of the woman's husband, "But it's nonsense to think he'd care enough", which prompts her quick and accurate retort, "You mean you couldn't understand his caring".

The force of the ending of "The Fear" lies in its anticlimax that makes the denouement even more powerful than one involving physical violence. The reader is shown that nothing can happen on a physical plane to match the misery of spiritual uncertainty. As Thoreau aptly puts it, "Nothing is so much to be feared as fear."<sup>40</sup>

To Frost, what happens in life, is not as important as to whom it happens and why. Therefore, when the woman collapses at the end of the poem it could be that she faints, as Lawrence suggests, or perhaps is killed, as Lowell thinks. More important than the actual collapse, or its extent, is why it occurred. The reason could be that a person under prolonged mental stress, as is the woman, can suffer a massive

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39. See Gray, *op.cit.*, pp. 141-61.

40. William Lyon Phelps, *Howells, James, Bryant and Other Essays* (New York, 1924), p. 77.

shutdown of the physical facilities that govern resistance to emotional strain. When nothing can be done to fend off the impending danger anxiety mounts to the point of mental collapse.

More likely, however, is the explanation that the woman collapses because of the sudden fear she experiences of losing love for a second time. It is conceivable that guilt causes her to think that Joel will desert in a moment of crisis as she did her husband. It is worth remembering that the woman does not collapse when facing up to the stranger, but only after calling Joel's name and receiving no answer,

"Joel!" She spoke as if she couldn't turn.  
The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground.  
It touched, it struck, it clattered and went out.

The symbolism of the lantern is important in "The Fear" in that it stands for intelligence and the individual spirit against the black cosmos. The importance Frost placed on this symbol of the perceiving mind in the chaos of the unknown can be judged from a letter he wrote to John T. Bartlett on 7 August 1913, "I have written one today that I may call *The Lantern* if Mrs. Frost doesn't dissuade me: she doesn't think it a fit."<sup>41</sup> It is the crisis of the meeting with the stranger that forces the woman to admit to her spiritual emptiness which even Joel cannot fill. When the full impact of that recognition becomes clear her mind is unable to accept it and she collapses.

By his wide vision of life Frost knew that it is important to have a sympathetic understanding of daily events. One must have patience with passions and sins, with the weaknesses of human nature. Small weight was placed on a purely academic study of philosophy as a means of coping with life. Accordingly, Frost's early poetry should be approached instinctively as well as intellectually. Being a wide reader the poet was open to the influence of Russian novelists such as Turgenev, with his realistic presentations of the confrontations between the sexes. No known record exists of how early Frost became exposed to Turgenev, whose novels are noted for their poetic atmosphere and country settings, with contrasts made between the male and the female. The first mention of the novelist in correspondence occurs

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41. Thompson, *Letters*, p. 89.

in a letter to Walter Prichard Eaton on 15 July 1915.<sup>42</sup>

Like Turgenev, Frost was keen to present realistic situations to convey his theme of conflict. In so doing he was determined to utilize American settings. Words of Transcendentalists like Orestes Brownson remained somewhere in his mind, "We are now the literary vessels of England [who] continue to do homage to the mother country. Our literature is tame and servile, wanting in freshness, freedom, and originality. We write as Englishmen, not as Americans."<sup>43</sup> In *North of Boston* particularly, Frost was able to prove Bryant wrong when the latter declared, "There is no romance either in our character, our history, or our condition of society; and, therefore, it is neither likely to encourage poetry, nor capable of supplying it with those materials - materials drawn from domestic traditions and manners - which render it popular".<sup>44</sup>

"The Housekeeper" from *North of Boston* is the type of poem where Frost displays material drawn from domestic situations in New England. Personal disagreements, he realized, tend to rise as a result of common social interactions. The domestic setting of "The Housekeeper", then, is based on the poet's personal experience of a neighbour, John Hall, who lived at Atkinson, a town near Derry. Frost momentarily confused Hall with another neighbour, John Kline, when he wrote to the English poet F.S. Flint in 1913, "Did I give you a feeling of and for the independent-dependence of the kind of people I like to write about. I am no propagandist of equality. But I enjoy above all things the contemplation of equality when it happily exists....The John Kline who lost his housekeeper and went down like a felled ox was just the person I have described and I never knew a man I like better - damn the world anyway."<sup>45</sup>

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42. Frost wrote, "Turgenieff must have had a good deal to do with the making of me." *Ibid.*, p. 182. One of Frost's 7th Grade Textbooks at Salem (L.J. Campbell, ed., *The New Franklin Fourth Reader*), contained Turgenev's "The Sparrow".

43. Grant, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

44. Norman, *op.cit.*, p. 232.

45. Unpublished letter to F.S. Flint, 6 July 1913, University of Texas Library. Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost* (New York, 1973), p. 53.

The poet had formed a brief friendship with John Hall while at Derry where Frost had gone to take up chicken farming to recover from nervous fatigue. This fatigue, together with the death of his mother from cancer, increased the poet's pessimistic view of life at that period. The poet's friendship with John Hall was coloured with this melancholy aspect from the start. Hall's life was formed around cherishing things Frost had just begun to appreciate, thus the poet felt a personal involvement in his neighbour's problems.

Conflict within a triple character study of the farmer, his defacto wife, and her mother is examined in "The Housekeeper". The examination is based on a familiar social order where various marital problems are viewed from two points of view, both given by a third person - the mother. The poet himself was somewhat of a misogynist in his makeup and women, except for the mother-figure, were seen as threatening. Perhaps this feeling stemmed from an initial jealousy of Jeanie and then later of Elinor. Whatever the case, Frost was not past making sexist statements such as 'I was saying about women the other day - they were plaguing me to leave some boys I wanted to talk to; they thought I was getting tired or something. Finally I turned on them, and I said, "A woman would rather take care of you than listen to you think".'<sup>46</sup> The visitor to the farm is coloured with this chauvinism. He embodies Frost's feeling that "All women are cunning with the cunning of sex".<sup>47</sup> The visitor, being a male, is quick to see fault in Estelle's action in fleeing from Hall. It takes the mother-figure, who rises above petty conflict, to give the balanced point of view.

Clearly Frost recognized the two separate tendencies in the female psyche: that of the mother, and that of the lover. The two women of "The Housekeeper" represent these two contradictory tendencies. Frost's regard for the power of the mother-figure, however, seems to indicate a latent Oedipus complex in his own makeup that perhaps came from his having been raised like John Hall of the poem, by his mother following the early death of his father. If the point can be accepted it goes a long way to explaining why the poet liked to seek spiritual

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46. Robert Frost, "Conversations on the Craft of Poetry". Barry, *On Writing*, p. 161.

47. Louis Untermeyer, ed., *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (London, 1964), p. 17.

peace in the arms of the mother-figure of his poems when so much turmoil existed around him.

The action of "The Housekeeper" is conveyed by means of neighbours talking. The poet declared, "I like the actuality of gossip, the intimacy of it. Say what you will effects of actuality and intimacy are the greatest aim an artist can have. The sense of intimacy gives the thrill of sincerity."<sup>48</sup> The reader learns along with the visiting neighbour that Estelle, the speaker's daughter, has run off and married another man. The melancholy theme of the end of a love affair is unusually treated here because, of the two people involved, one is encountered only briefly at the end of the poem, while the other does not appear at all. It was up to Frost as a monologist to make such off-stage characters as alive as those on stage.<sup>49</sup>

In this he succeeded; as Untermeyer puts it, "Many of Frost's most striking characters are revealed in a single line; some of them without even a word".<sup>50</sup> By the mother presenting both the male and female points of view in respect of their marital conflict Frost was able to obtain an impartiality that results in a balanced argument. In such spiritual disputes the poet knew it to be a sad fact that there could be no alternative settlement. Man and woman must suffer from opposite and irreconcilable approaches to the dictates of an indifferent universe.

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48. Thompson, *Letters*, p. 159.

49. See Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London, 1966), p. 33. The term "dramatic monologue" almost seems a contradiction. A decline in drama in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was by a progressive growth in the monologues at the expense of action. Speeches became so good that they could be taken out of context. The drama was described rather than acted out, thus losing much of its force. Frost, however, overcomes this by providing enigmatic endings to his poems. There is a real tension in "The Housekeeper" when the neighbour tries to leave before the farmer returns, but discovers it is too late. There is drama in the suspense over what the farmer will say to the neighbour. It is something the reader is left to speculate on. Thus, for those with vivid imaginations, the action assumes greater proportions than if it was actually acted out.

50. Louis Untermeyer, *The New Era in American Poetry*. (1919) (St Clair Shores, Mich., 1970), p. 25.



The mother, then, has a dual vision that allows her to see both the male and female aspects of the dispute. With this ability comes a moral responsibility. It turns out that the title of the poem has an ironic twist in that it is not the daughter, originally hired as a housekeeper, who lends her position to the title, but the mother who realizes that if she leaves John Hall he will perish and the farm will revert to nature. The old woman becomes a part of the home, a symbol of the spiritual peace that should reside there. She says that she will move once Estelle is settled, but by her adding

"I tell them they can't get me through the door, though:  
I've been built in here like a big church organ.  
We've been here fifteen years"

the possibility of her moving seems remote indeed. The comparison of the crippled woman to "a big church organ" imparts a spiritual note to the poem in direct relation to her own character.

The resigned attitude of the mother reflects the poet's own melancholy outlook towards the conflict of the sexes. By being able to judge both points of view the old woman is not able to mend the dispute, but only cling desperately to what she has built up in "fifteen years.!!" It is the woman's frustration at her impotence to change the events in the daily lives of her loved ones that provokes her frustrated outburst to the farmer, "Who wants to hear your news, you - dreadful fool?"

The melancholy message comes through in "The Housekeeper" that life is not always logical: what ought to happen is not necessarily what does happen. Often in an act of belligerence or just plain ignorance people fail to take into account the irrational emotions of others who may be close to them. John Hall is guilty of this when he says stubbornly, "Better than married ought to be as good / As married" in answer to why he will not marry Estelle. Foolishly he overlooks that she really wants children and her morality will not allow her to have them out of wedlock.

Where there is no hope of personal decision being balanced by a feeling of integrity towards another person, a feeling of spiritual loss must always reign. This sadness creeps into Frost's poetry in direct relation to his pessimism over man and woman's inability to open

their minds to alternative spiritual influences. His personal experience and wide observation of those around him involved in domestic disputes allowed his pessimism to become explicit in the outpouring of his soul in his poetry of conflict. His dual vision enabled him to appreciate both the constructive and destructive elements in human experience. He did not, however, consciously speculate as to which set of forces would triumph.

### CHAPTER III

#### COMMUNICATION

"But all the fun's in how you say a thing."

"The Mountain"

Spin a coin and it falls heads or tails.  
But hardly for Robert Frost. For him  
the coin is always in the air ...<sup>1</sup>

Arthur M. Sampley

1. Arthur M. Sampley, "The Tensions of Robert Frost", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 65 (Autumn, 1966), p. 431.

Difficulty of communication has been an important theme in New England poetry for more than a century, with poets such as Emily Dickinson displaying uneasiness over the slender possibility of spontaneous spiritual contact within a particular society. Later New England poets, especially Robinson and Frost, expressed a similar pessimistic appreciation of the symptoms of the "disease of incommunication" by writing of the hidden pressures in the solitary inner lives of their Yankee subjects.

It would have been impossible for a poet as close to the New England literary tradition as was Frost, not to have inherited some degree of awareness of the need of individuals to relate or perish. According to Frost, "The ruling passion in man is not as Viennese as is claimed. It is rather a gregarious instinct to keep together by minding each other's business."<sup>2</sup> In his early poetry of communication, Frost, in fact went a step further by examining the brutal effect loss of connection has on the spirits of those driven or condemned into silence. In so doing the poet proved that tragedy results not only from death, but also from the mental sufferings of those who fail to relate to both the physical world and to the other people around them. Investigation of the communication theme Frost found complicated by an artist's conception and execution when presenting his art; there is always a disheartening gap between a poet's vision and his ability to express it. Krieger noted this when he wrote, "the poet is a translator of a private, pre-existing idea by which the developing poetic context is restricted and the traditional demands of the medium are sacrificed."<sup>3</sup>

By espousing the attitude that poetry "provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another",<sup>4</sup> Frost endeavoured to master the problem of artistic imagination being limited by the ability to express it. Like many people Frost felt a victim of the dilemma that causes men to "talk in parables and in hints and

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2. Robert Frost, "The Constant Symbol", *The Poems of Robert Frost* (New York, 1946), pp. XVI-XVII. From Howell D. Chickenring, Jr., "Robert Frost, Romantic Humorist", *Literature and Psychology*, Vol. 16 (1966), p. 143.

3. Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Minneapolis, 1956), p. 75. From Geiger, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

4. Thompson, *Years of Triumph*, p. 363.

in indirections - whether from diffidence or some other instinct."<sup>5</sup>  
 Frost considered that the best a poet could do is attempt to communicate the fact that man in general cannot communicate.

In a world where everyone at some stage in his life craves to be understood, lack of spiritual union can be disastrous. In this regard the Transcendentalists as an intellectual group were advanced in their thinking that it was language that created the difference between man and beast. Language, in the form of poetry, was found to have a fundamental significance to man and was not, as the empiricists postulated, merely a mechanical go-between. Accordingly, occurrence of ideas was viewed by the Transcendentalists as a parallel to physical events, with language, the vehicle of thought, providing the only connection between mind and matter.<sup>6</sup>

In "The Ax-Helve", first printed in *Atlantic* in September 1917,<sup>7</sup> a broken combination of the English language and French pronunciation is used by Baptiste, a French-Canadian, to expound a private theory of laid-on education. This theory, based on the idea of freedom of expression of spontaneous spiritual values, is implicitly linked to his description of the qualities of a machine-made ax-helve

"You give her one good crack, she's snap raght off.  
 Den Where's your hax-ead flying t'rough de hair?  
 .....

Come on my house and I put you one in  
 What's las' awhile - good hick'ry what's grow crooked,  
 De second growt' I cut myself - tough, tough!"

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5. Ibid.

6. The poet's awareness of the importance of language is captured in Edward Thomas's review of *North of Boston*, "This is one of the most revolutionary books of modern times....These poems are revolutionary because they lack the exaggeration of rhetoric....Their language is free from the poetical words and forms that are the chief material of secondary poets....They depend not at all on objects commonly admitted to be beautiful". W.W. Robson, "The Achievement of Robert Frost", *Southern Review*, n.s., Vol. 2, Pt. 2 (Autumn, 1966), pp. 736-37.

7. Frost wrote to Louis Untermeyer on 15 June 1916, "I've been keeping under cover a couple of things called An Axe-helve and The Bonfire....One is old and the other is new". Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 553.

The French-Canadian's rough enunciation gives a feeling of power to his speech; it conveys an impression that he knows just what he is talking about when it comes to axe-helves. This strong emphasis of the natural over the artificial in relation to the helves later adds weight to a personal theory on education, although it is left up to the reader to fathom the connection,

Whatever school and children and our doubts  
Of laid-on education had to do  
With the curves of his ax-helves...

Similarly, it requires patience on the part of the poem's narrator, who initially suspects that Baptiste has "Something to sell" before he gains an inkling of his neighbour's real intention. A melancholy concern is implicit in the poem that more people do not possess such patience when listening to others.

Like his Transcendentalist antecedents, Frost was conscious of the potential for an individual to lead a rich and spiritually rewarding life if he understood the importance of listening to ideas for the feeling behind them, rather than dismissing them because a speaker finds it necessary to express himself in an indirect or contrary way. Frustration at man's instinctive reticence is reflected in Emerson's words that "Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright".<sup>8</sup> The words "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds"<sup>9</sup> stress the same writer's concern for the need to violate personal spiritual beliefs in order to obtain a clearer understanding and sympathy with others. This need for mental flexibility within the restrictions of a material universe as expounded by Emerson was of prime interest to Frost.

The uncertainties of human relationships leave little scope for the absoluteness that invariably accompanies a monist vision of life. Not that Frost thought that one should voluntarily suffer, like Aesop's donkey, the harsh consequences of being unable to make a choice between two alternatives; but often there exists no clear way to follow and sometimes it is better to try to accumulate more relevant facts before a decision is made, rather than ~~be~~ mindlessly<sup>to</sup> inherit a dogma from the past.

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8. Emerson, op.cit., p. 45.

9. Ibid., p. 38.

Frost sadly acknowledged that all dogmas and established social systems, because of a necessary rigid consistency, interfere with man's direct or intuitive awareness of his fellows. Such intuition was seen to be imperative if the harmful effect of a formal intellectual training was to be remedied. Support for intuition over reason, the individual over society, was originally begun by the Transcendentalists as a reaction against eighteenth-century rationalism, with its confining religious orthodoxy that governed the society of New England at the time. More a cast of thought than a rigid and systematic philosophy, the Transcendental movement followed the belief that the instinctive, the mystical, could provide the spiritual satisfaction absent in a society nourished on cold intellectualism.

The idea of establishment of order by means of mutual co-operation among men and employing a free sharing of human experience, was considered by the Transcendentalists the greatest human good. As a conviction this was opposed to the sterile rationalism and close-fisted conservatism of the earlier Unitarians that arose from a too-close adherence to set works of philosophy and religion. Frost agreed that limited human experience in a material cosmos alone would not provide the joy of solutions to metaphysical problems; he was also aware that experience is a valuable thing to have in order to achieve a smoother life style. Unfortunately there is no easy way to gain such experience; thus there are no spiritual diviners in Frost's early poetry. Once experience is gained he shows that there is no easy way to communicate it to others.

The Unitarians' approach to human nature, with their insistence on combining Arminianism with rigid intellectual discipline, held no appeal for Frost. Like Emerson, Frost placed no qualifications on the idea of self-reliance and unlike Alcott (the first of the Transcendentalists to preach self-reliance), did not compromise between an individual's spiritual freedom and the dictates of a society based on material values.

By adopting the dualistic concept of "mutual reaction of thought and life, to make thought solid, and life wise"<sup>10</sup> Frost again followed Emerson in the belief that by this man could help eliminate obstacles

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10. Frederic I. Carpenter, *American Literature and the Dream* (New York, 1955), p. 39.

to communication. In many of the early poems characters are placed in situations where they attempt to use material objects, such as mountains, walls, or axe-helves, to act as catalysts for the expression of an idea. It is a laborious business, however, and the poet was pessimistic about his chance of success. Often, as in the case of Baptiste's axe-helve, symbols effectively stimulate the narrator's thoughts, though sometimes the material object is not obviously related to the idea it provokes. The object generates a notion in the mind of one who wants to communicate, as does the wall in "Mending Wall" from *North of Boston*, or it represents to a listener qualities inherent in the person who is employing it as a means to achieve communication, as does the axe-helve in "The Ax-Helve".

The narrator's association of Baptiste with the flexible qualities of the natural axe-helve, and Baptiste's belief in the strength of human experience fashioned from love and home-living, as opposed to the brittleness of laid-on education, is more subtly expressed. There is a feeling that one who can "make a short job long / For the love of it, and yet not waste time either", must be worth listening to. The convictions of the French-Canadian gain strength because the natural qualities he believes in are inherent in a tangible object and hence more readily understood,

He liked to have it slender as a whipstock,  
Free from the least knot, equal to the strain  
Of bending like a sword across the knee.

Nevertheless, a doubt remains as to whether Baptiste had the ability to plan to communicate his meaning so vividly by way of the symbol; with curves that "were no false curves / Put on it from without", or whether it was merely used unscrupulously to bring the narrator to his house

To leave it to, whether the right to hold  
Such doubts of education should depend  
Upon the education of those who held them?

In his use of the helve imagery, Frost owes much to Thoreau, a debt he readily acknowledged in a letter written on 15 July 1915 to Walter Richard Eaton, associate professor at the Yale School of Drama, "I'm glad of all the unversified poetry of Walden...as in the beautiful passage about the French-Canadian woodchopper. The last alone with some things in Turgeneff must have had a good deal to do with



the making of me."<sup>11</sup> Another idea dealt with in the final chapter of *Walden* is echoed in "The Ax-Helve". This occurs where Thoreau wrote of an artist from the city of Kouroo who was determined to make a perfect staff, "The material was pure, and his art was pure; how could the result be other than wonderful?"<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the largest debt Frost owes Thoreau comes with the poem's final image of the helve as a snake, given in Baptiste's unusual speech, "'See how she's cock her head!'" Doyle, among others, sees the helve as a comparison to the serpent of the Garden of Eden.<sup>13</sup> He sees it as a symbol of evil; such evil is totally alien to Baptiste's character. Frost probably obtained the image of the helve as a snake from "The Ponds" chapter in *Walden*, where Thoreau describes losing an axe through the ice of a pond. Upon looking through the ice he saw the axe twenty-five feet down "standing on its head, with its helve erect gently swaying to and fro".<sup>14</sup>

The words of "Self-Reliance" that "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" and "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist",<sup>15</sup> probably stirred Frost in his investigation of the communication theme as much as his melancholy concern for man's spiritual separation from his fellows. Neither Frost nor Emerson attempted to make their individualism as literal as Thoreau's. Both saw the necessity of being individual in the mental as well as the physical dimension and did not avoid speaking forcefully on the subject, as Emerson's words prove, "What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness."<sup>16</sup>

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11. Thompson, *Letters*, p. 182.

12. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: or Life in the Woods and On The Duty of Civil Disobedience* (1859) (New York, 1960), p. 217.

13. John Robert Doyle, Jr., *The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis* (New York, 1962), p. 132.

14. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 122.

15. Emerson, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

In essence Frost maintained a dual view of the human conditions of individuality and universality much along the lines of the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of human nature as expounded by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Frost's brand of individualism, however, diversified in two directions: positively, with the self-reliant immersions of man in daily life; and negatively, with total aversion to anything that smacked of the rigid intellectualism born of formal learning. Frost further differed from Nietzsche in his belief that the forces of individuality and universality are more usually paralleled or opposed than fused. He followed the melancholy line that it is impossible to have a mingling of the forces of individuality and universality since one tends to detract from the other. Man in a materialist society, therefore, must sacrifice part of his individuality if he wants to attune to others on a common plane.

Protagonists in the poetry of communication are repeatedly made to pay the price of their individualism by having to suffer the consequences of refusing to bow to the dictates of a rigid society. The inability to obtain a close and satisfying spiritual relationship with others is one of the more important of these consequences. The difficulty of balancing the desire to maintain personal integrity with the need to compromise one's personal views in order to enjoy the spiritual satisfaction resulting from the exchange of ideas contributed greatly to Frost's gloomy outlook.

In "The Ax-Helve", most of Baptiste's problems with the communication of his ideas on education emanate from this inability to sacrifice a degree of personal integrity, something which the narrator, a schoolteacher with strong ideas on formal education, is able to do. The narrator's interest reflects the poet's own concern with the value of formal education. It was, as he put it, like a monkey's fascination for a basket of snakes, "I hate academic ways. I fight everything academic. The time we waste in trying to learn academically - the talent we starve with academic teaching!"<sup>17</sup> Such a distrust of institutionalism is really an extension of Emerson's scepticism about all that which is highly ordered and by which man is governed. Institutionalism, Frost felt, is born of a society based on materialist values. He considered it a sad fact of life in that it restricts man

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17. Thompson, *Years of Triumph*, p. 67.

from the free indulgence of his will. This mutual concern for "education at the college of fools" originally took root in the writings of an academically disgruntled Carlyle and grew with the early American nationalist writers who judged formal education as guilty of keeping the poet on the plane of English literary diction. It is in the realm of literature that man can best express his visions of how he sees things or wants things to be. If this is strangled during the early formative period by a narrow education, man will never be able to express his spiritual instincts. The early nationalist writers, then, preempted Frost in recognizing the usefulness of the natural American idiom as a medium for communication of spiritual feelings.

In "The Ax-Helve" the poet put his knowledge of the natural pragmatism of the back-country Yankee to good use by embodying it in the character of Baptiste who becomes the personification of Frost's poetic ideal for the uncomplicated conveyance of an individual point of view. The French-Canadian, in an anonymous role, also serves a poetic purpose in "Mending Wall" where he plays the part of a onetime neighbour, Napoleon Guay.<sup>18</sup> Any complications of autobiography, however, are effectively countered by objectivity of presentation. Similarly, the sentimentality which tends to accompany personal viewpoints is effectively checked by the roughness of the Yankee speech rhythm.

The merits and demerits of a scholarly education as dealt with in reflection by the narrator of "The Ax-Helve", are also weighed in the section of "The Death of the Hired Man" where Warren describes the conversations between Silas and the college boy, Wilson. In this case the issue is more complex and both subjects argue their point of view from a spiritual rather than a materialist basis. Where Silas stands for practical knowledge,

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18. The poet said, "In New England we share line fences. Carol on one occasion told me that he had kept his share of the fence religiously but that his neighbor wouldn't do anything for his share.... Too bad he didn't have a French-Canadian neighbor to help mend wall, and have a good time doing it." Mertins, *op.cit.*, p. 231. By using a French-Canadian as a subject of his verse, Frost effectively refutes Amy Lowell's claim that he "does not deal with the changed population, with the Canadians and the Finns who are taking up the deserted farms." *Ibid.*, p. 150.

"He said he couldn't make the boy believe  
 He could find water with a hazel prong -  
 Which showed how much good school had ever done him."

Wilson favours formal scholarship. Both respect each other, but neither will amend his view. A sad note sounds in the poem with Silas's inability to express his inherent admiration for the college boy, even if he does consider him "'daft / On education.'" The hired man's failing is shown to be a universal phenomenon by Mary, who says "'I sympathize. I know just how it feels / To think of the right thing to say too late.'"

Silas would like another chance to intimate his values; as Warren muses "'He thinks if he could have another chance / To teach him how to build a load of hay—.'" But finite man rarely gets a second chance to express deep emotional feelings. The opportunity must be taken as it presents itself; unfortunately, as Frost shows, all too often the moment is forever lost.

In presenting relationships of human beings to each other and to society, the poet recognized the ambivalence that penetrated deep into American society regarding the encouragement of sterile scholarship on one hand, and sensationalism on the other. With this knowledge came a refusal to bow to either extreme. Frost wanted to record in verse what his dual vision perceived, whether the world accepted it or not. Perhaps it was this refusal to compromise in his art that led, in part, to the initial non-acceptance of his early poetry by American publishers who were used to being fed on material from either one of the two existing literary trends. This critical rebuff naturally served only to exacerbate the traditional pessimism of the rural New Englander that was already a part of the nature of the farmer-poet.

The characters of much of the early poetry range from those who witness others who fail to associate themselves with either their surroundings or their society, to those who are blissfully unaware until it is too late of their own failure in this respect. The paradoxical need for man to express himself, yet his reluctance to do so, is captured by the poet who gives his reader a glimpse of the profound inner turmoil that can occur within any individual. Such an inner struggle is found in "Love and a Question". The structure of this particular poem Frost based on the Scottish ballad "Jamie Douglas",

but the story is derived from a personal encounter with a passing tramp. The episode led to the poet wondering how one draws the line between the principle of charity in a Christian society and the individual's right to privacy. In the poem the specific plea for shelter for the night is balanced against a young man's desire for idyllic separation.

At the time of writing of "Love and a Question" Frost was concerned with the exploitation of the common man by the corrupt practices of an encroaching industrialist community. The subject of the poem, therefore, is specifically made free of material corruption. He is not the type to worry about giving bread, money, a prayer for the poor - or even a curse for the rich. By not being rich himself the young man's generosity, when viewed in a material perspective, seems doubly commendable. The question the poet asks, however, is, is this enough. What happens when an appeal for aid requires some spiritual sacrifice to be made instead of a token material one? In the case presented the choice lies clearly between the bridegroom's right to privacy on his wedding night and a tramp's need for shelter for the night,

But whether or not a man was asked  
To mar the love of two  
By harboring woe in the bridal house,  
The bridegroom wished he knew.

The level of the stranger's appeal is lifted to the spiritual plane by his asking "with the eyes more than the lips / For a shelter for the night", thus conjuring up memories of the anonymous traveller who was the resurrected Jesus appealing to his apostles. In reply to the tramp's appeal for shelter the groom stares at the sky, but sees only the romantic picture of his bride stamped deep in his soul, "Her face rose-red with the glowing coal / And the thought of the heart's desire."

In "Friendship", Emerson wrote optimistically that "We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken... the whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether."<sup>19</sup> Frost, although less idealistic than Emerson, also believed that there always remains more unsaid in an individual than can adequately be put into words.

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19. Emerson, op.cit., p. 124.

Despite the desperate desire of most persons to express themselves to those who are close, the threat of the spiritual vexation suffered, because of beliefs appearing distorted when put into words, deters many from even attempting to relate.

In "Love and a Question" the bridgeroom cannot transfer his intimate thoughts to the stranger, but instead must stare down the "weary road" as if to find in material surroundings a solution to an unanswerable spiritual dilemma. Because his mind is filled with his own needs, the young man will never come near to deciding in favour of the tramp. He is also a victim of the Christian society in which he was raised and this prevents him from rejecting the appeal. As is usual with Frost's early verse, it is left up to the reader to decide what he would do; he is merely made aware of the young man's predicament.

The dramatic element is of great importance in Frost's poetry of communication. It makes the reader pay attention to a poem's speaker rather than to its author. This is vital if poems such as "Love and a Question", that deal with personal topics, are to have universal appeal. Often the dramatic component is embodied in the pastoral form in accord with the poet's keen interest in the classical authors who helped ground him in the convention of the eclogue, a form most suited to conveying his own rural interests.<sup>20</sup>

But whereas early classical authors tended to write romantic verses of escape, where reality rarely intruded, Frost presented a starkly realistic portrayal of the rural world and the effect it had in causing a duality in his poetic purpose,

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20. A letter from Elinor Frost to Mrs Romig on 4 February 1935 supports this, "He studied no English literature - nothing but Greek and Latin for four years". Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 509. While a student at Dartmouth the poet also remarked that it was "something in the *Georgics* of Virgil [that] showed him the way, confirmed him in his poetic purpose." Mertins, *op.cit.*, p. 50.

There had been days of terrific strain on the farm. You see, I can manage a poem in the singular very well and not feel the strain, not too much. In the midst of my work at the farm I could handle such a task. Sometimes one would grow out of an idea, leaving me relaxed. At other times the idea would produce a second growth, forcing itself as a Siamese twin on its predecessor. That would bring trouble of spirit, and more than likely right in harvest time....After all, what editor would buy even a first poem, much less a second growth, the second growth which brought all the trouble on!<sup>21</sup>

The rural world, then, is an integral part of the farmer-poet's thought process. It is a prime example of material surroundings having a direct influence on the mental process. Frost was able to utilize the uncontrived symbols common to his rural home. These symbols are, nevertheless, rich and complex in meaning.

Frost was not a successful poet because he wrote about nature or because he lived on a farm,<sup>22</sup> but because he was concerned with men, particularly those he knew personally and about whom he wrote, "At first I disliked the Yankees. They were cold. They seemed narrow to me. I could not get used to them."<sup>23</sup> Gradually, however, he came to see his subjects as a curious people who were apprehensive about expressing their private feelings. They were not a peasant social class, but a group of men and women who followed the cult of independence and endured, with laconic piety, the spiritual adversity that accompanied it.

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21. Ibid., pp. 81-82.

22. The poet liked to cultivate the image of an independent farmer and in later years claimed "First and last I'm a farmer, and I am always embarrassed when people call me a poet." Ibid., p. 310. In his early years, however, he was unable to take comfort in his lack of ability to be a self-sufficient farmer, "They [Frost's farmer neighbours] would see me starting out to work at all hours of the morning—approaching noon, to be more explicit....Certainly I couldn't be a farmer and act like this. Getting in to the field at noon! What a farmer!" Ibid., p. 78.

23. Quoted by Gardner Jackson in a newspaper article entitled, "'I Will Teach Only When I Have Something To Tell'", *Boston Sunday Globe*, Editorial Section (23 November, 1924), p. 3. From Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 49.

"Mending Wall" is just such a poem that deals with a study of men in a farm setting. Elements of the reflective lyric are combined with those of the dramatic narrative in this "nature" poem from *North of Boston* that involves itself with the difficulties of spiritual correlation. Episodes past are set in apposition to present events; a sense of the material symbol is enmeshed with emotional and intellectual urgency in a search into individual experience. Part of the dualism between mind and body is shown to consist of internal experience (reflection) and external experience (sensation). These qualities are juxtaposed in "Mending Wall" to provide a balanced examination of a complex sense of interrelations between inner and outer man.

In "Mending Wall" two barriers are present: the physical stone wall, and the stubborn mental attitudes of the two neighbours. The stone wall also serves as a material symbol that unites the natural image to the intangible idea the symbol provokes. As Thoreau stated in his *Journal*, "Natural objects and phenomena are the original symbols or types which express our thoughts and feelings".<sup>24</sup>

Many years after writing this poem, Frost explained just how he had fallen upon the symbol of the stone wall, 'I wrote the poem "Mending Wall" thinking of the old stone wall that hadn't been mended in several years and which must be in a terrible condition. I wrote that poem in England when I was very homesick for my old wall in New England.'<sup>25</sup> Accuracy of detail of such symbols, of course, is not alone enough to constitute a good poem. What is important is how they stimulate the minds of the characters of the poems. Only in man can these polarities of spirit and matter be juxtaposed; for if mind and body interact, so too should the spirit react with its material surroundings. With regard to the degree of inaction, the poet seems to concur with the more moderate of the parallelists who postulate that body (matter) can have an effect on the spirit (mind), but the

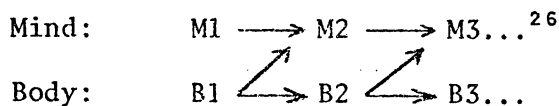
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24. F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York, 1941), p. 83.

25. Stated in a talk given by Frost at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn. (19 April, 1936). From Thompson, *Early Years*, pp. 432-33.



effect is not reversible.



"Mending Wall" does not simply present an iconoclastic hater of custom at variance with a conservative traditionalist. It soon becomes clear that the narrator of the poem, who sees his stereo-type neighbour as a stone-age savage for following custom unquestioningly, is himself not against building walls; he is only against building them for no logical reason,

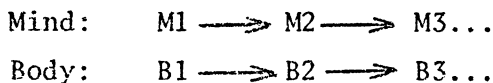
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence.

About the neighbour's axiom of "'Good fences make good neighbours'",<sup>27</sup> the narrator wonders, "'Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.'"

It is, in fact, the narrator who informs his neighbour that it is time to rebuild the wall. The necessity of having a wall "'Where there are cows'" is linked with the mental stimulation that for him is the product of physical labour. As a farmer Frost knew that sometimes barriers are needed, therefore the irresponsible destruction wrought by hunters who leave "not one stone on a stone", is condemned. Implicit in the narrator's condemnation of unnecessary barrier builders and wanton destroyers of what can be allegorically seen as the privacy of the individual, is the feeling that it is vital to constantly re-examine moral values. If re-examination is not done, man is in danger of losing touch with the rationale of his actions. The need for realism, however, developed through accurate descriptions of nature, does not mean that Frost sacrificed the other, idealistic side of his vision. He

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26. As distinct from the extreme parallelists, who say that mind and body have no effect on each other



27. This saying can be found in *Blum's Farmers' and Planters' Almanac* issued annually since 1828. See 1850 issue p. 13, 1861 issue, p. 11. From Addison Barker, "Good Fences Make Good Neighbours", *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 64 (October-December, 1951), p. 421.

believed that failure of communication between his characters was often caused by their excessive idealism. This idealism caused them to drive for goals which, because they were purely ideals, were always unattainable to mortals. Often, as in the case of the narrator in "Mending Wall", man is unable to transform his thoughts into action and is torn between the desire to expound on an ideal and the mechanical habit of releasing mental frustrations by physical labour; such a release, however, invariably proves unsatisfying since it is merely a substitute.

The poet evolved his own brand of transcendental idealism as a way of regaining a meaning in life after suffering a loss of faith in traditional religious teachings. In "Circles" Emerson, who earlier had an empty experience similar to Frost's, attempted to explain the degrees of idealism which could develop from this loss of faith, "There are degrees in idealism. We learn first to play with it academically, as the magnet was once a toy. Then we see in the heyday of youth and poetry that it may be true, that it is true in gleams and fragments. Then, its countenance waxes stern and grand, and we see that it must be true. It now shows itself ethical and practical."<sup>28</sup> Where the Transcendentalist automatically linked idealism with the unvarying pragmatism of the material world, Frost would not dismiss his perceptions of the everlasting ambivalent wistfulness caused by those who continue to hold ideals even though they are unable to express them. This belief in the spiritual ideal prevented Frost from completely accepting Darwin's theories founded on inflexible scientific fact. The narrator of "Mending Wall" in this light seems to be attacking the same stone wall that Dostoevsky wrote of when he condemned Darwin for letting crass practicality impinge on man's spiritual freedoms, "What stone wall, do you say? Why, the stone wall constituted of the laws of nature, of the deductions of learning, and of the science of mathematics. When, for instance, people of this kind seek to prove to you that you are descended from an ape, it is of no use to you to frown; you must accept what they say".<sup>29</sup>

A wistfulness emerges in "Mending Wall", then, that is against the confining reality of facts which are often used out of context. A

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28. Emerson, *op.cit.*, p. 199.

29. Sidney Finkelstein, *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature* (New York, 1965), p. 47.

universal yearning for harmony within mankind is evident and finds its place in the mind of the poet along with the ingrained Yankee practicality. The result is an ambivalence in his poetic purpose.

Ambivalence is manifest in "Mending Wall" with its juxtaposition of humour and scepticism. As in "A Hundred Collars", the humour is used only as a means of accepting an unpleasant reality. Confusion is avoided over the role of humour in the early poems with the poet's remarks, "Many sensitive natures have plainly shown by their style that they took themselves lightly in self-defense. They are the ironists....I own any form of humor shows fear and inferiority. Irony is simply a kind of guardedness....Humor is the most engaging cowardice."<sup>30</sup>

There were two types of irony that Frost could have employed to incorporate the humour into his verse. The first and most familiar kind is simple irony, where the apparently true statement is contradicted by the actual state of affairs. The second kind is double irony, which is less familiar and involves a situation where two equally valid views cancel each other out. The second method was favoured by Frost because it came closer to capturing his own ambivalence.<sup>31</sup> The better of the poems of communication, have this ironic consciousness that allows common and innocent things to be juxtaposed with a melancholy aspect. The effect is for a more poignant edge on the verse for the reader who sees through the laconic quality to the inner fumings of anger and frustration; but it is an anger and frustration that is rigidly controlled as is the traditional New England way.

The aversion Frost felt at "putting up a holler in verse" over having to face the dual enemies of the outer lack of response and the inner frustration caused Amy Lowell to misinterpret the bitterly ironic "A Hundred Collars" as "a laborious attempt at humour."<sup>32</sup> What the

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30. Untermeyer, *Letters*, p. 166.

31. Frost had a "temperamental sympathy" with the way his contemporary Robinson handled grief in his poetry. According to Barry he claimed that Robinson's ironic humour was 'a gallant and stoic defence as he reached down to "immediate woes"; not for him to bleed his heart out self-pityingly all over poetry's pages.' Barry, *Robert Frost*, p. 14.

32. Amy Lowell, *American Poetry*, p. 125. Lowell was not the only one to misinterpret the poem, as the following quotation shows, 'I have heard audiences of the most sober-minded citizens punctuate "A Hundred Collars" with chuckling.' Untermeyer, *American Poetry*, p. 29.

critic missed was the distress felt by the naturally gregarious money-collector, Lafe, at not being accepted into society because of his size and the onerous nature of his job. Pathos permeates the portrayal of this harmless human being whose only escape from loneliness comes in drink. Lafe is a highly sensitive man, who is self-conscious of his size,

"I've been a-choking like a nursery tree  
When it outgrows the wire band of its name tag.  
I blamed it on the hot spell we've been having.  
'Twas nothing but my foolish hanging back,  
Not liking to own up I'd grown a size."

He attempts to combine his money collecting with socializing and his horse Jemina turns in automatically at every house even if there is no errand, because as Lafe says, "'She thinks I'm sociable. I maybe am.'" The seasons affect the big man deeply, as does the topography of the land; it is this human feeling that captures the sympathies of the reader.

In contrast Dr. Magoon, a democrat "If not at heart, at least on principle", is unable to respond to anyone with anything but suspicion. Forced into a narrow world of speciality by way of his academic learning he has to seem "Preoccupied with formidable mail", to escape the embarrassment of being unable to talk with old friends at Lancaster. Such was the poet's belief that communication within a society is often confined to a class or professional group. When Lafe discovers that Magoon is a doctor he comes out with the jovial remark, "'Professor Square-the-circle-till you're tired?'" The joke carries a deeper meaning, however, in that squaring the circle was a preoccupation of ancient alchemists who became involved in the problem of trying to equate the two great cosmic opposites of heaven (circle) and earth (square). The qualification "'till you're tired'" implies that the problem is unsolvable and thus the joke takes on a more sombre air.

An ingrained fear of strangers, stemming from Magoon's ignorance of those he does not have professional dealings with, is highlighted when he misses his train at Woodsville Junction "a place of shrieks and wandering lamps" and is forced to seek shelter at the town's one hotel. Such fear of strangers through ignorance is not confined to Magoon. The hotel clerk points to a dozing man who turned down the

offer to share a room because "He was afraid of being robbed or murdered." Even Lafe feels this fear when he says to the clerk "Show him this way. I'm not afraid of him. / I'm not so drunk I can't take care of myself."

The different physical sizes of the two men, brought out in the open when Lafe discusses his collar size,

"Number eighteen this is. What size do you wear?"  
The Doctor caught his throat convulsively.  
"Oh-ah-fourteen-fourteen"

merely accentuate the impossibility of people with totally different life styles ever reaching a common exchange. At first it seems that Magoon is offensive by refusing the money collector's generous offer of his old cast-off collars, but on reflection, how many, like Magoon, would also refuse a similar offer? That it is natural for man to decline spontaneous offers of friendship from strangers, rather than risk committing himself to situations where he must lay his sensitivities open to the harshness of a material world, gives a melancholy aspect to Frost's poetry of communication. On the other hand (and this holds the greatest pathos) is the disquieting example of those like Lafe who have tried and failed. The message is that it may be better to suffer in silence than to try to communicate at all.

In contrast to "A Hundred Collars", which deals almost entirely in verbal exchange to make its point, concrete symbols, similar to those used in "Mending Wall", have a very real effect in stimulating the mental processes of the characters of "The Mountain". Considered by the poet as one of his most perfect in form, this poem contains intricate and precise descriptions of landscape to form the background to a tale of an irrational human desire to wonder at the supernatural. The action involves a traveller who meets a local inhabitant under the shadow of "Hor", a mountain that dominates all who live within its shadow. "Hor" is described in terms of opposing contrasts,

Great granite terraces in sun and shadow,  
Shelves one could rest a knee on getting up—  
With depths behind him sheer a hundred feet—

After a brief discussion the taciturn farmer informs the traveller of a magic spring, "Warm in December, cold in June", which can be found at

the mountain's summit. The natural caution and reticence of the speakers are artistically conveyed by constant intrusions into their conversation by the poet's colourful descriptions of the surrounding landscape such as

Pasture ran up the side a little way,  
And then there was a wall of trees with trunks;  
After that only tops of trees, and cliffs  
Imperfectly concealed among the leaves.  
A dry ravine emerged from under boughs  
Into the pasture.

An important feature of this poem is that it demonstrates that humdrum and commonplace elements of life are frequently interlaced with sensitive feelings, and that a person only develops within a community if he can convey these sensitivities to others who understand them. All human values, both positive and negative, are shown to be defined either in terms of individual to individual, or in relation to a person and his immediate society. Man, then, must commit himself to the give and take of emotional intercourse if he is to achieve the satisfaction that mutual understanding of sensitivities can bring.

Little happens by way of explicit action in "The Mountain", and on the surface it seems hard to justify it being termed a dramatic poem. Its force, however, lies partially in the guarded awareness and respect the two Yankees have for each other's integrity. Theirs is a mutual understanding of the practicalities of life which to them must temper spiritual ebullience. Yet the poem has a melancholy flavour brought out by man neglecting to satisfy his inner curiosity owing to material concerns. The local man says "'I've always meant to go / And look myself, but you know how it is'", then adds with Yankee logic, "'T'wouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it.'" The visitor agrees with "'I shouldn't climb it if I didn't want to—/ Not for the sake of climbing...'"

Sheer practicality, bred of a material culture, is what prevents the men from indulging their spiritual fancies. Instead they seem content to rationalize about the truth of the tale,

"I don't suppose the water's changed at all.  
You and I know enough to know it's warm  
Compared with cold, and cold compared with warm.  
But all the fun's in how you say a thing."

In the last line Frost, like Thoreau, who maintained that "The name of a thing may easily be more important than the thing itself",<sup>33</sup> indicates that the vitality of the American idiom can be a valuable asset when it comes to overcoming inertia born of practicality.

Like W.S. Merwin's mountain, "Hor" and its "magic" spring are rich in metaphysical association in that they reach, despite the Yankees' attempts at rationalization, beyond physical explanation. Yet these natural symbols are not loaded with doomful significance as were Hardy's. By means of clear statement and simple imagery, Frost provides for the coherent expression of his verse. Three dimensional impressions of natural phenomena are achieved by graphic description and give body to a poetic vision which sought to interpret a dual perception of spiritual and sensual experience. The imagery transcends ornamentality by contributing directly to the poem's meaning.

Where the Transcendentalists found the symbol to be the basic unit for expressing knowledge, Frost went a step further by showing by example that the uncomplicated natural symbol was superior when it came to communicating a complex poetic insight. Like the axe-helve, the symbols come to adopt a magic life of their own;<sup>34</sup> for example, the mountain, "Hor", is seen as a living thing,

The mountain held the town as in a shadow.  
I saw so much before I slept there once:  
I noticed that I missed stars in the west,  
Where its black body cut into the sky.

The symbols, however, never lose their aura of realism. As the poet said, 'Some of the poems combine many incidents, many people and places, but all are real. Take the mountain the man "worked around the foot of all his life". That wasn't one, but several mountains. But it was just

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33. Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca and London, 1973), p. 169.

34. Both Emerson and Thoreau used water images often and Emerson, influenced by Greek writers, found that Thales envisioned a dualism between energy and matter. Hence the reason for identifying water (matter) with life. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, William H. Gilman, et al., ed., Pt. III (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), III, p. 363. From Nina Bym, "From Metaphysics to Metaphor: The Image of Water in Emerson and Thoreau", *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 5 (Summer, 1966), p. 231.

as real for all its being composite.'<sup>35</sup> According to Frost, the

Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter, to make a final unity. That is the greatest attempt that ever failed. We stop just short there. But it is the height of poetry, the height of all thinking, the height of all poetic thinking that attempts to say matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter.<sup>36</sup>

Concern that even seemingly communicable meanings are tinged with the colour of the uncommunicable made the poet increasingly determined not to echo contemporary symbolists like Elliot<sup>37</sup> by abandoning the familiar ways of speaking and adopting complex imagery. Frost did not search for the startling; instead he stood somewhat alone among his contemporaries by clinging to a communicative speech that worked towards a philosophic meaning. No good reason could be seen for substituting the natural, the simple, and the idiomatic, for the fashionable, intellectual, erudite, and esoteric verse that enthroned obscurity as a virtue. Frost's belief in the need for straight-forward expression was summed up by Pound when he wrote of the style found in *North of Boston*, "This man has the good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing, the thing as he sees it", and "he is without sham and without affectation".<sup>38</sup>

In the dramatic poetry there is always a gulf between the subject and the poet as observer. But the poetry does not suffer from this separation of subject and idea. Desired objectivity can only be achieved if the poet speaks through a variety of masks as the detached observer of his own emotions. Because of the sudden change in emphasis from the subjective in *A Boy's Will* to the objective in *North of Boston*, much controversy exists over what effect the English sojourn had on the early verse. (Frost sailed to England during September 1912 aboard the SS *Parisian* just before Harriet Monroe's publication *Poetry: A*

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35. Mertins, op.cit., p. 72.

36. Robert Frost, "Education in Poetry", a talk to the alumni council of Amerst. Thompson, *Years of Triumph*, p. 364.

37. When Amy Lowell tried to get Frost to join the Imagist School, he remarked unkindly to Louis Untermeyer, "I don't believe she is anything but a fake". Untermeyer, *Letters*, p. 106.

38. Gerber, op.cit., p. 28.



*Magazine of Verse* appeared in October 1912, to mark the beginning of the American poetic revival of the same date.<sup>39</sup>

The England Frost visited before World War I was full of idealistic movements at odds with the realities of life, a fact the contemporary Georgian poets failed to realize. Nevertheless, the visitor's rapid change in poetic style when moving from the subjective *A Boy's Will* to the more mature and objective books of *North of Boston* and *Mountain Interval* indicates that there was some degree of influence from the local literary figures with whom he mixed. Wilfred Gibson, one of these associates wrote,

I doubt if Frost's visit to England had any influence on the essential quality of his work; but I do think it helped to give him reassurance as a writer. One of the proudest moments of my life was when I heard him declare to a Philadelphia audience that I was the first person who had given him any encouragement to write poetry! I suspect this was a friendly exaggeration; but I have little doubt that the sympathetic appreciation of such men as Lascelles Abercrombie and Thomas did much to stimulate his self-confidence.<sup>40</sup>

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39. In line with the poet's contradictory character, many reasons are advanced as to why the trip to England was made. The poet said that Elinor first suggested the migration by wanting to "live under thatch." Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 390. In a note to Bartlett, Frost mentioned that a letter from the British Consul in New York about the low cost of living in England had convinced him to migrate. Munson, *op.cit.*, p. 60. The poet also stated that the trip was taken over the toss of a coin! "We'll toss for it," I said, when decision had not been arrived at. We tossed and England won — or lost, lost I guess.' Mertins, *op.cit.*, p. 102. Then again, in a letter to Louis Untermeyer on 16 May 1915, the poet wrote, "I went to England to write and be poor without further scandals in the family." Untermeyer, *Letters*, p. 7. John Haines, a Gloucester solicitor and friend of Frost's, who occasionally sought to gather biographical detail on the poet remarked 'Robert Frost, as he told me once, came to England to get his poems published where "The Golden Treasury" had been, and I think what he chiefly got from England was just self-confidence.' Mertins, *op.cit.*, p. 131.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 139. On the subject of Georgian influence, Frost wrote to Amy Lowell on 22 October 1917, "I didn't meet Gibson till I was putting the last touches on *North of Boston* and I didn't meet Abercrombie till after the MS was in David Nutt's hands. It was the book that got me invited down to live with those fellows in the country. I had begun writing in 1905: I wrote the bulk of it in 1913....You see if any of my work was in danger of Gibsonian or Abercrombian influence it was what I wrote of *Mountain Interval* in 1914: *Birches* and *The Hill Wife* and *Putting in the Seed* and *The Sound of Trees*. Thompson, *Letters*, pp. 219-20.

Love of the English countryside and the pastoral form as displayed by the Georgians was similarly imbibed by Frost and added to his extensive appreciation of natural beauty. The common idiom of the Georgians, typically bucolic in its presentation of delicate emotion, together with their uncomplicated verse forms, helped the New Englander to rid himself of the nineteenth-century poetisms evident in *A Boy's Will*. Where the Georgians allowed themselves to go to the point of sentimental pastoralism, however, Frost was not satisfied with anything but complete realism for the presentation of his melancholy vision. The Georgians sang a dainty tune and moralized mildly<sup>41</sup> while Frost struck out at the inability of men to communicate amid a material world that had nothing in common with the pleasant weekend ruralism of his English contemporaries. It is true that together with Thomas, Gibson and Abercrombie, Frost nearly founded the "Neo-Lake School", but his sense of national identity forced him to speak out as an individual to create his own idiom amongst an established literary genre, much the same as Hemingway would later do in Paris.<sup>42</sup>

While living in England, the poet found himself among a timeless people and remarked "Perhaps the most precious quality of the life here was its continuity."<sup>43</sup> About the natives he wrote, "They were the curds and whey population of England - the remnants of the old Saxons, like the mountain whites of our American south, living with prejudices that were the accumulation of the years."<sup>44</sup> By living in old England Frost came to see the Yankees of New England more clearly. In poems like "The Code" he was able to present a more accurate picture of the tough independence of the Yankee hired man by comparing his fierce sense of pride to the ingrained subservience of the English rustic. In a letter to Ernest L. Silver on 23 February 1914, the poet described the

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41. Amy Lowell wrote of *Georgian Poetry 1819-1919* edited by Edward Marsh, "It is a profound labour to read this book. Not because, let me hastily say, there is nothing good in it, but because it is all so dreadfully tired." Amy Lowell, *Poetry and Poets* (1930) (New York, 1971), p. 123.

42. Amy Lowell put it succinctly when she wrote "good poets are not echoes, and never were, and that is the long and the short of it." *Ibid.*, p. 125.

43. Mertins, *op.cit.*, p. 118.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

terrible conditions of the English peasant, "The poor, I have made up my mind, have a hard hard time here, with no houses to live in and no wages to buy common food with."<sup>45</sup> Knowledge like this caused the poet to appreciate the need to stand up for oneself - even if poor. He also wondered to what extreme one should go in pursuit of spiritual integrity.

"The Code", first published in *Poetry* in February 1914, shows that spiritual beliefs ruthlessly and indiscriminately followed can cause men to grow apart through a lack of understanding of each other's values or codes. A degree of admiration, however, is implicitly expressed for someone who is prepared to maintain his principles irrespective of cost. The poem opens with a city-bred farmer being told laconically by his hired man that it was "'Something you just now said'" that caused another labourer to suddenly thrust his pitchfork into the ground and march home. In fact it was something said "'more than half an hour ago'", but as the hired man explains

"You didn't know. But James is one big fool.  
He thought you meant to find fault with his work.  
That's what the average farmer would have meant.  
James would take his time, of course, to chew it over  
Before he acted: he's just got round to act."

It seems that the speaker can differentiate between those whose moral conduct should be governed by a code and those whose conduct should not, owing to their ignorance of the existence of such a code. As illustration of this belief, the speaker digresses about how he was prepared to murder a local farmer named Sanders for a similar transgression. Sinisterly the hired man warns

"Never you say a thing like that to a man,  
Not if he values what he is. God, I'd as soon  
Murdered him as left out his middle name."

The speaker, like Silas of "The Death of the Hired Man", displays spiritual pride in his ability to build a load of hay. Warren says of Silas's ability,

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45. Thompson, *Letters*, p. 117.

"He bundles every forkful in its place,  
 And tags and numbers it for future reference,  
 So he can find and easily dislodge it  
 In the unloading. Silas does that well.  
 He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.  
 You never see him standing on the hay  
 He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself."

There is something pure and childlike in Silas's spiritual satisfaction in his labour and in his desire to teach the boy Wilson something so he would be "'Some good perhaps to someone in the world.'" This is in direct contrast to the use of such rural knowledge to attempt to suffocate an overly zealous employer, as is the case with the hired man in "The Code" who proudly says

"I'd built the load and knew right where to find it.  
 Two or three forkfuls I picked lightly round for  
 Like meditating, and then I just dug in  
 And dumped the rackful on him in ten lots."

Having dumped the hay, the hired man meticulously and professionally clears the rack before he drives off. It is only later that the reader learns that the farmer achieved a lucky escape. Yet Sanders took no retributive action because, as the hired man explains, "'He knew I did just right.'"

The feeling of communication and the sense of fellowship held by the rural Yankee came from his belonging to a common moral code, a code of the integrity of labour which had its roots in the very soil of New England. It is only natural that the earth, a continual element in the lives of the farmers, should form the basis for the formulation of moral values. In this specific morality a city-bred farmer is seen to be less spiritually sophisticated than his hired man. Spiritual sophistication, then, is shown to be relative to a particular community. This fact gives the poem a universal appeal since the farmer's experience could be that of anyone confronted by new social surroundings.

Primarily, "The Code" deals with a balance of contrary feelings. It shows that it may be desirable to possess an ethical code as an aid to communication yet the extremist action taken to uphold this code is questioned by the city-farmer's guarded comment, "'You took an awkward way.'" He implies that there are more civilized ways of dealing with such grievances. Ample evidence was available to the poet

of the rigid system of integrity in the relatively uncomplicated New England rural community. City dwellers, who have the advantage of a wider experience with which to attenuate the stringency of a sound code, unfortunately seem to lack the same degree of morality.

Weakness in the enforcement of a code, then, seems to lead to a direct loss of spiritual integrity. No attempt is made by the poet to judge which is the better case: to have a rigid code of spiritual values, or none at all. Instead, both cases serve to comment on each other. This balanced attitude and reluctance to make a decision in favour of equally viable approaches to a moral question typifies the style of Frost's early poetry in general. In terms of this theme of communication, however, Frost's dual vision was made the more melancholy by his frustrated awareness that the only way man could ease much of his spiritual vexation amid a material universe, where his time was limited, was by clear expression of his inner feelings to his fellows. They in turn must have the patience to listen and understand the spiritual needs of a fellow man. However, the poet, with his interesting blend of pessimism and practicality, knew that this could never be and therefore it was gregarious man's sad lot while on earth to suffer the torture of the misunderstood and the unaccepted.

## CHAPTER IV

### ISOLATION

A light he was to no one but himself

"An Old Man's Winter Night"

The struggle of man to dominate life, to assert and insist that life has no meaning outside himself where he comes in conflict with life, which he does at every turn; and his attempt to adapt life to his own needs, in which he doesn't succeed, is what I mean when I say that Man is the hero.<sup>1</sup>

Eugene O'Neill

1. From Williams, op.cit., p. 116.

In *The Lonely Crowd*, David Riesman regards the feeling of spiritual isolation as a "recent phenomenon" of a highly industrialized society. Such a feeling of alienation, however, can also be a product of the rugged individualism that makes men adopt either a defensive stance or a stoic attitude to all around them.<sup>2</sup> The stoic attitude was what mainly concerned Frost in his examination of the isolation of the rural folk of New England.

The literary period following the Civil War, sometimes known as the "American Enlightenment", marks the increasing tendency for American writers to concentrate on the actual workings of everyday society. It is as though this would miraculously conjure some improvement in man's temporal existence, and even ultimately ensure his future salvation. Although this optimistic modern trend had its influence on Frost, many of his ideas still had their genesis in a fatalistic Puritan inheritance. The poet was not restricted in his social outlook to either purely pessimistic or falsely hopeful leanings. There was no tendency to view social conditions as purely the outgrowth of intellectual commitments, Frost was interested not just in the social psychology of his subjects, but with the metaphysics of their existence: with the "metaphysics of the isolate".

Theodore Spencer defines the lonely person as "one whom circumstances have forced into a "suffering self-recognition of separateness"". <sup>3</sup> This definition fits Frost's characters who do not choose the creative solitude of the self-appointed hermit, but are insular, introspective, and self-destructive. Experience of those around him enabled Frost to witness the collapse of the spiritual will to survive that accompanied such rural isolation,<sup>4</sup> and the desperate attempts by the Yankees to continue to exist regardless of their unhappy circumstances.

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2. See Winifred L. Dunsenbury, *The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama* (Gainesville, 1960), pp. 1-7.

3. Theodore Spencer, "The Isolation of the Shakespearean Hero," *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 52 (1944), pp. 313-31. From *ibid.*, p. 4.

4. Amy Lowell wondered why peasants in isolated areas in Russia, Poland, Norway and Sweden were able to avoid going insane. What was so special about New Englanders? She concluded that "It is a question for the psychiatrist to answer". Lowell, *American Poetry*, p. 106.

It is easy to look upon society as, at best, an arbitrary institution that prevents men from colliding with, and destroying one another. This view is closely correlated to the poet's persistent melancholy broodings and disillusionment with his art. He endeavoured to surmount these obstacles by rationalizing his artistic disappointment as a punishment handed out by God for his supposed misdeeds in life. The product of the punishment was his inability to find an appropriate spiritual path to follow.

Isolation within a society can be caused by biological (death), psychological, and social factors. All of these factors apply to Frost's poetry of isolation where faith in non-material values is lacking, resulting in a brand of uneasy stoicism. Any lack of faith is partly because from the beginnings of his poetic career Frost was determined to confront the unpleasant realities of a material existence which he judged to be estranging and destroying, one by one, the population of the rural community of New England. For making people aware of the terrible things found in a material world, Trilling associates Frost's visions with that of Sophocles'.<sup>5</sup> Louis Untermeyer and others, however, deny that Frost was a poet of stark terror as Trilling suggests. According to Untermeyer, the darkness of Frost's poetic vision has been emphasized out of all proportion, 'Frost is by no means the dark naturalist that many suspect. Behind the mask of "grimness" which many of his critics have fastened upon him, there is a continual elfin pucker; a whimsical smile, a half-disclosed raillery glints beneath his most sombre monologues. His most concrete facts are symbols of spiritual values.'<sup>6</sup>

But there is nothing 'whimsical' about "The Vanishing Red", a tough-minded poem about racial hatred, intolerance and the brutality

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5. Trilling's association of Frost with Sophocles is probably nothing more than a reiteration of Coffin's original statement about Robinson, "He is the Sophocles of the vast private battles in the dark, the battles without trumpets and with none of the old gods looking on, battles with the issue of life or death, or, even worse, the issue of a modern kind of unkingly sanity or an unprophetic and purposeless insanity. He is a Sophocles of modern life". Robert P. Tristram Coffin, *New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson* (Baltimore, 1938), p. 146.

6. Louis Untermeyer, *Modern American Poetry* (New York, 1921), p. XXXV. From Gerber, *op.cit.*, p. 85.



of man against those from whom he feels alienated. No code exists in this poem to bind working men together; only the quickest and most savage are able to survive in the material surroundings of the mill-house where gentle spiritual feelings have no place.

"The Vanishing Red" with its coldly ironic title deals with hatred strong enough to cause physical revulsion. The situation is drawn where an Indian's "guttural exclamation of surprise" at the workings of the mill "Disgusted the Miller physically as coming / From one who had no right to be heard from." The poem is made more disquieting if the reader remembers that Frost as a young man worked in a millhouse and thus there is a fair chance that the story may be a true one. The emotions portrayed by the miller, however, are shown to be not just special to him, or to the situation presented, but to be common to mankind,

You can't get back and see it as he saw it,  
It's too long a story to go into now.  
You'd have to have been there and lived it.  
Then you wouldn't have looked on it as just a matter  
Of who began it between the two races.

With the above lines Frost succeeds in universalizing a senseless and inexplicable struggle, which otherwise would be in danger of being limited to the narrow interests of the protagonists. Of Copperhead sympathies himself (inherited from his father), Frost was familiar with feelings of racial intolerance. The cold-blooded action of the poem proves this beyond doubt when the miller takes the Indian down to show him the wheel pit,

Then he shut down the trap door with a ring in it  
That jangled even above the general noise,  
And came upstairs alone - and gave that laugh,  
And said something to a man with a meal sack  
That the the man with the meal sack didn't catch - then.  
Oh, yes, he showed John the wheel pit all right.

Although nothing explicit is indicated regarding the Indian's fate, there is little doubt as to how he met his end as a result of irrational emotional feelings that have succeeded in isolating two entire races. The action of the poem is mostly implied and together with the miller's harsh jest about the meal sack, adds greatly to the sinister atmosphere prevailing at the mill following the incident.

Irony lies in the understatement of the poem expressed by a poet who is able to say one thing but mean another; pathos lies in the fact that such an incident had to occur then, and will continue to occur, because of the spiritual isolation of the various races of mankind.

Typically, Frost displays unwillingness to side with the miller, or to attempt to pass judgement on him. He concentrates instead on giving a personal glimpse into a universal spiritual dispute with no beginning and no end. Underlying this struggle of racial turmoil is the threat that every individual feels when not being accepted into a majority group and when left spiritually isolated from his fellows.

Frost's art, then, is at neither of the extremes that Trilling or Untermeyer suggest, but is closer to being the product of his melancholy pondering on the problems of life in a material world; it is more of a lament than a terrifying judgement. At one moment the poet adopts the stance of a stoic, while at another he is as bitter and confused as many of his characters because he felt that his eyes had given him a "double image of everything". It has been said that the genius of tragedy and comedy are the same and Frost too was ambivalent as to what truly constituted comedy and what made tragedy. There is, for instance, nothing humorous about the miller's laugh after he had murdered the Indian, "If you like to call such a sound a laugh. / But he gave no one else a laughter's license."

Frost discovered that the comic-tragic mix could act as a double-edged blade to insert his melancholy vision of man's spiritual isolation in a material universe into the minds of his readers. Such a juxtaposition of black comedy with melancholy is commented upon by Amy Lowell when she discusses the absence of mirthful humour in Frost's early work, "And just because of the lack of it, just because its place is taken by irony, sardonic and grim, Mr Frost's book [*North of Boston*] reveals a disease which is eating into the vitals of our New England life, at least in its rural communities."<sup>7</sup> Lowell is accurate in so much as when Frost does allow black humour to blend into irony, it becomes even more like the grim and contemptuous type that was favoured by Hardy

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7. Amy Lowell, "North of Boston", *New Republic*, Vol. II (20 February, 1916), pp. 81-82. From Thompson, *Years of Triumph*, p. 4.

with whose earlier work Frost was acquainted. Like Hardy, Frost allowed the general air of, if not exactly pessimism, certainly melancholy nostalgia, to dominate his poetry of isolation. And although he was to pass the remark that his rival, Robinson, was the "prince of heartachers", "whose theme was unhappiness itself",<sup>8</sup> he was, in fact, close to summarizing his poetic vision and his own position as the master of concentrated pathos.

Much of the poet's personal feelings of isolation can be connected to his lack of confidence as an artist. This is particularly evident in *A Boy's Will*, "the most innocent and melancholy of Frost's books".<sup>9</sup> To William Stanley Braithwaite on 22 March 1915, the poet wrote of *A Boy's Will*, "The book is an expression of my life for the ten years from eighteen on when I thought I greatly preferred stocks and stones to people. The poems were written as I lived the life quite at the mercy of myself and not always happy."<sup>10</sup> Much of what Frost meant is illustrated in his short poem "Into My Own", which has as its gloss, "The Youth is persuaded that he will be rather more than less himself for having forsworn the world."

Attention must, of course, be focused on Frost's poetry rather than on its sources and influences. Nevertheless, many illuminating comparisons regarding the poetry of isolation can be drawn from the work of earlier writers with whom Frost was familiar, and from whom, perhaps, he drew inspiration. The debt owed to William Cullen Bryant, for instance, is greater than generally noted. In both his melancholy outlook, as well as his verse forms, Frost is to some extent Bryant's disciple. A preference for the American scenery, coupled with a questioning posture that fell just short of agnosticism, made Bryant, in poems like "To a Waterfowl", a poet who could capture the lonely feeling of a man linked with nature, believing that he too was guided by

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8. See Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Latham, *Selected Prose of Robert Frost* (New York, 1966), p. 62 and Cox, *op.cit.*, p. 58. From Frank Lentricchia, *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscape of Self* (Durham, N.C., 1975), p. 169.

9. George W. Nitchie, *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of the Poet's Convictions* (Durham, N.C., 1960), p. 91.

10. Thompson, *Letters*, p. 158.

providence. This belief in a protecting divinity is, however, absent in Frost's poems of isolation. Another aspect in which Frost differed was by his rejection of Bryant's neo-Wordsworthian style which he thought strayed too close to the English literary tradition. Nevertheless, the overall literary impression of America's first nationalist poet lingered.

Like Bryant the "schoolroom poets", who wrote just prior to Frost's poetic emergence, also failed to achieve a greater impact on the literary scene than they did mainly because they failed to respond fully to the new experience of literary nationalism. Although the "schoolroom poets" choose American subjects, they wrote in a borrowed language and in an effete tradition. Whittier, perhaps the least sophisticated of this group and therefore the least conscious of having to emulate the British poets, is the one to whom Frost's vision seems closest.

Frost admired Whittier's ability to present warm life imagery in opposition to the blackness of death and in a thematic sense the effect is noticeable in his own poetry. The unshakable optimism of the earlier poet in believing in the goodness of a divine providence, however, prevented an even stronger bond from being formed between the two New Englanders. It took Frost's dual vision to weigh the pessimistic view of the material universe against the so-called divine optimism. With this vision he was able to fully<sup>to</sup> appreciate the loneliness experienced by those who exist in a state of spiritual isolation.

In the initial part of *A Boy's Will*, Frost portrays his subject, the young man, as pensive and withdrawn: a reflection of how the poet saw himself at the time of its writing. It was a period where he existed in a world of his own and his spirit sang a sad song of nostalgic yearning for the past values of New England, and past youth. Whenever the inner turmoil became too great, thoughts of escapism, such as those found in "Into My Own" and associated with the dark woods, came to the fore,

I should not be withheld but that some day  
 Into their vastness I should steal away,  
 Fearless of ever finding open land,  
 Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.

Frost would go for long walks by himself in the woods of New England while mulling over such statements as "I am on record as saying that freedom is nothing but departure-setting forth-leaving things behind, brave origination of the courage to be new."<sup>11</sup> But in the main he remained in the ambiguous state of mind of one who was undecided whether escapism from the nervous tension sometimes caused by having to exist among others was a good or a bad thing, a brave or a cowardly way of solving a problem.

This same appeal of the deep woods was felt by many of the earlier American writers; it was not a monopoly belonging to Frost. Thoreau captured much of what Frost must have felt when he wrote in *Walden*, "Once or twice, however, while I lived at the pond, I found myself ranging the woods...with a stronger abandonment....I found in myself, and still find, an instinct towards a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life... and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both."<sup>12</sup> Thoreau also wrote, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."<sup>13</sup> The tendency to isolate oneself in the woods is looked upon by both Thoreau and Frost as an aesthetic experience rather than a physical one. Frost told Sergeant that his attraction to the dark woods in "Into My Own" represented his "first desire to escape from something."<sup>14</sup> Unlike Thoreau, however, Frost found it difficult in this early poem to portray convincingly his feelings as universal ones; they seemed too immature, too personal.

In a letter to Susan Hayes Ward on 13 May 1913, the poet wrote, "The beauty of such things as Into My Own ... is that they are not just post-graduate work, nor post-post-graduate work, but the unforced expression of a life I was forced to live."<sup>15</sup> The Romantic influence on Frost at the time of his writing *A Boy's Will* suggested that the

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11. Frost, *Daedalus*, p. 715.

12. Lloyd N. Dendinger, "The Irrational Appeal of Frost's Dark Deep Woods", *Southern Review*, n.s., Vol. 2, Pt. 2. (Autumn, 1966), p. 824.

13. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 66.

14. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Robert Frost: The Trial By Existence* (New York, 1960), p. 57.

15. Thompson, *Letters*, p. 73.

discovery of the private experience should be immersed in elaborate schemes of self-pity.. The individual at one moment is shown at home in his own world of connected personal events, while at another instant is depicted at odds with his material surroundings and having to indulge in a surrender to egotistical solitude. Frost was aware of his own susceptibility to such a surrender as is shown when he wrote to his daughter, Lesley, about an incident involving her schooling, "My way at your age would have been to shut up in my shell. I was always too inclined to give up wanting anything that was denied me unjustly and take it out in a feeling of injured superiority."<sup>16</sup>

When dealing with the theme of isolation Frost was constantly aware of the dangers of adopting a style of poetry that shows too much inwardness, 'As I sat there I even made some marginal notes, setting forth what each poem stood for. It seemed to me, though, that there was too personal a note in them - too much of Robert Frost in these marginal identifications....So, I rewrote the marginal notes, taking the capital "I" out'.<sup>17</sup> In many of the earlier poems, therefore, the reader can recognize the emphasis on the individual searching for himself.

Obviously Frost was not a man without his own deep convictions; however, these convictions were rarely absolute. They were more like tensions between opposites - often between himself and the world of physical laws. The American principle of human freedom, Frost realized, could work two ways: the individual could be entirely independent, or he could yearn to be submerged in the security of the masses. The term "democratic individualism" was recognized as something of a contradiction in that it meant both mass rule and individual freedom. It was a case of the ego set against the world of unresponsive matter, presented in terms of an oscillation between surrender to the external and assertion of the inner.

In the poetry of isolation there comes the message that the melancholy realm of the insular self contains a sense of dignity and worth. The fact is stressed that individuality in some way prevents

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16. Grade, *Letters*, p. 8.

17. Mertins, *op.cit.*, pp. 106-107.

man from becoming the property of nature. The problem is how does man cope with the spiritual isolation such individuality so often demands? This question is found in "Into My Own" which involves the Romantic's escape from the world of purely social considerations,

I do not see why I should e'er turn back,  
Or those should not set forth upon my track  
To overtake me, who should miss me here  
And long to know if still I held them dear.

The poem is somewhat vague and naive in its pessimistic presentation of the world of the fallen hero. Because it deals with fears that are coated with Romantic sentiment and cannot be recognized for what they are, the poem loses many of its impulses of whether to face these fears or attempt to flee from them. This ineluctable dualism is expressed in the words,

There, I say, we have revealed the basic conviction of Mr Frost about man, and those who are apt in the reading of ideas as well as apt in reading verse will see that the poet's sense of contraries is not far from the humorists's declaration that in man there is a duality of consciousness, a struggle between his impulse to unify himself and his impulse to drift with the stream of life.<sup>18</sup>

The dark woods play an important part in many of Frost's poems. In "Into My Own" they become a symbol for the unknown territory within a man, and are an enigmatic combination of both beauty and horror. The poet's own withdrawal (as with the youth of *A Boy's Will*) into nature's woods, which become fused with his spirit, is typical of the depth of self-examination during the early period when he was burdened with financial distress, fears of isolation, and despondency over the non-recognition of his poetry.

On his Derry farm the poet felt a spiritual exile, as does the persona of "Good Hours", who goes walking alone on a winter's eve and senses that he has ventured too far and faces the danger of becoming cut-off from his fellows,

I went till there were no cottages found.  
I turned and repented, but coming back  
I saw no window but that was black.

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18. Gorham B. Munson, "Robert Frost and the Humanistic Temper", *Bookman*, Vol. 71 (July, 1930), pp. 421-22.

The persona of "A Late Walk" amid "The whir of sober birds", that "Is sadder than any words", senses a similar kind of psychic estrangement from the dead autumn world where he must exist. Melancholy and yearning thoughts of his absent lover fit well into the poem's mood of aloneness,

A tree beside the wall stands bare,  
But a leaf that lingered brown,  
Disturbed, I doubt not, by my thought,  
Comes softly rattling down.

I end not far from my going forth,  
By picking the faded blue  
Of the last remaining aster flower  
To carry again to you.

The trees in Frost's poetry of isolation are a great lure to the human spirit that wishes to escape the moral responsibility of decisions. In poems such as "Into My Own", trees even become an integral part of the action. In "Into My Own", this craving for seclusion is linked to a feeling of youthful petulance, to an immature desire to engage in a nostalgic fantasy of spiritual indulgence. The youth believes that those he leaves behind will follow because they would "long to know if still I held them dear". His ego seeks to obey the irrational impulses and follow the primitive callings of the id. The rationality of the ego and the moral force of the super-ego are set in opposition to the animal instincts bred of material nature.

Of similar theme, but of marked stylistic contrast to "Into My Own", is "Out, Out —" from *Mountain Interval*. This poem is based on a local event that was told to the poet by his friends, the Lynches, during the summer of 1910.<sup>19</sup> To Frost "Poetry was a way of taking life by the throat", and by seeing poetry as a dramatic act in narratives such as "Out, Out —" he was able to present more than mere recollections; he could present a dramatic situation of the present.

Coupled with the basic idea of man's spiritual isolation, is the notion of the uncertainty and unpredictability of physical life. The earthbound event that so often means the most to man is death. Such is the case with "Out, Out —" which touches on the waste of human potential that occurs with the untimely death of the boy in the sawmill. "Out, Out —" reflects on the inevitability of death when harsh realism

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19. The event was a sawmill accident in which Raymond Fitzgerald (16 years) was killed. See Thompson, *Early Years*, pp. 566-67.



violates the almost blissful scenario of a vital, hardworking youth about to be brought his supper by his sister. A picture is presented of the unfeeling material world of labour as the poet knew it. The gloominess of Frost's vision is apparent when it becomes evident that it is impossible to withdraw and isolate oneself from the pain of nature and everyday life. Man is doomed to an existence where melancholy incidents break the surface of an otherwise mundane life. Nevertheless, it is not these incidents, so much as the effect they have on man's spirit, that occupied Frost.

In "Out, Out —" a boy "Doing a man's work" has his hand cut off by a buzz-saw and dies of shock. The allusive title from Lady Macbeth's soliloquy indicates that the flow of physical life can be interrupted as easily as can a spoken sentence. Coupled with many incomplete expressions and lengthy pauses, the allusion gives the effect of the narrator's thoughtful, but inconclusive findings on how the boy's sudden death should be faced. It appears that no spiritual consolation is possible for those who are isolated by death from the living.

Because the dramatic situation of "Out, Out —" is simple, it does not mean that the poem loses its force: quite the opposite. The force is compressed like a spring in lines such as

And then - the watcher at his pulse took fright.  
No one believed. They listened at his heart.  
Little - less - nothing! - and that ended it.

The melancholy drama of man's physical life and ultimately his death, whether among the snarling, aggressive buzz-saw of "Out, Out —" or the big, thumping millstone of "The Vanishing Red", is shown to be intense. It often becomes a case of man having to defend himself both spiritually and physically against the hostility of the values and the machines of a materialist society.

Constantly in the early poetry the struggle between human spirit and mechanical power rages. Man is placed in a situation whereby he is forced to labour alone in hostile surroundings. Sometimes sudden death is the penalty that must be paid to the exacting conditions that must be met if work, something alien to man and imposed on him because of his original sin, is to be completed successfully. Such is the case in "Out, Out —" when fate shows no mercy for the boy's age

when causing his death. The boy is not yet up to the task of combating his harsh surroundings. Only at the moment of death does he realize the precarious position of man in a physical world,

...Then the boy saw all —  
 Since he was old enough to know, big boy  
 Doing a man's work, though a child at heart —

The juxtaposition of man's spirit with physical labour is made more gently in "The Tuft of Flowers" which uses the theme of isolation to highlight a way that sensitive man can help overcome the alienation of his spirit that is often the product of solitary work for long hours. Accordingly, at the beginning of the poem, the grass turner is conscious of the difficulty of a butterfly's quest among the dead flowers as being symbolic of his own sense of desolation. On espying the spared tuft of flowers, however, the turner is to some extent able to transcend his melancholy mood by relating to the sensitivity of the earlier mower who had spared them out of "sheer morning gladness..."

It was probably Emerson's influence, especially noticeable in the lines "Men work together," I told him from the heart, / "Whether they work together or apart," that prompted Frost to deny what Robinson saw more extremely as man's fate to always struggle alone. Yet one must not forget that optimism about the power of aesthetic sensitivity was also rare for Frost in his early verse and seldom does a character feel, as in this case, "a spirit kindred to my own".

In *North of Boston* and *Mountain Interval* in particular, the poet remained separate from the objects which he studied through the eyes of his personae. Such distance he considered a protection for personal sensibilities against the harshness of material nature. In "The Tuft of Flowers", both the butterfly and the flowers, products of nature, are indifferent to the persona's sensibilities. It is up to the persona to establish spiritual contact with his fellows. If he does so by way of the medium of material objects, well and good; however, the objects in themselves are not important. Man gives them worth. Unfortunately, seldom is man sensitive enough to notice the seemingly unimportant things around him, things that can carry such impact upon those who seek a spiritual awareness of others.

The narrator of "Out, Out —" implies that in a universe of unpredictable accidents it is better to hide one's sensitivities in stoicism. The question of how much one's sensitivities must be protected relates to the degree of effect an event has on a person's spirit. Because the youth's accidental death at the sawmill is not true tragedy (which only comes from shaped response rather than from accident) its effect on the reader's emotions depends on his capacity to link the accident to surrounding facts which make it appear more than mere accident.

Frost considered that the more faceless fate was, the greater the melancholy effect it had when it was unkind. In this belief he joined Robinson, Hardy and the Greek tragedians. Unquestionably tragedy and disaster are two fundamentally different structures of experience. Disaster, or "crass casualty" as Hardy termed it, centres on death and often comes from without rather than from within; it is a weapon of the hostile universe and solitary man is the helpless victim. In tragedy it is man who, by some failing in his character, makes himself the victim; by being partially responsible for his fate he therefore seems less deserving of pathos. Hence Frost's preference in his poetry of isolation for the melancholy caused by accident. This preference fits with his poetic vision of spiritual man as an outcast in an inhospitable cosmos.

The loneliness caused by blind fate can be seen as the prime feeling of isolation that confronts man. In "Out, Out —" the reader knows nothing of the victim's past, or of any reason why the boy should deserve the fate that befalls him. By the boy's life force being suddenly and brutally cut short, the poet's convictions of the weakness of man is highlighted and little faith is held in trying to form a definite pattern to an unpredictable universe.

A form of defence against such material aggression is to adopt a stoic belief, as the narrator of "Out, Out —" attempts to do. The narrator tries to isolate himself spiritually from the course of things, he likes to believe that somehow events are supremely directed, that there is an intelligible purpose in the cosmos. His is an existentialist way of reacting to a universe too vast for man's understanding.

Invariably, however, the blind fate that draws the pathos from the unsuspecting reader does so because it occurs in juxtaposition with some psychological complexity that lurks unobtrusively in the background of the dramatic action. In "Out, Out —" there is a psychological drama between the boy and his family. A self-destructive process of a young spirit acts against the insensitive materialism of a family who have rushed him into adulthood before he was ready.

The boy is young, he feels restrained by his work. Perhaps his unconscious nature pushes his hand onto the saw as a rebellion against the harsh dictates of the society in which he lives. The line beginning "He must have given the hand..." together with, "The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh, / As he swung toward them holding up the hand", seems to indicate his defiance. Without the hand there can be no more physical labour to encumber his child's spirit. What the boy did not count on was the bitter fact that fate decreed that he must die since, paradoxically, without physical labour he cannot survive into manhood and his spirit cannot mature to the stage where it can cope with the unhappy position of solitary man trying to survive in an unfriendly world.

Something in human nature forces the reader to seek some justification for the senseless misery of an existence at the dictates of the blind fate that is so evident in Frost's early poetry of isolation. When none is apparent, gloomy hopelessness pervades the mind. Philosophic anxiety coupled with stoic sadness results from the malevolent workings of nature that are beyond human comprehension.

When he cannot fathom why the boy should die, the narrator of "Out, Out —" seeks solace by rationalizing that nothing can live except by the death of something else. It was the habit of the brand of oriental mysticism and optimism that the Transcendentalists followed to make nothing of death. The Transcendentalists, therefore, have something in common with the stoics in their belief that spiritual man should face the viable external forces with equanimity. Frost saw it as a case where a strongly spiritually oriented philosophy unites, indirectly, with a materialist philosophy based on reason, in an endeavour to provide a moral dictate by which helpless and isolated man can survive.

The lines "No more to build on there. And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs", then, do not mean that the speaker in "Out, Out —" has no feelings of grief. In fact, it is evident earlier in the poem that he is fond of the boy and wishes the boy could be spared from half an hour's work that would mean so much to him. The narrator's practical belief of wanting to go on despite the emotional blows experienced in life is close to the personal ideas of the poet as found in a letter to Louis Untermeyer dated 12 April 1920, "And I suppose I am a brute in that my nature refuses to carry sympathy to the point of going crazy just because someone else goes crazy, or of dying just because someone else dies."<sup>20</sup>

Despite what he said, however, optimism and reason were not qualities that sat well on Frost. His true power lies in the pathos of those like himself who reach for an emotionally escapist philosophy yet fail to be convinced by it. Instead they feed the frustration that comes from seeking an unattainable goal. Thus, to Frost "Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements."<sup>21</sup> By way of his personae the poet faced a personal crisis of isolation. He craved for spiritual surety yet acquiesced to the absurdity of trying to escape from a world of spiritual suffering.

In this mode of thought Frost had much in common with Hardy.<sup>22</sup> Both were concerned with individuals who were hard pressed protecting their spiritual values from the painful assaults of an unpredictable universe. But as I.A. Richards wrote, Hardy was a poet "who has most steadily refused to be comforted....Hence his singular preoccupation with death; because it is in the contemplation of death that the necessity for human attitudes...to be self-supporting is felt most poignantly"<sup>23</sup> Much of this also applies to Frost; however, the New

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20. Thompson, *Years of Triumph*, p. 130.

21. Gerber, *op.cit.*, p. 111.

22. In a letter to Sidney Cox on 2 January 1915, Frost called Hardy "One of the most earthly wise of our time". Thompson, *Letters*, pp. 146-47.

23. Irving Howe, "The Short Poems of Thomas Hardy", *Southern Review*, n.s., Vol. 2, Pt. 2. (Autumn, 1966), p. 885.

Englander did not completely shut himself off from seeking a solution to his spiritual anxieties as did Hardy. It was his inability to find a solution that increased the gloominess of his poetic vision.

One of the keys to the problem of spiritual anxiety experienced by solitary man in an inhospitable materialist world is that involving the lonely individual out to discover his own identity. Once the individual could achieve his identity, it would be easier for him to predict the metaphysics behind human existence. In an attempt to resolve the metaphysical puzzle in the poetry of isolation, much oscillation exists between the extremes of solitude and society, doubt and acceptance, disaster and irony. But it is a riddle with no answer, as the poet well knew, and the result of the poetic enquiry was a restless melancholy.

When trying to understand Frost's concern with man's spiritual estrangement from his fellows and from the physical events of the world, it is important to distinguish between the "fear of death" and the "fear of dying". Fear of dying prompts man to wonder what is waiting for his spirit and causes him to regard his estrangement on earth with an exaggerated estimation of what desolation his soul could meet in the unknown beyond physical death. The act of death itself does not exert the same force on the mind as does the anxiety of the unknown.

Estrangement from nature, society and one's fellows is largely the theme of "An Old Man's Winter Night". The action of this poem is, once again, simple. It involves an old man wandering alone within the desolate scene of an empty house before finally falling asleep beside the stove. The poem goes further than just capturing the loneliness and pathos which often accompanies old age: it presents the dualities of life and death, order and chaos. Although it deals with the personal suffering of its persona, the poem shows the suffering to be caused by spiritual isolation and to be, therefore, common to humanity.

A static drama of a single scene in which the melancholy atmosphere is created by means of visual effects, rather than by dialogue or action, "An Old Man's Winter Night" is a fine example of what Cornelius Weygandt meant when he said of Frost, "What he does with stories ... is to isolate

them from the chaos of life and recreate for them a little world all their own. The truth is that his human sympathy and divination of motive give him more knowledge of the people of New Hampshire than anybody else possesses".<sup>24</sup> The subject of "An Old Man's Winter Night" may well have been based on Jont Eastman, Carl Burrell's grandfather, who for a while lived in the upper storey of Frost's farm. The image of the persona also has something in common with Longfellow's description of the solitary father of the Baron of St Castine,

And the old man rouses him from his dreams,  
And wanders restless through the house,  
As if he heard strange voices call.  
His footsteps echo along the floor  
Of a distant passage, and pause awhile -

which compares closely with the scene described in Frost's lines,

What kept him from remembering what it was  
That brought him to that creaking room was age.  
He stood with barrels round him - at a loss.  
And having scared the cellar under him  
In clomping here, he scared it once again  
In clomping off - and scared the outer night,

The similarity of Frost's lyrics to Longfellow's not only helps prove the influence Longfellow had on him, but also points out the universality of the theme of isolation.

European writers such as Maeterlinck also indirectly helped Frost define his subject. These writers determined that confrontation was no longer the essence of drama. The depiction of a seemingly uneventful life packed with frustrations to the spirit they considered more gripping. Maeterlinck once described his idea of drama as the presentation of a solitary old man sitting at night in his armchair "giving unconscious ear to all the external laws that reign about his house, interpreting, without comprehending, the silence of doors and windows and the quivering voice of the light, submitting with bent head to the presence of his soul and his destiny."<sup>25</sup> In "An Old Man's Winter Night", the persona, like Maeterlinck's old man, is juxtaposed with the

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24. Cornelius Weygandt, "Frost in New Hampshire", *The White Hills* (New York, 1934), pp. 244-45. From Thompson, *Years of Triumph*, p. 247.

25. John Gassner, ed., *A Treasury of the Theatre* (New York, 1959), p. 265.

universe. The lamp-light of the empty house is set in apposition to the darkness of the outer night; man's inner life contrasts to the death-like stillness of the "out-of-doors", while a feeling of banishment is evoked by the picture of an isolated farmhouse surrounded by cold nothingness. Man can keep going in such a bleak position, but it is, inarguably, an unsatisfactory mode of existence where man becomes so accustomed to his isolation that he blinds himself to his own situation. In the poem this blinding is symbolized by the artificial man-made lamp that prevents the old man from seeing outside the cabin. Only his spirit burns on, but sadly it is a case of "A light he was to no one but himself." The only way the old man can continue to exist is by methodical routine: habit enables him to adapt himself to the situation. His unconscious mind turns action into a physical reaction in an ever renewed present and true mental processes exist in the past, reached as he sleeps to escape the isolation of the present.

Because the old man is alone he is subject to a more intense fear of dying than those who are surrounded by friends.<sup>26</sup> Since the spiritually estranged man experiences more fear of the unknown, the vastness of the universe has a greater intimidatory effect on him. This has much to do with why Frost was pessimistic over the ultimate destiny of his isolated New England farm folk. Man is basically a social creature, who, if separated from his fellows, can seldom exist for long. It follows that no good can come to those who for one reason or another turn introspectively into themselves. Frost's characters do not do so for self-indulgence, but because such a state is forced upon them by external circumstances. In this view Frost differs significantly from the Transcendentalists whose basic optimism about the spiritual fate of man kept their vision centred on trying to understand the workings of the universe, rather than examining the melancholy state of those isolated from it.

Emerson may have optimistically thought that individual man contains in his spirit the whole wealth of experience of mankind, but what he failed to see, and what Frost grasped in his poetic vision, was that the universe must appear in a very poor perspective when viewed

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26. See J.W. Riley, Jr., "Death and Bereavement", *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 4 (1968), p. 23, From Dumont and Foss, op.cit., p. 21.



by a character who is in a state of spiritual isolation. It meant that the estranged character had only one experience to draw on with which to view things - his own melancholy one.

It may be argued correctly that there are men who appear to stand alone successfully, in, at best, an indifferent world. The tough, independent Thoreau seems to be one such isolated ego who was cut-off from all contact. On closer inspection, however, it turns out that he was dependent to a certain extent on the praise of Emerson. And it was not with the few strong exceptions that Frost was concerned; they could take care of themselves. It was with the spiritual struggle of the ordinary people, like those he saw around himself in New England, that he was primarily involved.

Frost believed that each man came a stranger into the world of external things and must grow to understand himself and others if he was to survive in it. The poet never underestimated the power of the forces of the cosmos and this recognition of a malevolence is caught by Irving Howe in his valedictory piece written after Frost's death,

The best of his poems are neither indulgence in homely philosophy nor wanderings in romanticism. If anything, they are antipathetic to the notion that the universe is inherently good or delightful or hospitable to our needs. The symbols they establish in relation to the natural world are not, as in transcendentalist poetry, tokens of benevolence. These lyrics speak of the hardness and recalcitrance of the natural world; of its absolute indifference to our needs and its refusal to lend itself to an allegory of affection; of the certainty of physical dissolution; but also of the refreshment that can be found through a brief submission to the alienness of nature, always provided one recognizes the need to move on, not stopping for rest but remaining locked alone, in consciousness.<sup>27</sup>

The poetry of isolation, then, is concerned with man's need for self-knowledge while being aware of the beauty of nature around him. The beauty of natural objects may be noticed, but it is only in passing; there is no endeavour to provide a sense of spiritual certainty in the world of matter, nor is there any false optimistic belief that

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27. Waggoner, op.cit., p. 294.

nature will actively lend itself to aid man's awareness of others. Nature may be used by man, if he wishes to do so, but otherwise is indifferent, or by its very unpredictability, hostile.

In his poetry of isolation, Frost often presented the house, normally a symbol of contentment and family life, in the opposite role as a symbol of desolation. The degree that the house was seen as a security symbol by the writers prior to Frost is exemplified by Thoreau's view of the old Yankee farmhouse being a part of the very soil it stands on. To him and his contemporaries the farmhouse offered security to man amid unpredictable external forces. In "Housewarming" in *Walden* Thoreau wrote of the warm woodfire of the home, "Well, we are safe and strong, for now we sit / Beside a hearth where no dim shadows flit" and captured the transcendental optimism over the possibility of spiritual security offered in the home.

Frost had other ideas. He regarded himself an exile on his farm at Derry and of his general feeling of isolation he said to Munson, "I had days and days and days to think the least little thought and do the least little thing. That's where I got my sense that I have forever for accomplishment."<sup>28</sup> More specifically, Frost believed that part of his spiritual banishment was the result of harsh treatment from his grandfather, who allegedly said to him, "I have bought you a farm, just as you wanted it: You've made a failure out of everything else you've tried. Now go up to the farm and die there. That's about all you're fit for anyway."<sup>29</sup>

This feeling of personal desolation did much to increase the melancholy aspect of the poet's vision of isolated man's spiritual fate in a world of external events. "In Neglect" is a five line epigrammatic poem that stems directly from Frost's somewhat paranoid feelings about his grandfather's action against him and Elinor, and it displays some of the grievance that he felt at the beginning of his poetic career,

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28. Thompson, *Years of Triumph*, p. 322.

29. Mertins, *op.cit.*, pp. 64-65.

They leave us so to the way we took,  
 As two in whom they were proved mistaken,  
 That we sit sometimes in the wayside nook,  
 With mischievous, vagrant, seraphic look,  
 And try if we cannot feel forsaken.

Of this poem, Ezra Pound wrote, "There is perhaps as much of Frost's personal tone in the ... little catch ... as in anything else. It is to his wife, written when his grandfather and his uncle had disinherited him of a comfortable fortune left him in poverty because he was a useless poet instead of a money-getter."<sup>30</sup> Perhaps Pound was naive to believe fully Frost's account of the situation,<sup>31</sup> but this is of small importance; what is relevant is the way the account shows the degree of bitterness, whether justified or not, the poet felt over his banishment during the time of the writing of his early verse.

By using his knowledge of what the home meant to the average reader, Frost was able to utilize the common feeling of nostalgia and home-sickness that fill the mind upon confronting the ruins of a house. The poignant feeling experienced when viewing a deserted building evokes the thought of life after death and the desire to survive despite the crushing pressures of a timeless cosmos that scorns transitory man. This is close to the situation depicted in "An Old Man's Winter Night" where the persona is nearing the end of his life in an empty house. The things that once made the house a home are all packed into barrels, ready to be moved, "He stood with barrels round him - at a loss". The old man is being forced to leave his spiritual fortress because "One aged man—one man—can't keep a house, / A farm, a countryside..."

The melancholy effect created by a deserted dwelling occurs frequently in the poetry of isolation. In "Ghost House" from *A Boy's Will* the loneliness evoked by the ruins of a house<sup>32</sup> is connected with

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30. D.D. Paige, ed., *The Letters of Ezra Pound* (New York, 1950), p. 16. From Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 412.

31. The annuity from Frost's grandfather was paid to the poet for more than twenty years (10 July 1902 - 10 July 1923), enabling him, among other things, to go to England and live for two years without needing to earn a living. The total sum paid was \$12,903.15¢. Thompson, *Letters*, p. 48.

32. The house in this poem could have been based on that of Mr Merriam which burnt out while he was attending Fast Day service in the Congregational Church at East Derry in 1867. Frost transplanted some bushes from the cellar hole to his own gardens in 1907. Lesley Frost, *op.cit.*, notes to Book III, 1905-1907, pp. 128-29.

the purple raspberries growing alongside its walls. The house lies on a now "disused and forgotten road" which offers no unturned dust for a toad's "dust-bath". The images of desolation became nostalgic reminders of nature gently yet remorselessly recovering its own as shown in the line "The footpath down to the well is healed."

Like Bryant's poem "The Two Graves", Frost's "Ghost House" deals with the problem of life and death within the bounds of nature. The narrators of both poems are stirred by the sight of the graves of previous inhabitants of the derelict houses, while the observation of nature remains a purely secondary consideration. Frost, however, is probably more successful in using nature to create the right mood when linking the life-death duality to the spirit-matter equation. His sweeping descriptions create an atmosphere that lends itself to the rediscovery of his spiritual flights as a youth.

Nostalgia is effected in "Ghost House" when the reader becomes aware that the narrator must have been familiar with the house and its surroundings prior to it becoming derelict. When he comes to pondering about the graves the narrator remarks that moss hides the names of people, and adds "They are tireless folk, but slow and sad— / Though two, close-keeping, are lass and lad—". How could he know this unless he was aware of the past? It is important to realize this link with the narrator's past since the poem is fundamentally about his human experience of having "a strangely aching heart" when confronted with the transitory nature of man's stay on earth - a feeling made the more poignant by the sense of isolation engendered by the forgotten graves.

"Ghost House" evokes much philosophic thought and is in many ways a disturbing poem because it deals with the melancholy, almost pathological yearning of the youth for some spiritual contact with the dead. To the youth the dead Yankees, though unable to speak, are spiritually alive and present with him,

With none among them that ever sings,  
And yet, in view of how many things,  
As sweet companions as might be had.

The fundamental need for man to relate to his fellows can, therefore, in a spiritual sense, surmount even death, the ultimate

isolation. Perhaps it is from this total and perpetual isolation that much of man's philosophic ponderings emanate. The desire to break the bonds of death in Frost's poem echoes closely what Bryant sought after in "The Past" with the lines

My spirit yearns to bring  
The lost ones back - yearns with desire intense,  
And struggles hard to wring  
Thy bolts apart, and pluck thy captive thence.

Bryant was not the only poet who drew Frost's attention when it came to capturing the melancholy effect of spiritual separation on man. With "The Black Cottage" from *North of Boston*, Frost can be seen to be on the same thematic plane as William Ellery Channing was with "The Lonely Road". Both pairs of men who feature in the two poems come across a ruined house while out walking. Channing described the scene as

We strayed along, beneath our feet the lane  
Creaked at each pace, and soon we stood content  
Where the old cellar of the house had been,  
Out of which now a fruit-tree wags its top.

While Frost wrote

We chanced in passing by that afternoon  
To catch it in a sort of special picture  
Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees,  
Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass,  
The little cottage we were speaking of,  
A front with just a door between two windows,  
Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black.

The two poems seem similar enough at the start. Notice, however, that whereas Channing's men stand "content", Frost's characters appear to have come with a philosophic purpose in mind since the journey to "The little cottage" apparently resulted from an earlier discussion.

In this way the curiosity of the reader is immediately aroused. He does not relax his faculties as he would tend to do along with the contented personae of Channing's poem. Fortunately the reader is prepared because almost at the start of the poem he is confronted with the line "'Everything's as she left it when she died'", which sets the mood of a poem investigating the melancholy theme of failure of personal involvement with others. The theme, found so often in the poetry of isolation, must be distressing to those who seek to deny a feeling of spiritual alienation in the material cosmos.

In "The Black Cottage", the deserted house, once the residence of Mrs Sarah J. Upton, widow of Mr George E. Upton, the first Derry soldier killed in the Civil War,<sup>33</sup> represents the gradual decline of the rural population of New England. This shift of population with its corresponding melancholy effect on the poet is given in the familiar terms of the history of the family who used to own the house, and of whom only haunting memories remain,

A buttoned haircloth lounge spread scrolling arms  
Under a crayon portrait on the wall,  
Done sadly from an old daguerreotype.  
"That was the father as he went to war."

The poem, then, is not just a statement of political and theological ideas, but is about the need to react against the senseless changes that come from fashion or urbanization. Emotion replaces the statistician's figures to make the point of encroaching isolation more poignant.

"The Black Cottage" is told essentially in terms of the two men, the minister and the narrator, who discuss the past as relating to the ruined house. To the minister the ruins represent the inevitable decay of transitory man. First the father went, "Then the two sons, till she was left alone." The old woman's sons mean to return to the place where they were spiritually formed, but within their limited life spans they can never find the time; nevertheless, some lingering nostalgic memory prevents them from selling the house or the things in it. A common melancholy situation is presented of finite man being unable to fulfil his spiritual responsibilities. In a material cosmos hostile to his needs he is unable to satisfy his longings for his real home and his lost youth.

Imaginative and evocative use of metaphor to describe the black cottage allows it to take on the characteristics of the lonely old lady who was its last inhabitant. The cottage, like the other houses of Frost's poetry of isolation, stands as a medium between man's spirit and the surrounding nature.<sup>34</sup> The poet's description of it shows his

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33. Mrs Upton was personally known to Frost. A photo of the house (which was burnt down in 1922), appears in *Houses of the Double Range*, p.16.

34. About metaphor the poet said "There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, the pleasure of ulteriority..." Frost, *Poems*, p.XVI. From Chickering, *op.cit.*, p. 144. He also wrote that "Education by poetry is education by metaphor". Robert

impressionistic concern for colour and his fresh and vigorous use of personification, evident in "'The warping boards pull out their own old nails.'"

The house itself is only interesting in that it provokes thought about its inhabitants; yet it is never dropped from the poem since it provides the thoughts with a time setting. As the minister says, "'It always seems to me a sort of mark / To measure how far fifty years have brought us.'" The cottage also constantly reminds the reader of an isolated folk culture that has been broken by encroaching industrialization.

Throughout "The Black Cottage", Frost is conscious of the need to balance the tendency to see the New England rural society as narrow and parochial, surrounded by rigid theological systems, and the desire to keep up the old traditions. This dual concern is presented in terms of the minister's dilemma as to whether or not he should modernize his church creed to suit the changing times, and appease the younger generations. But memory of the old lady with "'her old tremulous bonnet in the pew'" who, "'had some art of hearing and yet not / Hearing the latter wisdom of the world'" acts as a powerful force for tradition. The woman's spirit seems to transcend even the isolation of death. Her spirit also sheds light on the relationship between mind and matter. The importance of this relationship is summed up by Carington who writes, "The relationship between Mind and Matter is also, of course, vital to the whole question of whether a man's conscious existence terminates altogether with the death of his body, or whether in any but the most Pickwickian sense he may reasonably be said to survive it".<sup>35</sup>

The minister eventually opts for innocence against fashionable belief, and with cynical wisdom decides

"For, dear me, why abandon a belief  
Merely because it ceases to be true.  
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt  
It will turn true again, for so it goes.  
Most of the chance we think we see in life  
Is due to truths being in and out of favor."

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Frost, "Education by Poetry", a talk to Amherst College Alumni Council in 1930. From Caroline Ford, *The Less Traveled Road: A Study of Robert Frost* (1935) (Folcraft, Pa., 1974), p. 38.

35. Carington, op.cit., p. 4.

To the minister the basic philosophies of life never change, but are merely subject to fashion. Because the point has been made that most of man's philosophies are engendered by his thoughts on mind and matter, by the possibility of the spirit transcending the ultimate isolation of death, it follows that his religions should also be primarily concerned with this possibility.

Religions, in fact, tend to focus on the certainty that man's spirit will transcend his physical body. Frost would have liked to believe it, but much of the sadness in his early poetry is due to his dual vision which prevented him from taking a stand on the tenuous issue of mind and matter. To Sidney Cox, Frost wrote, 'Sometime we must discuss that minister [in "the Black Cottage"] and his creed. I make it a rule not to take any "character's" side in anything I write. So I am not bound to defend the minister you understand.'<sup>36</sup>

Frost acknowledged that "There is such a thing as getting too transcended. There are limits."<sup>37</sup> Therefore he could not accept with optimism the ultimate supremacy of the spirit. In this pessimistic outlook, he remained somewhat closer to the Puritan rather than the modern Christian outlook. Emerson, in religious thinking, shocked the earlier, more conservative Unitarians by throwing off the shackles of tradition and custom. In contrast, Frost in "The Black Cottage" seems to pine for the dogmatic Calvinism which saw man in a state of spiritual vulnerability in a hostile cosmos and attempted to bolster his spirit by its rigid doctrines.

The Puritans and the later Unitarians did, however, to some extent advocate the right to private judgement and individual experience in that they saw no need for a spiritual mediator.<sup>38</sup> Such a right, Frost realized, often had to be paid for (as in the case of the old woman of "The Black Cottage") with spiritual isolation from fellow man.

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36. Thompson, *Letters*, p. 138.

37. Frost, *Daedalus*, p. 716.

38. This was not the Unitarianism of 1785-1819, but that of 1819 to the Civil War, after William Ellery Channing had assumed the role of spokesman and tried to end the soul-destroying conservatism of the movement. Channing's efforts helped form the moral and spiritual basis for the following Transcendental movement.



Frost also had difficulty in regard to religion (that is, the philosophy expounding the certainty of life after death) in establishing exactly what was natural or material, and what was supernatural or spiritual. Both Frost and the religious movements in question placed strong emphasis on actual experience. When he was dealing with spiritual concerns this emphasis tended to complicate the issue for Frost.

In his early poetry of isolation Frost recognized religion as a melancholy dualism. On one hand it leads man to the ideal, to universal brotherhood, while on the other hand its doctrines can isolate him from his fellows. The question of the value of theological isolation as opposed to the spiritual strength it can give a person is examined in "The Black Cottage" and it is significant that it is the minister and not the narrator who has made a decision as to which stand he takes on the theological issue. The narrator, or Frost himself, prefers to reserve the judgement for his reader.

Repugnance of self-centred introversion, the poet knew, might be one thing, but simple affirmation of fellowship did not necessarily mean the conquering of social isolation. If that were the case, much of man's earthly concerns would have long since vanished. Thus in "The Black Cottage" the issue of the great social alienator, racial prejudice, is again raised. Except this time, although the old woman appears to have used the same innocent logic in her thoughts as she did in her theological beliefs, namely

"White was the only race she ever knew.  
Black she had scarcely seen, and yellow never.  
But how could they be made so very unlike  
By the same hand working in the same stuff?"

she could not surmount the total retirement from the outside world that she had to suffer in her final years. The reader leaves the poem with the melancholy impression that no matter how pure one's spiritual beliefs are, they all too often prove inadequate when coping with the isolation imposed by the physical world. In the case of this poem, isolation takes the form of racial colour and the geographical location of the woman's sons.

In his poetry of isolation Frost mainly concerned himself with meditations on the past, brought about in many cases by the personal

sense of sadness he felt over the loss of the New England folk culture. The disconsolate feeling over the breakup of the rural society manifests itself in the poet's attraction to dark, lonely places. It is a form of death wish for a supreme liberation. But, of course, there is the uncertainty over whether death will give the spirit ultimate freedom. Perhaps the spirit will not succeed in transcending matter, as religions confidently predict, yet cannot prove.

Frost, being a pragmatic New Englander, required such proof before he could amend his melancholy vision of man's isolation in the universe. As the poet well knew, however, such proof could never be forthcoming. Faith and optimism are required in order to exist happily in such circumstances, and unfortunately, in the early verse they could not find a place in Frost's poetic vision.

## CHAPTER V

### DESPAIR

"Don't you be hard on me. I have to take  
What I can get. You see they have the feet,  
Which gives them the advantage in the trade.  
I can't get back the feet in any case."

"The Self-Seeker"

Philosophy is the account which the human mind gives to itself of the cons<sup>t</sup>itution of the world. Two cardinal facts be forever at its base; the one, and the two. — 1. Unity, or identity; and 2. Variety. We unite all things...by perceiving the superficial differences, and profound resemblances. But every mental act...recognises the difference of things. Oneness and otherness. It is impossible to speak, or to think, without embracing both.<sup>1</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson

1. Emerson, op.cit., p. 254.

Frost believed that despair will result from the contention between spiritual man and the material world he inhabits. He saw the situation exacerbated by the permanent tension existing between the opposing forces of life and death with further complications added by external pressure in the form of unforeseeable accidents. The poet sadly acknowledged that life does not necessarily follow the course that existentialist man wants it to follow and this involves man in a supreme test of the durability of his spirit.

When studying Frost's early poetry it is important to remember that the poet was not so interested in presenting a reconciliation of spiritual man to the material cosmos, as exploring the struggle, sacrifice, and despair encountered in the battle to survive. Thus, although Frost was, by disposition, an affirmer of life, his poetry is never more powerful than when it deals with death: his saddest poems become his best. In his poetry of forlorn hope Frost tried to remain objective: there is always a distance between the questioner and the questioned. In fact two worlds are presented: an inner, subjective one of the mind, and an outer, objective one. Sometimes these worlds overlap and confusion exists between them.

Much of Frost's early work reflects a fear of chaos in the universe, combined with a sense of apprehension over man's ability to persevere within such external confusion and pressure. Frost was not a visionary extremist; but he did believe in the importance of the spirit in creating an aesthetic balance in a material universe. In essence, Frost could only display a stoic unease, the product of a clash between mind and matter, the psyche and the physical.

As demonstrated in poems like "The Snow Storm", Emerson also discerned a pressing need for an aesthetic equilibrium of opposing values; but it was for one dictated solely in terms of nature's power. Frost found this assessment somewhat unsatisfying: it must be the creative spirit of existentialist man that overcomes the tension between mind and matter. This is no easy task, however, since the spirit is confined within the bounds of a physical world and man becomes despondent at the strength of the resistance of objects and external circumstances to the dictates of his will. Frost saw the stage reached where man despairs at ever being able to hold the initiative in a

material universe; at most all he can do is endeavour to survive against the external physical forces exerted by nature. This vision gives Frost's poetry of despair not so much a terrifying aspect as a melancholy one.

In his first book, *A Boy's Will*, Frost concentrated on a self-examination of his own position in relation to the external events of his era. Darwin's out-spoken beliefs on evolution had a strong impact on Frost and he was naturally cautious when viewing the evolutionary future of spiritual man; but any hope he may have had of there being a benevolent universe was eroded by the starkness of Darwin's controversial theories.

The melancholy despair inherent in Frost's vision was in most cases contrary to the general feeling of confidence and emotional fervour enjoyed towards the end of the Romantic era. Always an existentialist in the sense that he believed that man should not be the victim of either an omnipotent deity or a belligerent universe, Frost became one of the first to foreshadow a change in the current optimistic beliefs.

The new pessimistic view was based mainly on the poet's experience in trying to develop his own spiritual values. He saw that much of the Romantic's confidence in the self-reliance of ordinary man glossed over the struggle of man to maintain his humble place in the universe, let alone become its undisputed master. By the acknowledgement of his own spiritual weaknesses, Frost was better able to understand the corresponding weaknesses of others.

In *North of Boston* Frost changed the emphasis of his poetry from himself to others; great perception is displayed in his observation of people in moments of humour and despair, often with only a thin dividing line separating the two. And although he remains strongest when presenting homely situations with graphic vividness, Frost possessed a dramatic gift that enabled him to remain emotionally divorced from his subject. A separation of this nature allowed him to be less a dramatic purist and more an exhibitor and interpreter of a single domestic situation involving the tensions of everyday life.

A dual aspect is evident in this early dramatic poetry: first,

an explicit idea is presented within a background of material nature and common domestic experience; and second, an implicit spiritual appeal can be discerned. The reader must delve below the surface of the poem, then, to grasp its true significance. The explicit idea based on the domestic incident was not what the poet was immediately concerned with. He saw character as superior to plot and his Yankees, by their daily trials, bear ~~the~~ burden of conveying the implicit message of the need for spiritual survival. Amy Lowell is correct when she sees *North of Boston* as a book which deals not so much with incidents of a contemporary New England, but instead concentrates on the analysis of the melancholy state of a people fraught with nervous prostration.

Although largely correct in her initial criticism, Amy Lowell is wrong, however, in thinking that Frost's early poetry only applies to a virtually extinct race of morbid and inbred Yankees. The actual subject matter of Frost's verse may be regional, but his vision is not; the question of how to exist in a universe is common to mankind. Survival depends on the will of the individual to persevere in the face of despair. But there is more involved than bare survival. The cost in terms of spiritual anguish surely must also be considered.

By his acute psychological interpretations Frost described the problems encountered by his rural subjects in changing moods of humour, commonsense, irony and sadness. Frost was primarily concerned with the inner spiritual exertions that caused the melancholy dispositions of his Yankees. He carefully selected the detail which could best suit his purpose of presenting characters who embody certain qualities. About these subjects he wrote, "I don't invent characters. I'm not writing about entire strangers. I put them down as I see them, more often than not, reminiscent of something. I see only one part of them - that which is interesting to me.... I'm not making snapshots of people. I'm trying to stress the side that I see."<sup>2</sup>

Because Frost was engrossed in character study, it does not mean that he neglected the natural settings. In his poetry material nature is found to be effectively linked with the spiritual aspirations of man and provides a backdrop for the poet's numerous psychological

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2. Mertins, op.cit., p. 299.

projections. Only occasionally, however, is man shown in harmony with his natural surroundings. Nearly always any attempted co-existence of mind and matter is disturbed by external events, or by nature's power unleashed to exert tremendous pressures on man's finer spiritual qualities, thus precipitating a melancholy despair. An awareness of nature, then, Frost considered of great importance since it plays a primary role in the destiny of man; even if sometimes it is only a negative part. Much of the poet's own awareness of nature derived from his interest in botany and many of his natural settings are presented from a botanist's viewpoint.<sup>3</sup>

No complex academic arguments are used to substantiate the poet's conviction that if man severs himself, or is severed by external action beyond his control, from being able to appreciate nature, the delicate balance of mind and matter is upset and despair born of spiritual collapse can occur. To support his case that mind and matter retain their individual qualities, but paradoxically depend on each other for existence, Frost employed simple domestic poems from which the reader must draw his own conclusions. It is easy to discern the message that a beautiful universe is of no use if man cannot appreciate it, and it is difficult for him to do so because he must continually be on guard if his spirit is not to be engulfed by the crass materialism that surrounds him.

The poet's own strong existentialist and Romantic belief in the need for an individual's self-reliance within an indifferent or hostile cosmos clashed with the inherited Pauline doctrine of an inherent human evil about which little could be done. To some extent the element of despair, which creeps into Frost's early poetry when he investigates man's spiritual war of survival, is the product of the Puritan belief in predestination. Puritan determinist theology, which stated that it was virtually impossible to improve one's spiritual lot in the surrounds of a physical cosmos, combined with Frost's own existential beliefs and led in part to the evaluation of his dual vision of things.

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3. In her book, *New Hampshire's Child*, Lesley Frost testifies to the extent that her father botanized around Derry. She often accompanied him on such expeditions and may even be the little girl mentioned in "The Self-Seeker".

In the mythological and Ovidian fable, "The Demiurge's Laugh"<sup>4</sup> from *A Boy's Will*, illusion and reality are juxtaposed to present a dual vision of what can be expected if science and metaphysics are searched for ultimate answers. Based partly on Keats's "Why Did I Laugh Tonight?" Frost's poem describes his personal search for spiritual values within a nature depicted as a Shiva-like destroyer and Vishnu-like creator. "The Demiurge's Laugh" is a poem of despair that succeeds in identifying man's latent creative spirit with the alien and amorphous quality of the dark woods.

The poet indulges in much inward scrutiny (probably a legacy from Puritan conditioning) by way of his persona's vain hope of learning the metaphysical mysteries of life. An air of scientific assuredness, typical of the late Romantic period, turns to despair when the persona's idealist qualities confront the facts of the physical world. The new scientific discoveries on evolution, which present themselves in the form of a taunting demiurge, work to further undermine man's tenuous spiritual confidence. The persona's egotistic faith in his own moral judgement is shaken by the demiurge, who arises behind him to laugh mockingly and disrespectfully. Man is shown to have evolved into a victim of the materialist universe and to seek only temporal pleasures at the expense of his spiritual peace. The demon casts a cloak of scornful pessimism over such limited aspirations of material success,

The Demon arose from his wallow to laugh,  
Brushing the dirt from his eye as he went;  
And well I knew what the Demon meant.

The persona feels "a fool to have been so caught" by the demiurge; he knows, deep down, that the materialism he hunted "was no true god". Then just as the young man's spiritual "light was beginning to fail", bringing with it despair for his future and the future of mankind, there comes a moment of recognition that the lust for power and wealth is useless. Such things have only an ephemeral

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4. In Gnosticism, the demiurge is the creator of positive evil and is specifically of the material world. In philosophy the demiurge is a craftsman who orders and arranges the physical world, bringing it as far as possible into the best rational pattern. From his classical readings the poet discovered that Plato had revived the myth that the act of creation was assigned to a demiurge who used the elements of matter for creation, thus making his creation lower than the ideal spiritual form. See Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 326.



material value and bring no lasting gratification. The scorn of the demiurge enables the persona to realize his initial folly, "That I suddenly heard - all I needed to hear: / It has lasted me many and many a year." The question that remains is can he recover his neglected spiritual values, or has he already lost the power of self-determination due to their gradual erosion throughout the evolving generations.

Despair is the price one pays for attempting to attain an impossible goal. To Frost it is a forgivable sin to have such high aspirations. Only a good man, he believed, has the capacity for absolute failure and can experience the melancholy depression that accompanies it. In "The Demiurge's Laugh" this despondency ("Thereafter I sat me against a tree") results from the disintegration of the persona's belief in the good intentions of his own behaviour and occurs after he eventually realizes that he seeks the unachievable goal of ultimate happiness through material possessions.

The impact of Darwinism caused the poet to feel that it did not leave enough scope for the "provinces of God" (that is, spiritual values). Darwinism greatly eroded Frost's confidence in the ability of man to maintain purity of mental intention. Not surprisingly, therefore, the persona is shown to abandon his search into the metaphysics of his own motivations after experiencing the shocking revelation of the demiurge. He must accept that his hopes of achieving total spiritual happiness can be corrupted in the alien emptiness experienced after a life oriented towards materialist pursuits.

Much of the gloom evident in Frost's first three books of poetry emanates from this clash between spiritual idealism and shabby experience; between the vision of man as he might be and the man as he is. These early books were composed at a stage in the poet's life where disheartening self-criticism was threatening to overcome his determination to persevere with his life's ambition to be a recognized poet. The humiliation and bitter amusement that clouded the poet's thoughts were given voice in his early poetry; he imagined himself incurably idle, self-indulgent and without worldly competence. This pessimistic outlook is particularly noticeable in the statement, "A man at thirty should have done one little constructive thing, made some sort of success out of something. I have never succeeded to any job I tackled".<sup>5</sup>

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5. Mertins, op.cit., p. 90.

Much of Frost's despondency over lack of personal achievement in life is prominent in poems such as "Pan with Us", which, like "The Demiurge's Laugh", searches for a metaphysical illumination of a particular moral code. Frost's tendency to see man as an insignificant being in the cosmos was enhanced by lack of recognition of his poetic skills. Disillusionment with mankind is partially why Frost presents sweeping descriptions of nature in "Pan with Us" with little account given of the presence of spiritual man. An exception, perhaps, is the brief mention of homespun children "Who see so little they tell no tales", and who themselves appear to be little more than an extension of nature.

Pan's pipes traditionally symbolize the notion of erotic anguish, and in this particular poem the demigod wants to use them to play a tune for his physical kingdom,

He stood in the zephyr, pipes in hand,  
On a height of naked pasture land;  
In all the country he did command

A contrast is established between Pan's love of solitude, "He saw no smoke and he saw no roof. / That was well! and he stamped a hoof" and his haunting need for an audience to which he can play in an attempt to equate moral decisions with the inflexibility of the physical state. Yet Pan is baffled in his attempt to choose a suitable tune because the static and unbending physical world that he represents is antithetical to the values of the 'new-world song' as applicable to the scientific discoveries of the late Romantic era.<sup>6</sup>

On one hand, then, the poet's dual vision saw the scientific discoveries enabling man to be less a victim of the uncaring universe in which he lived, while on the other he saw the new theories making it more difficult for man to attune himself to the opposing values of the natural world. Frost was convinced that the material element of the universe could be just as impotent and helpless as man if it lacked man's appreciation of its values. Without mind, the existence of

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6. The view of the impotency of Pan is in direct contrast to Thoreau's view when he wrote "In my Pantheon, Pan still reigns in his pristine glory...for the great god Pan is not dead, as was rumored.... Perhaps of all the gods of New England and of ancient Greece, I am most constant at his shrine." Thoreau, *A Week*, p. 64.

beautiful matter is of no consequence and Pan can only ponder that

Times were changed from what they were:  
Such pipes kept less of power to stir  
The fruited bough of the juniper  
And the fragile bluets clustered there  
Than the merest aimless breath of air.

Whereas man at one stage gained much spiritual inspiration from nature, now it seems that nature has little influence over him unless it is in a threatening sense, "And the world had found new terms of worth." Such a turn of events is unsatisfactory to all concerned; but, as Frost sadly acknowledged, little could be done to recapture the allure of ruralism to man.

Despite the overwhelming pessimistic note in Frost's early poetry there are times when some of Emerson's transcendental optimism shines through the bleakness of his melancholy vision, as when Frost tried to believe that what cannot be altered must be accepted.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this belief is what prevented him from indulging his various suicidal inclinations. Emerson, in the passage from "Self Reliance", indirectly shamed Frost into continuing the fight against a personal sense of oppression, "And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark."<sup>8</sup>

To Emerson, "Entire self-reliance belongs to the intellect. One soul is a counterpoise for all souls"<sup>9</sup> and further, "Every man beholds his human condition with a degree of melancholy."<sup>10</sup> Man, to Emerson, always tends to be pessimistic, but nevertheless is not alone in his spiritual struggle. Emerson envisaged a vast Yeatsian-like Spiritus Mundi, where all the souls meet and exchange a common knowledge while

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7. At the height of the Romantic Movement in America, Emerson wrote in "Self-Reliance", "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the Divine Providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events." Emerson, op.cit., p. 32.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., p. 221.

10. Ibid., p. 209.

concurrently gaining combined strength. Frost felt that Emerson's confidence was precarious because of his over-insistence in claims to spiritual freedom. Where Emerson cherished the whim of a spritually free man looking with hope to the future, Frost saw man restrained by materialism into wrestling with the present while morbidly meditating on the past.

Frost was only half right in his belief that Emerson lacked a vision of evil, or a sense of wrong in the world. Emerson was aware of the existence of emotions harmful to man's inner spiritual well-being, but he chose to assign them to external life.<sup>11</sup> In his essay "The Tragic", spiritual suffering is considered to be only apparent; evil is not acknowledged as an all-encompassing or absolute force. The small significance attached to evil by Emerson did much to erode Frost's faith in transcendental optimism. There is no *Spiritus Mundi* from which Frost's personae can gain spiritual strength. Once they lose the initiative in the material universe through adverse and often unpredictable circumstances all that is left is the despairing acceptance of melancholy circumstances which cannot be altered.

Within the overall pessimistic vision in his poetry of despair Frost was able to examine man's values in regard to the forces of life and death. In the elegy "My ButterFly", written while the poet was teaching at Salem, and inspired after an autumn walk at Dartmouth, Frost attacks the paradox of life and death after the persona of the poem (the youth of *A Boy's Will*) discovers the wing of a butterfly among fallen leaves,<sup>12</sup>

I found that wing broken today!  
For thou art dead, I said,  
And the strange birds say.  
I found it with the withered leaves  
Under the eaves.

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11. At the age of twenty Emerson wrote in his journals, "There is a huge and disproportionate abundance of evil on earth. Indeed the good that is here is but a little island of light amidst the unbounded ocean." Newton Arvin, "The House of Pain: Emerson and the Tragic Sense", *Hudson Review*, Vol. 12 (Spring, 1959), p. 42.

12. See Thompson, *Early Years*, pp. 162-63.

A slight familiarity with the esoteric teachings of Anoesis allowed Frost to use the butterfly to represent the spirit of life that is crushed by the winged foot of the angel of death. In "My Butterfly", the tiny winged creature is meant to stand for man's spiritual fancies on earth after they have been smothered by all the limitations imposed on them by an omnipotent deity,

It seemed God let thee flutter from His gentle clasp,  
Then fearful He had let thee win  
Too far beyond Him to be gathered in,  
Snatched thee, o'ereager, with ungentle grasp.

Melancholy existentialist protests are made in the poem about the cruel power of predestination over the self-determination of spiritual man,

Thou didst not know, who tottered, wandering on high,  
That fate had made thee for the pleasure of the wind,  
With those great careless wings,  
Nor yet did I.

It seems that man is not yet at liberty to formulate his own decisions; by God not trusting him, man's individuality and sense of purpose are destroyed and he becomes the victim of fate.

Much contradiction in feelings between the poet's dual vision of the doctrine of self-reliance as preached by the Romantics and the powers of a Puritan-like sense of predestination is displayed in "My Butterfly". The result is a pensive elegy of despair, where the flowers are dead, the sun extinct, and spiritual man, in the form of the butterfly, is seen to be as transient as the leaves of the trees in autumn. The death of the butterfly is important only when it comes to represent the spiritual depression of man. In the case of the poem, man himself is represented by the narrator who is affected adversely by the cycle of physical life brought about by the changing seasons. It is clear how Frost sought, even at such an early stage in his poetic career, to show how external forces, such as those of material nature, could have a powerful effect on man's spiritual outlook.

Because "My Butterfly" was composed during a transitional phase of poetic composition in America, many of the European Romantic mannerisms can be detected in its verses. It was Frost's first "commercial" poem (selling for \$15 to *The Independent*); about it the poet confessed "You will find me using traditional clichés....I

was even guilty of 'theeing' and 'thouing', a crime I have not committed since."<sup>13</sup> Such a blatant use of archaic words, rich in vowel sounds, alliteration and conventional rhythms points to a strong poetic regard for Longfellow's stoic endurance, a quality reflected in much of that poet's life and poetry.<sup>14</sup>

The degree of Frost's elaboration upon Longfellow's theme of time as the enemy of finite man, naturally, is important. Instead of man being the complete victim of time, Frost postulated that man's spiritual element gave him a chance of enduring. The poet had a melancholy awareness of the spirit being lashed to a physical body that was at the mercy of time and decay. The material elements subject to the ravages of time, then, can exert considerable pressure on man's spiritual outlook, often changing it from an optimistic to a pessimistic one. To some extent these ravages were felt by Frost, who reached middle age without his poetry being acknowledged by the public. Failure by American editors to recognise his work, understandably, did little to alleviate the poet's melancholy disposition.<sup>15</sup>

When dealing with abstract philosophic ideas in verse, such as the transient nature of man's body and the desire for the spirit to endure beyond it, Frost found that it suited his purpose to present simple specific examples wherein he could expound his dual vision of the need for co-existence between mind and matter in the universe.<sup>16</sup>

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13. Mertins, op.cit., p. 197.

14. Frost wrote, "One of the real American poets of yesterday... was Longfellow." Munson, *A Study*, p. 84. In support of his view that Longfellow had more than just a minor influence on Frost's poetic craft, Grant argues that Frost would not have named *A Boy's Will* after a line from a poem by Longfellow unless he had more than a dilettante's interest. Grant sees Frost's attraction evident in very early poems such as "The Later Minstrel", published in Pinkerton's *Critic* (March, 1907). The title, "A Boy's Will", was eventually taken from Longfellow's poem, "My Lost Youth" (1855), because of that poet's connection to youth, trees, and wind, all important elements in Frost's first book. The basic difference between Frost's book and Longfellow's poem is in the tone. Where Longfellow sentimentalizes the past, Frost comments ironically on a youth's "love with being misunderstood."

15. Frost was almost forty years of age before the publication of his first book. By that time he had accumulated the subject matter of about three books.

16. Such a vision has been termed "Radical Dualism" or "Psychophysical Parallelism". Carington, op.cit., p. 7. By presenting specific examples Frost was putting into effect his theory that "Life is a mechanic mixture in which matter and spirit are made one by the paddle of action." Morrison, op.cit., p. 52.

His rural Yankee characters, therefore, came to represent the intangible values of the mind, while matter, which invariably has an effect on man's temperament, commonly takes its form from the New England countryside.

Frost's New England is not the kindly rustic setting found in much of the earlier regional poetry. There is no optimistic assent of the complete superiority of spiritual man allowed by the help of a benevolent deity. Instead, it is a region ruled over by an indifferent and, in some cases, definitely hostile nature. Frost's New England is ever ready to display its brute power in phenomena such as violent snow-storms that threaten to blast loose man's precarious foothold on earth. With no deity to appeal to, Frost's Yankees must determine their own survival. Some, however, like the persona of "Storm Fear", despair of their ability to withstand the crushing material forces exerted by nature.

"Storm Fear" is a fine example of Frost's dramatic lyrics. When speaking of the poems of *A Boy's Will* Frost mentioned that "'Storm Fear' was the youngest of the lot, the last finished before publication."<sup>17</sup> It is probable, however, that the poem was written in draft form at an earlier date, as it is set in Derry, in the south-eastern corner of New Hampshire, before the poet's second surviving child was born.

The poem opens in a style typical of the late Romantic era where nature (in this case in the form of a storm), is personified as a beast. The hostile and aggressive beast "works against" man "in the dark", reinforcing Frost's view that the external world is a threat. The stormy wind, an insidious enemy to man's tranquility, which "whispers with a sort of stifled bark", viciously attacks man's primary spiritual institution, the home. The wind brings as an ally the New England farmer's fearsome enemy, the obliterating snow.<sup>18</sup>

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17. Mertins, op.cit., p. 106.

18. Frost had much experience with the onslaughts of nature. In a letter to Lesley on 8 February (circa) 1920 he wrote "I write, this snowed in by the greatest snow-storm of all time....We are running short of food fuel and water. How long we can last we are not experienced enough in rationing to calculate." Grade, *Letters*, p. 75.

Frost was aware that men must fight on physical terms a battle for life against the paralysis of winter. The blizzard, which in "Storm Fear" is anthropomorphized as a wolf, is held at bay only by the physical quality of the man-made cabin window. Much of Frost's early work, especially that in the Romantically influenced *A Boy's Will*, contains this antropomorphic quality.

"Stars", written in 1900 after the poet was infected with his wife's bitterness over the loss of their first child, Elliot, also contains a dominating anthropomorphic strain in the form of the stars in the heavens. The snow imagery of this poem, together with the alien indifference of the stars to mortal man's plight, gives a frigid and despairing outlook on the future of mankind. Part of this feeling of the coldness of the universe towards man is evident in the lines

And yet with neither love nor hate,  
Those stars like some snow-white  
Minerva's snow-white marble eyes  
Without the gift of sight.

The stars gaze unseeingly and uncaringly on man's struggle for life in a bleak and inhospitable landscape. Even the grave, the final resting place for man's weary body, is made invisible by a smothering blanket of snow. All memory of man is erased by elements resentful of his attempt at spiritual imposition in the material universe. Added poignancy is given to man's struggle to survive by the juxtaposition of his "faltering few steps" amid the raging storm below, with the eternal stability of the pitiless stars above.

The despair projected in "Stars", vast though it is, is no greater than that inherent in "Storm Fear". The extent of the poet's depression in this poem can perhaps best be illustrated by making a brief comparison of "Storm Fear" with the seemingly analogous "Snow-Bound" by Whittier, and Emerson's "The Snow Storm". Both these early poems influenced Frost in his use of imagery and setting. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how entirely different Frost's poem is in its final depiction of man's spiritual plight.

For Emerson, nature and man were in closer harmony than they could ever be for Frost. It is not strange, then, that "The Snow Storm" should present nature as constructive rather than threatening and destructive. The wind in this poem, although wild, is filled with a



boundless energy. Viewed initially as a conquering hero, "Announced by all the trumpets of the sky", then as a fierce artificer who, besides demonstrating man's helplessness, the wind is able to teach a lesson about the beauty and constructive power of nature. Similarly, Whittier's poem, although initially different from Emerson's in that it opens with the calm before the storm, also holds nature to be no direct threat to mankind.

Humanity, according to Emerson, must give and take if it is to survive in a material universe. His poem offers an example in submission to the naked power of nature. In contrast, in "Storm Fear", Frost despairs of nature doing anything but taking. Like Whittier, Frost places most emphasis on the spirit of man rather than on the acts of nature. Here the affinity ends; the optimism of Whittier's poetic vision is the complete opposite to the pessimism found in Frost's poetry of despair.

The narrator of "Snow-Bound" casts his mind back to his childhood days, where he sadly recalls memories of "lighted faces" that "smile no more". Yet he is able to conquer this melancholy mood, caused by an awareness of the physical transience of man, by clinging to a spiritual faith in a benevolent deity, "Yet Love will dream, and Faith will trust / (Since He who knows our need is just)". Frost had none of Whittier's Christian humanism or Emerson's mystical pantheism with which to bolster the spiritual despondency of his persona; the young man of "Storm Fear" must, therefore, suffer the disquieting fear of the unknown and sadly wonder how he can save himself and his loved ones.

Whittier suggests the brute force of mindless nature solely to emphasize the unique spiritual quality of the human mind. His storm becomes important only in its ability to enforce a companionship among those indoors. Similarly, Emerson's poem, in conveying an idea of isolation, "The sled and travellers stopped, the courier's feet / Delayed, all friends shut out ...", only serves to enhance the sense of privacy felt by those inside together. Frost's poem, which emphasizes the persona and his family as a meagre human force ("Two and a child") to face the threatening natural force, is the antithesis to Emerson's feeling of cosy bonhomie. Rather than feeling a sense of community or privacy as a result of the storm's onslaught, the persona despairs over his ability to endure,

And my heart owns a doubt  
 Whether 'tis in us to arise with day  
 And save ourselves unaided.

All three poems of the storm relate fire (symbolizing in each case the spirit of man) with the cold of the raging storm. Whereas the fires of both the earlier poems are able to hold the cold at bay, however, that is not the case with Frost's fire. "Storm Fear" contains no warmth to laugh at the cold nor beat it "back with tropic heat" as does Whittier's.<sup>19</sup> In "Storm Fear" the cold creeps up insidiously as the fire dies down, threatening to engulf the persona and his family. In this pessimistic and despairing view of the relative strengths of the material cold and the spiritual fire, Frost seems to refute his own claim that he is basically Emersonian in his outlook. It becomes obvious that, although Frost used a surface imagery and setting similar to that of both "Snow-Bound" and "The Snow Storm", his fundamental poetic vision is far bleaker than Emerson's.

Although Frost's poetry of despair is based on direct experience of events that either occurred to him personally, or which he actually witnessed, the imagery he used to convey these experiences is derived mainly from his broader interest in nature. Flower imagery, for instance, provides the background for many of the early poems. This reflects the poet's love for botany, influenced in part by his friend, Carl Burrell.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, the same botany is used to provide the background setting for the despair suffered by a character based on Carl Burrell, who had his feet smashed in a saw-mill accident and who was paid a paltry sum of compensation before the full extent of his injury could be established.

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19. Whittier took the introduction to his poem from Cornelius Agrippa's *Occult Philosophy*, "As the Spirits of Darkness be stronger in the dark, so Good Spirits, which be Angels of Light, are augmented not only by the Divine Light of the Sun, but also by our common Wood Fire: and as the Celestial Fire drives away dark spirits, so also this our Fire of Wood doth the same." Richard Harter Fogle, ed., *The Romantic Movement in American Writing* (New York, 1966), p. 418.

20. Burrell lent Frost Mrs William Starr Dona's *How to Know the Wild Flowers: A Guide to the Names, Haunts, and Habits of Our Common Wild Flowers*, which also contained scattered nature poems from poets such as Emerson, Longfellow, Thoreau and Bryant. Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 218.

Frost's love of botany enabled him to gather material for many of his early poems. In fact it was while on a botany expedition which specialized in ferns, on the shores of Lake Willoughby in northern Vermont, that Frost encountered Mrs Connolley and obtained the idea of "A Servant to Servants".<sup>21</sup> Frost, who took his family on this particular expedition, used to obtain milk and eggs from the Connolley farm. While talking with Mrs Connolley, Frost noted how worn out she was by the daily routine of the domestic chores she carried out for her husband and his hired men. Mrs Connolley had openly admitted to the poet that mental trouble ran in her family and that she herself had previously "been away" at the State Asylum.<sup>22</sup> But it was the woman's determination to survive, no matter what the cost, or the dubious rewards, that most impressed the poet.

In the Lathems' copy of the first edition of *North of Boston*, Frost wrote that the character of the wife of "A Servant to Servants" was "A composite of at least three farm wives one of who I was glad to learn years afterward didn't go the way I foresaw."<sup>23</sup> The wife mentioned in the quote is a reference to Mrs Connolley, the only one of the three women actually named by Frost as a part of the composite. Another of the original women, however, could have been the wife of John Field, "an honest, hardworking, but shiftless" Irishman with a destitute family, who appears in the "Baker Farm" chapter of *Walden*. Ample evidence exists to prove that Frost had read much of Thoreau and was particularly fond of *Walden*.<sup>24</sup> It is likely, therefore, that the poet was fully aware of Thoreau's description of Mrs Field, "she too was brave to cook so many successive dinners in the recesses of that lofty stove; with round greasy face and bare breast, still thinking to improve her condition one day; with the never absent mop in one hand, and yet no effects of it visible anywhere."<sup>25</sup> The basic

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21. The incident was recorded in "Company" by Lesley Frost in a notebook that has since been destroyed.

22. See Thompson, *Early Years*, pp. 350-54.

23. Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 568.

24. Frost mentions *Walden* as one of his favourite books containing "everything from a tale of adventure...to a declaration of independence and a gospel of wisdom." Robert Frost, *The Listener*, Vol. 52 (26 August, 1954), p. 319. From S.P.C. Duvall, 'Robert Frost's "Directive" out of *Walden*', *American Literature*, Vol. 31 (January, 1960), p. 483.

25. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 139.

difference between Mrs Field and Frost's wife of "A Servant to Servants" is that Frost's subject has lost all hope of improving her lot. She has yielded to a despair that points towards insanity, yet still manages to survive, even with madness as the only reward. Her blind determination to go on in life in the face of despair captured the poet's imagination and is used by him to exemplify the spiritual fortitude needed by mankind in adverse circumstances. A melancholy doubt, however, prevails: is the struggle to survive worthwhile?

Frost did not provide an answer; it would have been glib for him to do so. He concentrated instead on presenting, as thoroughly as possible, selective details of the woman's character and of her bitter struggle against circumstance. The reader must make his own decision about the extent of the sacrifice he is willing to endure in his own personal battle to survive. Such things to Frost are individual to each and every man. This feeling is in full accord with the poet's belief that spiritual man must determine his own fate in a materialist universe.

In his endeavour to establish in his poetry a delicate balance of external matter with the inner mind, Frost often set the egos of his characters against an imposing neurotic anxiety. This particular brand of anxiety is synonymous with the general notion of fear, except that it emphasizes the insidious nature of the internal fear that some people have the misfortune to experience. Frost held intangible neurotic fear to be far worse a threat to spiritual harmony than any fear coming from an external source.<sup>26</sup> From his knowledge of human psychology through observation rather than text-book study,<sup>27</sup> Frost

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26. Besides neurotic anxiety, Freud also categorized two other types of anxiety; reality, or objective anxiety caused by external fear; and moral anxiety caused by conscience. Hall, op.cit., p. 62.

27. What little formal study of psychology Frost did was conducted under William James and George Santayana at Harvard in 1898. Frost said "Now I really didn't know much psychology, except maybe by osmosis from James and Santayana in Harvard." Mertins, op.cit., p. 100. Both these men influenced Frost; James combining psychology with philosophy and metaphysics. He saw man's purpose as the attainment of maximum insight into the world and metaphysical puzzles as needing the most urgent attention. Santayana influenced Frost by reinforcing his early feeling that if God did exist, then He was indifferent to man's needs.

understood that defence mechanisms have a number of irrational ways of dealing with the very real problem of neurotic anxiety. He was also aware that any failing of the defence mechanism would result in a person's ego being overwhelmed by anxiety and end in nervous breakdown or even, in extreme cases, madness.

In dealing with the problem of neurotic anxiety and its effect on man's morale, Frost did not attempt to indulge in a heavy scientific probing into the minds of his subjects. He found that a simple presentation by the characters of their own stories allowed the reader sufficient scope to make his own judgements. By employing the dramatic monologue and dialogue as mediums of poetic exposition, Frost enhanced his aim of constructing simple but deep poems that move relentlessly towards both spiritual and psychological illumination. Frost found the dramatic monologue, with its subsequent integration of the social and the intellectual spheres, to be a particularly suitable form to present a dual vision of matter and mind. The monologue especially served to tighten and control the mass of subjective experience, enabling a simplification of the poet's task of portraying complex philosophic values in both apposition and opposition.

In "A Servant to Servants" the dramatic monologue is used as an effective means by which the harassed farmer's wife can recount her predicament to a patient stranger. To this amateur botanist, who in real life was the poet himself, the woman says "'I didn't make you know how glad I was / To have you come and camp here on our land.'" In the visitor, the farmer's wife recognizes a sensitive person who, because he can appreciate the frail beauty of nature's ferns, can also be expected to understand (she asks for no sympathy) the woman's suffering. A juxtaposition of material and spiritual frailty is presented to prove that it is possible for both these opposing philosophic values to co-exist in the mind of man. First, however, he must attain a balance of their contradictions.

As a dramatic poet, Frost realized the importance of compressing dialogue and favoured expressing difficult and complex emotions by implication rather than struggling to find words adequate for the purpose. In this way the vivid speech of the woman recalls to mind the talk of one who is hysterical, mentally disturbed or in a state of

complete despair. The difficulty the woman experiences in expressing her spiritual turmoil is recognized as a widespread human dilemma and her inability to remedy her inarticulateness is the cause of much of her depression,

"With a houseful of hungry men to feed  
I guess you'd find....It seems to me  
I can't express my feelings any more"

Frost learnt to cut directly to the heart of his subject. Prophetic confessions are presented by past action being elucidated by characters conversing in an abbreviated, compressed speech of the present. In this way the wife of "A Servant to Servants" presents a psychologically motivated soliloquy<sup>28</sup> that is a credible manifestation of her disturbed mental state. The overall effect is to allow the reader to share her intense spiritual despair. A poignant sense of intimacy is created and it is possible to observe the melancholy action of the poem through the weary eyes of the person involved.

Human life, according to Frost's melancholy vision, does not conform to or integrate with nature: it is not an heroic existence, but one of perseverance. Much of his early poetry comes to deal with the exploration and discovery of the limits a character can endure before a tragic state of despair and eventual mental breakdown occurs. The ability of the human spirit to suffer and endure in the face of overbearing hardship is the theme of "The Self-Seeker". Material forces in the form of a machine and a pitiless lawyer try to break the spirit of a keen amateur botanist: the machine by smashing his legs, the lawyer by paying him a trifling amount of compensation. Not even the "Broken One's" impetuous friend, Willis, is more aware than the injured man of the parsimonious nature of the monetary settlement.

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28. Schuckling, in his *Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays* distinguishes between two types of soliloquy;

- a. "a means which the author uses in order to instruct his audience about events, or about the plans and character of the personage speaking"; and
- b. "the expression of an individual who, thinking aloud, renders account of his most intimate thoughts and feelings."

Thomas Van Laan, *The Idiom of Drama* (New York, 1970), p. 31. The second type represents an opportunity to explore the speaker's mind and is the one Frost uses in his poetry.

The "Broken One" declares "'I'm going to sell my soul, or rather, feet. / Five hundred dollars for the pair, you know.'" Yet despite his cognizance of the unfairness of the deal he will not let materialist haggles encroach on his desperate attempt to maintain spiritual tranquility.

Life and death are set in apposition in the poem to highlight man's daily involvement with material things. Of the buzz-saw whine, the crippled man observes, "'No doubt it has a sort of prosperous sound, / And it's our life.'" Willis morbidly answers "'Yes, when it's not our death.'" The realization that man has no choice but to interact with material things, however, brings the "Broken One's" melancholy and philosophic reply "'You make that sound as if it wasn't so / With everything. What we live by we die by.'"

The "Broken One" knows that there is no choice but to accept the lawyer's paltry sum. He does not want to vex his spirit in a useless effort, "'it's that or fight, and I don't want to fight'". All his strength is needed simply to endure and survive. To Willis he says

"Don't you be hard on me. I have to take  
What I can get. You see they have the feet,  
Which gives them the advantage in the trade.  
I can't get back the feet in any case."

Money cannot compensate for the loss of the feet, a point Willis acknowledges by saying "'With you the feet have nearly been the soul'". The feet enabled the amateur botanist to gain a spiritual freedom (much the same as that experienced by the young man in "Flower-Gathering") by his being able to wander freely in nature and achieve an aesthetic balance of mind and matter in his personality. The "Broken One" will not sell his soul, represented by his feet, to his anxious friend, because as he says, "'But I'm not selling those, I'm giving them.'"

The only choice left to the crippled man is to exercise his spirit in nature vicariously through the child. Anne, about whom he states, "'She's going to do my scouting in the field'". A contrast is established in the poem between the spiritual innocence of the "little barefoot girl" and the "baritone importance" of the insensitive, materialist lawyer, who does not even know the name of the accident victim with whom he deals. To add insult to injury it turns out that

the lawyer has made investigations at the saw-mill to determine if any means exist whereby the payment of compensation, even a paltry \$500, can be avoided.

Willis is bitter at the lawyer's action. The "Broken One", however, understands more fully what is involved. He says to Anne, but refers to the lawyer, "'Pressed into service means pressed out of shape.'" The botanist is aware that material values have subverted the spiritual conscience of the lawyer. Rather than lower himself to the lawyer's level, the "Broken One" seeks an escape in the form of the Ram's Horn orchid that the girl has brought him. The poet's own knowledge of the local habits of the flora and fauna serves him well and a gem of local information is given to add credibility to the poem: the woodchuck prefers the Ram's Horn seedpot to the farmer's beans.

In "The Self-Seeker", as in the other poems of despair, Frost exhibits a tender affinity for his subject. No accusations and few explicit judgements are made; the poet refuses to moralize; instead a clear awareness of value judgements and how they affect personalities is shown. Frost conveys the idea to the reader, that spiritual man must either learn to endure the sorrow imposed upon him from external sources, or else cease to survive. A melancholy vision is presented of a grim world where the positive pole of endurance is always balanced by a negative one of suffering and despair. However, any humaneness displayed by the poet in his presentation of characters like the "Broken One" has little to do with pity. Since Frost does not presume to judge, he is rarely tempted to pity; his vision is a dual one, both hard and fraternal. Above all, sentimentalism is avoided; it will do nothing to ease the bitter struggle to survive.

If the melancholy battle to exist is hard on Frost's males, it can be disastrous for his females, who are often framed in states of abject hopelessness, or even broken into madness. More finely tuned in the emotional sense than their menfolk, Frost's women find little escape from the pressing burden of mental anguish. Such is the case with the woman of "A Servant to Servants", who tells her own story with all the pathos that characterises one resigned to accepting a terrible, inevitable fate. In this particular poem there is no development or change in character, no decisions are made, no action results, no logical conclusion is evident, and no future conduct of the woman is



predicted. Her individual struggle to retain sanity and endure comprises the complete drama.

In early poems like "A Servant to Servants", "The Self-Seeker", and others, Frost is primarily concerned with the courage of his characters in the face of despair and almost inevitable spiritual defeat. Courage to endure is what Frost admired most in his individuals, "Courage is the human virtue that counts most—courage to act on limited knowledge and insufficient evidence. That's all any of us have".<sup>29</sup> In fact ideas on the courage of the individual were first explained as early as "Into My Own" of *A Boy's Will*. Because of their courage to endure Frost's characters do not seek suicide as an escape from the suffering imposed on their spirits by a material world. Suicide is rejected because it offers a dubious escape from the problem of how to live. Frost himself was confronted with this problem on a number of occasions in his life. He realized, however, that suicide, favours only one side and thus would not solve the tension between life and death. The problem is to live in recognition of the contradiction and tension that life and death produce. Many of Frost's characters despair at finding a solution to this difficult enigma, but they never give up trying.

Frost saw despair occurring at a point between two incompatibles: intense physical life, and the ultimate certainty of death. This natural tension is further aggravated by any decline of spontaneous spiritual freedom into mechanical routine, as in "A Servant to Servants"; or by the sacrifice of spiritual independence for the bonds of material gain, as in "The Self-Seeker".

The farmer's wife of "A Servant to Servants" struggles to survive amid her domestic drudgery, even though she despairs of improvement. Sadly she becomes aware that probably the sole payment for her battle to survive will be eventual madness. There is no opportunity even to escape into nature: she is fixed in a physical world with which she is unable to identify. It seems incredible to the woman that "things more like feathers" can dictate the comings and goings of her visitor. But even the fantasy of botany holds her attention only for a moment.

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29. Donald Key, "A Minority of One", *The Cedar Rapids Gazette* (13 April, 1959), p. 15. From Issacs, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

Quickly her inherent pragmatism comes to the fore,

I almost think if I could do like you,  
 Drop everything and live out on the ground—  
 But it might be, come night, I shouldn't like it,  
 Or a long rain. I should soon get enough,  
 And be glad of a good roof overhead.

Her moment of fantasizing, however, is enough to provide a sharp contrast to the mundane reality of her daily existence. It also proves that her story must have some worth if even a person of her practical frame of mind and desire for the security of a home, is distraught over her predicament.

Frost employs the surrounding nature in "A Servant to Servants" to imply more important things. An impression of the haunted soul of the farmer's wife in Frost's poem is conveyed by the juxtaposition of her endless domestic chores with the vast freedom suggested by the dazzling waters of the lake clearly visible from her kitchen window. Described as "'a fair, pretty sheet of water'", the lake is suggestive of the human mind, since its living processes, like the workings of the unconscious, are hidden. A connection, then, is made between the mental and the physical world, between the potential for spiritual escape encouraged by the still beauty of the lake, and its capacity for economic development that can destroy happiness by the extra work it creates.

The woman's life is a struggle to survive within the values represented by the fathomless water. Her husband, Len, who occasionally rents out cottages by its shores is endowed with the ability to look on the bright side of things; he does not have to suffer the daily nuisances and trials of life that his wife experiences. Len works hard "'from sun to sun'", but as the woman observes, it is a man's work, which does not have the heartbreaking quality of domestic routine. The steady accumulation of little things, Frost believed, leads ultimately to despair.

For Len, "'the best way out is always through'", and he applies this to his wife's condition. The woman readily admits he wants the best for her. "'He thinks I'll be all right'", she says; however, despairingly, she also knows that it is not medicine, but rest that she needs

"From cooking meals for hungry hired men  
And washing dishes after them—from doing  
Things over and over that just won't stay done."

Like her mother before her, Len's wife must suffer spiritual hardship and privation because of her devotion to a male. Nothing she can do will prevent Len from attempting greater material gain which involves the hiring of useless men who take advantage of him. The woman explains to the visitor what she thinks of the situation,

"We have four here to board, great good-for-nothings,  
Sprawling about the kitchen with their talk  
While I fry their bacon. Much they care!"

The men show no respect for the farmer's wife, so it is difficult for her to maintain self-respect. She continually lives in fear of sexual violence. Bitterly she makes a pun on Len's word "through" by adding "'then they'll be convinced'", to show that the men fail to understand her and will only be satisfied when she goes insane.

To protect herself against her fears the wife employs black humour, "'There's two can play at that'", she confides to the visitor, and hints that the fact she has been away to the "'State Asylum'" is used as a weapon of defence. Two poetic planes are thus presented: in one the reader identifies with the woman; in the other she identifies with madness that is given an added poignancy by the terrible story about her uncle's bestial form of insanity. The woman's madness, caused by despair, is juxtaposed with that of her uncle, who was kept in a cage where he screamed at night until, as the woman sinisterly remarks, "'They found a way to put a stop to it.'" <sup>30</sup>

Although the woman openly confesses, "'I have my fancies: it runs in the family'", it is difficult to establish the complete truth

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30. The question of whether or not an insane person should be put in an asylum or kept at home with the family continually plagued Frost. "A Servant to Servants" to some extent seems a rationalization by the poet over his rejection of his sister, who after signs of mental instability early in life, eventually went insane. Frost took warning from Jeanie's condition and three years after her death in 1929 spoke to John Bartlett, who recorded the meeting: "We all have our souls-and minds-to save. And it seems a miracle that we do; not once but several times. He [Frost] could look back and see his hanging by a thread. His sister wasn't able to save hers. She built protecting illusion around herself and went the road of dementia praecox." John T. Bartlett, "Notes from Conversations with Robert Frost", Thompson, *Years of Triumph*, p. 134.

about her alleged fits of madness. It is a point of conjecture whether her trip to the asylum was caused by hereditary insanity, or by her desperate attempt to flee from the domestic route that had become her life, from which anything, even an asylum, would seem a break.<sup>31</sup> But it was a break the woman could only use once, for now she realizes that simply to escape from one place to another will not ease her dilemma because the change will only wear out "'like a prescription'". There can be no escape from what is inside a person spiritually by simply seeking a new abode. This concept is something that Len cannot grasp. By showing the woman's decision to go on living, because as she says, "'there seems no other way'", Frost exhibits a despairing metaphysical pessimism, combined with a stoic sense of acceptance.

Frost's ultimate concern was not with any immediate emotional unrest, but with the frightening consequences of that unrest and survival beyond it. In "A Servant to Servants" he was concerned with showing how a woman lives through what it seems she cannot. The idea of sacrifice becomes archetypal when the wife says "'We didn't change without some sacrifice,'" and later resorts to the defence mechanism of rationalization to aid her in the battle to exist, "'I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going: / Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I?'" Despairingly she learns to accept the inevitable, "'I shan't catch up in this world, anyway.'"

The poetry of despair contains many problems that are common to humanity. No attempt is made to provide a ready solution; instead effort is expended to show how people actually cope with their problems. By appreciating the spiritual struggle that man endures in a hostile universe, Frost captures the despair inherent even among those with the ability to persevere. And one can not claim that those who survive have an unadulterated stoic acceptance of things, because that implies that they are above suffering from worldly influences. This is clearly not the case with Frost's Yankees. The external material world has a major influence on their approach to life. It is up to them, and the individual in general, to equate spiritual values to the material ones

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31. According to Jung "The lunatic is an individual completely overcome by his unconsciousness". This, however, is not the case with the farmer's wife. It seems that her main problem is workstrain.

around them. Frost's dual vision is but a recognition of this melancholy impasse of life.

The discovery and exploration of the limits of his subjects and of the paradox of mortal and spiritual humanity was of great interest to the New England poet. Not all limits, he found, are external; some are intrinsic to the personality; but both can lead to a melancholy resignation of one's role in life.<sup>32</sup> This fact is probably the premise upon which much of the poetry of despair is founded. The woman in "A Servant to Servants" is resigned to her fate, yet still clings to her sanity and her spiritual company, "'I'd rather you'd not go unless you must.'" Similarly, the cripple of "The Self-Seeker" seems resigned to accepting his hopeless state. He accepts that the impersonal lawyer cannot understand the tragic significance of his loss. This does not however, dilute the force of his final anguished cry that escapes to reflect the true state of his suppressed despair,

"You don't know what I mean about the flowers.  
Don't stop to try to now. You'll miss your train.  
Good-by." He flung his arms around his face.

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32. In the *Zarathustra* comment on his *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche wrote "Tragedy guides us to the final goal, which is resignation." Williams, op.cit., p. 38.

## CHAPTER VI

### FACT AND FANCY

But I was going to say when Truth broke in  
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,  
I should prefer to have some boy bend them  
As he went out and in to fetch the cows

"Birches"

It is rich in the blend of fact and fancy; of the  
intermingling of scenic loveliness and a psychological  
liveliness.<sup>1</sup>

Louis Untermeyer

1. Untermeyer, *American Poetry*, p. 33.

It has been said that the poetry of Robert Frost is an extension of his life and that the poet was aware of dichotomy within himself. This dichotomy, in fact, was partially responsible for his inconclusive, yet simultaneously thorough, poetic vision. It led to a continual vacillation between the alternatives of a totally subjective or a totally objective world that could never co-exist.

In his early poetry of fact and fancy Frost was concerned with getting as near to the truth of a particular human situation as possible. His dual vision, therefore, naturally encompassed both the conscious action and the unconscious thought, as manifest in a character's reveries or dreams. Poetry, he concluded, was exactly the right medium to conduct his study, because "Poetry", as he wrote to R.P.T. Coffin in 1938, "plays perilously between truth and make-believe".

Truth does not necessarily have to consist of provable, objective facts; it can involve fanciful notions which the mind creates. The illusions may even be a defence mechanism that enables a person to survive, or continue to exist. For that person those illusions could be absolutely real. When examining Frost's poetry it is necessary, therefore, to venture a little beyond the scope of literary criticism. The "escape" element in Frost's verse demands this. Stapledon stated that, 'The assessing of the "escape" element in literature cannot be left wholly to the literary critics. The psychologists and the sociologists ought to have something to say about it'<sup>2</sup> and in the poetry of fact and fancy, this must hold true. The poet's own mature grasp of the psychological problems of his subjects becomes apparent and it is necessary for the reader to have a basic understanding of such problems to appreciate fully the poet's art.

Because neither a totally subjective nor totally objective world can exist, the poet is left with a conglomeration of facts and fancies that cannot be organized into clear-cut categories from which to determine a binding spiritual philosophy. For his indecision in choosing a spiritual path Frost was accused by Yvor Winters, somewhat unfairly, of being an irresponsible spiritual drifter. The poet, however, considered it more reasonable to depict the interactions of

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2. Olaf Stapledon, "Escapism in Literature", *Scrutiny*, Vol. 8 (December, 1939), p. 306.

instinct and experience that prompt a person to conjure a phantom world of illusion, than to speculate idly on the chance of resolving a desirable spiritual philosophy. Such foolishness, to him, accomplished nothing, but instead led to a false security. Purposeful thought must be based on objective fact, since reality is also composed of the same objective fact. The true reality of a person's life is composed not merely of conscious action, but also of the unconscious reactions stimulated simultaneously by both objective fact and individual spiritual inclination. Thus the spiritual essence distinctive to man, based on his own fanciful idiosyncrasies cannot be ignored. Man's idiosyncrasies or unconscious thoughts become manifest in dreams or reveries and allow him to transcend the normal material existence by importing a new significance to otherwise seemingly unrelated events. The illusions of Frost's personae, in consequence, always have a definite and functional relationship to the surrounding material world of objective fact.

Earlier, the Transcendentalists had searched for their own way of expressing, in understandable terms, the instinctive and intuitive content they judged to be latent in the human mind. Their judgement was coloured by a particular belief that man must refuse to acquiesce in things as they are, but must be inspired by a vision of things as they should be. The efforts of the Transcendentalists were somewhat self-defeating, however, owing to too grand an idealism. They were inclined to hold a mystical acceptance of intellectual intuition as final, with the triggering stimuli of sensual experience having small importance. Although the Transcendentalists were correct in realizing that objective fact gained through the senses could not actually create ideas, they failed to understand that it could transform such thoughts into a useful and acceptable mode of human behaviour practicable to the material surroundings.

Frost did not fall into this same intellectual trap when writing his poetry of fact and fancy. He remained of divided consciousness: there were possibilities perhaps where intuition was not correct, where it alone could not be relied upon to reach a satisfying solution. To an existentialist like Frost, it was a sad fact to have to acknowledge that man is not the sole determiner of his own fate, and one which, understandably, imparted a more pessimistic perspective to his vision.



*Mountain Interval*<sup>3</sup> is a book whose poems tend to combine the inner lyric and the external narrative. It contains a poem entitled "The Road Not Taken", which provides an interesting illustration of the failure of human instinct to provide satisfactory answers to problems encountered in a material world. The narrator of the poem, a country stroller states his particular problem in the lines, "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, / And sorry I could not travel both". At a deeper level, the problem highlights the inability of man to determine what lies ahead of him in life and thus choose the path that would result in the most happiness. It is a sad fact of a transitory existence that not all avenues in life can be pursued.

A poem of nostalgic regret, "The Road Not Taken", with its elegiac air and autumnal mood, was written in memory of Edward Thomas, Frost's friend killed at Vimy Ridge during World War I.<sup>4</sup> Apparently Thomas inspired the poem by always regretting, while walking with Frost, the wildflowers missed on roads they had no time to travel.<sup>5</sup> The poet drew strength from Thomas in whom he saw the same tendency as himself to procrastinate over equally viable alternatives.

The narrator of "The Road Not Taken" acknowledges that he has little to do with determining his way in life. The decision he makes regarding the two paths is purely a speculative one, based on no objective fact apart from the thought that one route is less worn than the other. Human decision compared to the law of cause and effect, has little power in the universe, and it is with little seriousness that the narrator declares

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

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3. Apparently Frost quarrelled with George H. Browne, who ran a school in Cambridge, Mass., over the spelling of the title. Browne claimed, because the book was written after the cabin built in New Hampshire on the side of a hill between two valleys, it should have been called "intervale". Frost, however, persevered with "interval" for "its double meaning". Barry, *On Writing*, p. 71.

4. The poet stated this at Middlebury College on 9 November 1945. Reginald L. Cook, "Robert Frost's Asides", p. 357.

5. Lentricchia, *op.cit.*, p. 175.

By taking the "one less traveled by" the narrator's character is reminiscent of an Emersonian individuality. Such individuality, however, has its price and the narrator's attempt to impart an artificial rationality to what is, in fact, a completely arbitrary choice causes the poem to take on a sour note.

"The Road Not Taken" is more interesting than perhaps it would otherwise be (for it is a minor work) because it involves a clash between two elements of the poet's character. The scientific investigator in him made him try to discern the objective truth about nature's laws (in a manner similar to Darwin) while the existentialist philosopher in him liked to believe that man was the governor of his own destiny. Whereas a scientific observer does not let his personal feelings enter into his investigation, nor reject a particular view because it creates displeasure, an emotionally oriented philosopher tends to avoid what will cause a breakdown of his beliefs. There was this contention within the poet as he sought desperately to balance these two opposing aspects of his nature.

By appreciating the need for facts in the search for truth about man's existence on earth, and for the fanciful selection of these facts if spiritual man is to have a joyful existence in a material cosmos, Frost was able to present a balanced poetic vision. Because he recognized that the pure fancies of men were impossible to fulfil, his vision was a sad one. He did not, however, try to deny the existence of such fancies, nor did he condemn those who possessed them.

It is not strange, then, in "The Road Not Taken" to witness the narrator unashamedly fantasizing for a moment ("Oh, I kept the first for another day!") prior to facing the reality of his transitory existence on earth. ("I doubted if I should ever come back.") There exists the contradiction of delusion caused by an existentialist wish to control destiny, and a reality that is based on the narrator's awareness of the limitations imposed by an earthly life.

Prior to the emergence of Darwin's controversial theories it was fashionable to consider the mind aloof from the effects of matter. Once the scientist pointed out a recognizable link between man and the physics of evolution, however, philosophizing on the purpose of life and on an eventual spiritual fate became more than a case of metaphysical

speculation based on the intellect alone. It complicated immensely the process involving the ultimate separation of mind from matter. For many the comfortable security of a spiritual belief based on religious faith was lost forever. Because it was shown that he may have evolved from base things rather than having been divinely created in his present image, man suddenly came to recognize his susceptibility to things physical, things which could not be foreseen, nor controlled by the power of his intellect.

To Frost it seemed that in the race of evolution, mental progress had been outstripped by material progress. He was prompted by this notion (somewhat against his will since it was a difficult road to follow), to adopt a dualist doctrine. There are two opposing schools of dualists, however; the one that affirms an interaction of mind and body, and that which denies such interaction. The poet, because he was of the former school, was able to capture the melancholy musing of his subjects triggered by the pressures of their physical situations. From these musings the reader can discern the poet's preoccupation with the certainty of the end of physical life and his doubts about the possibility of a spiritual afterlife.

"Birches", from *Mountain Interval*, and written at the "Bungalow", one of Frost's English homes, is a philosophic, dreamy poem that relates a man's musings about the transitory aspect of his existence in relation to the real and lasting power of nature. Spiritual fancies of how things should be are juxtaposed with the true situation in a poem of "control and equilibrium". Much of its effect is obtained by an action which oscillates between the two extremes of the spirit and the flesh. The poem commences with the narrator fantasising, by means of a daydream, about an ideal situation, one he wishes could be fact.<sup>6</sup> Against his craving for transitory man to make some sort of permanent mark in

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6. According to Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, daydreams can be wish-fulfilments of ambitions. Adler believed they can express a person's wish for power to compensate for an inferiority complex. See J.A. Hadfield, *Dreams and Nightmares* (London, 1954), pp. 31, 36-7. In this poem perhaps the narrator feels insecure because of the transitory nature of his existence compared with the powerful force of the ice-storms.

a world of austere fact is the melancholy realization of the supreme power of nature,

When I see birches bend to left and right  
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,  
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.  
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay  
As ice storms do...

Lesley Frost on 11 October 1905, when six years old, described her own love of swinging on birches and furnishes insight into the universality behind the narrator's own spiritual yearning, "At first i was scared to swing with birches but now i am not so much scared because it wont hurt me and i am not scared if it swings down with me if it does klerl down with me i dont like it if it dosunt i climb uther trees but they dount swing as the birches do".<sup>7</sup> The action of swinging, however, is transformed in the man's mind from a child's game into something that reaches a fantastic plane, relieving him for a moment from the harshness of conscious reality. Such moments are invariably short-lived, but the narrator, with characteristic Yankee stubbornness, sees that as no reason for ending his self-indulgent fancies,

But I was going to say when Truth broke in  
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,  
I should prefer to have some boy bend them  
As he went out and in to fetch the cows -

Even the boy's action to "fetch the cows" is one of "out and in" thus maintaining the idea of life as a rhythmical process of impermanence. A sense of rhythm within the poem reinforces Frost's implicit belief that some sort of compromise must be arrived at between fact and fancy, the real and the unreal figments of man's imagination, if any sort of workable philosophy is to be arrived at.

The constant switching of the narrator's spiritual fancies back to objectiveness also eliminates the possibility of a charge of sentimentality being levelled either at him or at Frost. The interplay between the subjective and the objective did not, however, prevent Frost from imparting a note of spirituality to "Birches". This is done, perhaps somewhat obviously, by the line, "You'd think the inner dome of heaven

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7. Radcliff Squires, *The Major Themes of Robert Frost* (Ann Arbor, 1963), p. 5.

had fallen", but more subtly and effectively by the narrator's pining over man's weakness on earth while wishing that the trees could be bent by "Some boy too far from town to learn baseball".

The feeling of movement in "Birches" is important. Bergson believed that physical sensations such as swaying were responsible for the initiation of every dream and fancy of men, even if, as is the case of this poem, the feeling was a vague and confused one, as a childhood memory could recall.<sup>8</sup> William James,<sup>9</sup> who understood the difficulty of attuning spirit to flesh, was against the idea that such sensations could have this effect on the mind by saying "the visible surfaces of heaven and earth refuse to be brought by us into any intelligible unity at all. Every phenomenon that we would praise there exists cheek by jowl with some contrary phenomenon".<sup>10</sup> James believed in experience in life as a continuous stream, and little credence was given by him to its influence over man's imagination. Thus it is clear when reading the poetry of fact and fancy that even though Frost admired James' pragmatism, he was more of Bergson's school of thought in the exposition of his dual vision. Yet it could be said correctly that "The point is not to show how James influenced Frost, but that Frost moves easily in the same intellectual climate, that the Jamesian temperament is congenial to him."<sup>11</sup> James' teachings helped create an atmosphere of practical thinking especially in the New England area and indirectly helped Frost remodel his early Kantian belief of thought as a purely universal mental process, to something that was shaped by the private needs and interests of an individual in his daily routine. The poet

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8. Bergson's theory was first presented in a lecture before the Institut Psychologique on 26 March 1901. It was subsequently published in *Revue Scientifique* on 8 June 1901. Hatfield, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

9. Frost said of James: "My greatest inspiration, when I was a student, was a man whose classes I never attended." Janet Mabie, "Robert Frost Interprets His Teaching Method", *The Christian Science Monitor* (24 December, 1925), p. 11. From Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 536.

10. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York, 1st ed., 1896, republished New York, 1956), p. 41. From Lentricchia, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

11. Reuben A. Brower, *The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention* (New York, 1963), p. 149.

evolved the practical notion that objective fact is needed to temper spiritual idealism in an unsympathetic material world. Facts such as those recalled by a childhood experience, could, then, be tempered by imagination to create personal illusions.

There is, of course, the argument that the practical, objective world as experienced through the senses is not the real world since man tends to view reality as he would like it to be. Man's memory magnifies, distorts or minimizes the true situation into something more acceptable to him. Memory, therefore, is not always a safe way to employ experience, particularly if great distance in time is involved as with an adult recalling a childhood action.

The use of the memory is very evident in "Birches" where the narrator's nostalgic imaginings border on self-delusion about the freedoms of his lost youth. His memory images tend to substitute for actual life which to him is wretched because in it his body has grown old, while his spirit recalls lost youth and yearns to be free of transience. Thus, although the poet was not a visionary mystic, he understood the power of the memory that enabled man to reach beyond his immediate material confines.<sup>12</sup>

These escapist illusions allowed by memory have long been employed as an element of drama and provide a melancholy contrast between what is and what could be. Frost insisted that both the real and the imaginary worlds were present in his poems of fact and fancy, together with a pessimistic awareness that although man's dreams enable a brief escape, they can never provide, other than in total madness, a complete escape from the unpleasant reality of worldly concerns,

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12. The complexity of this memory can be gathered from the following, But these two extreme states, the one of an entirely contemplative memory which apprehends only the singular in its vision, the other of a purely motor memory which stamps the note of generality on its action, are really apart and are fully visible only in exceptional cases. In normal life they are interpenetrating, so that each has to abandon some part of its original purity. The first reveals itself in the recollection of differences, the second in the perception of resemblances: at the meeting of the two currents appears the general idea.

Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer, trans. (London, 1911), pp. 201-2.

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.  
 And so I dream of going back to be.  
 It's when I'm weary of considerations,  
 And life is too much like a pathless wood

Clearly, in such poems Frost liked to present his dual vision within the context of both the natural and the supernatural. In "Birches" the narrator is shown to wish an escape from physical life with its petty routine, yet he has an instinctive fear of the spiritual unknown after death,

I'd like to get away from earth awhile  
 And then come back to it and begin over.  
 May no fate willfully misunderstand me  
 And half grant what I wish and snatch me away  
 Not to return ...

The solidity of the known never relinquishes its grip on him. It appears that even a dreamer fears to enter the realms of the unknown.

Frost's use of imagery in his poetry of fact and fancy is particularly memorable in that it is created from natural objects such as the tree that trails its leaves to the ground "Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair / Before them over their heads to dry in the sun." These images from material nature help trigger the reveries of the subjects of the various poems. Frost recognized such images as being the only way of bringing the latent knowledge of the subconscious mind into the open: of breaching the no-man's land between what is mortal and what is immortal. The images do not conceal but reveal. They must satisfy the demands of sensory experience yet still fit into an overall symbolic scheme. The scheme itself forms the basis of the fantasies manifested in the spiritual fancies of Frost's characters.

Further depth is imparted to the poems by the poet's simultaneous presentation of the spiritual longings of his subjects in the past, present and future. In "Birches", the narrator, in the present, recalls his wistful memories of the past while contemplating the unknown future. His past joy as a youth is juxtaposed with the nostalgia of the present and apprehension about the future regarding the fate of his soul after death.

Like "Birches" the early sonnet "A Dream Pang" from *A Boy's Will*,

involves a persona who drifts into a dream world and becomes lost in his fancies and his fears. His dream becomes a vehicle of emotional strain which, by its bizarre symbolism, distorts both the subjective and the objective into one, until for a while it becomes impossible for the dreamer to realize that the suffering he experiences, although itself real, is caused by a figment of his imagination. Perhaps it was some earlier guilt about his having "dwelt aloof", that spurred the youth to dream of a lover's quarrel that made him seek escape in the "dark woods" of his subconscious mind, "I had withdrawn in forest, and my song / Was swallowed up in leaves that blew away."

"A Dream Pang" was written about the relationship between the poet and his wife, Elinor, and how her presence helped him rid himself of much of his feeling for escapism and self-pity. A relatively minor and immature example of Frost's poetry, "A Dream Pang" nevertheless provides some insight into his highly-strung nature with its resulting vivid imagination and self-torture. It also shows that the fanciful illusions of man are reflected in his spiritual longings and his fears of them not being fulfilled. For the rural Yankees of Frost's verse, who possess the inbred pragmatism peculiar to farmers, the sonnet shows that there is seldom the complete escape into the madness of total illusion. For them only a tortuous half-way point exists and their dreams disclose the ambivalence of persons who are unable to accept the mundane routine of an earthly life, yet are afraid to plunge into something of which they are ignorant. Frost saw such ambivalence as a melancholy dualism inherent in mankind in general.

If the poet himself was not born a Yankee, he was certainly bred as one and his feelings on the onslaught of such vacillating demands of spirit and flesh are reflected in his early poetry, prompting Gordon to remark "Frost's transcendent ego is the victim of contrary demands."<sup>13</sup> The poet knew of two ways to try to face the dilemma of the unknown and perhaps alleviate some of the pressures of being torn between dissatisfaction with earthly life and fear of a spiritual one. The first way was to accept man's role in the universe by a metaphysical understanding of it. The second was through religion, by making theological assumptions about the spiritual unknown.

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13. Jan B. Gordon, "Robert Frost's Circles of Enchantment", Jerome Mazzaro, ed., *Modern American Poetry: Essays in Criticism* (New York, 1970), p. 61.



Unfortunately for the poet's peace of mind he could accept neither approach: the first because it was beyond a single man's comprehension, the second because his practical nature deemed it too fanciful to accept something that required a blind faith. A dual vision, however, enabled him to acquire temperance both ways. In the poetry of fact and fancy can be found religious speculation presented in terms of psychological or metaphysical experiences, much in line with the rational Unitarian quest for the truth of the afterlife.

Frost was uncertain of the part that God played in the system of things. This was partially because the poet lived in a rural environment, surrounded by practical people, and partially because his was an era when science had begun to destroy many of the myths of religion. In New England, in particular, the rigid grip of Calvinism had been broken by the rising prosperity after the 1812 war and all the intellectual and scientific thought it nurtured. The poet was denied the bliss of being able to adopt an unquestioning faith as an eventual spiritual reward for mankind. Such a belief would have given some reason why one should struggle against the daily trials of a transitory material existence.

Nor was Frost's personal struggle against the dilemma of his dualist nature made any easier by his father being a tempestuous dreamer, and his mother highly religious.<sup>14</sup> Although his father died young, Frost inherited many of his fanciful notions, which, when combined with the unquestioning religious teachings of his mother, contributed much to the blend of practicality and mysticism evident in some of his early poems. It also placed the poet in the unenviable position of being unable to make a categorical philosophic decision about the reason for man's earthly existence.

The practical element of Frost's personality forced him to doubt the validity of such a thing as a true faith. The doubt was probably intensified by his instinctive dislike of the idea of predestination as advanced by the traditional New England religions. The attraction the chance of spiritual peace offered to those with an unquestioning

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14. It seems that Mrs Frost was deeply involved in the Swedenborgian brand of religion that was fashionable at the time; often she held meetings in her parlour. However, it is also interesting to note that Blanche Rankin Eastman, the poet's childhood nurse, did not remember Mrs Frost as unduly religious. Mertins, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

religious belief, however, still exerted enough force on Frost to cause him to give the matter much thought. Obviously if religion made death easier to face Frost could not dismiss it lightly, especially since he himself held pessimistic doubts about the existence of a benevolent deity. It must be remembered that Frost did not seek a heaven of angels, but simply one that would allow an extension of man's finitude into timelessness.

Once a man, especially if he is a poet, is prejudiced towards a certain spiritual desire, he will tend to lose all sense of probability and proportion in his unrelenting pursuit of it. This is what occurred to the youthful writer of "The Trial by Existence" and does much to explain why the poem is not a success. The poet attempted, unconvincingly, to use the fanciful notion of pre-existence rather than fact to support his quest for a belief in a benevolent deity. Even allowing for human susceptibility to attractive ideas, this poem of false optimism convinces no one, least of all the poet. It remains as an example of the very early verse where the poet was at the mercy of emotions that caused him to confuse his intellectualism with a mixture of vague spiritual aspirations and moral prejudice.

Frost's mother and her scripture lessons undoubtedly had the effect of preventing the poet from rejecting, like the Transcendentalists, all supernatural biblical elements connected with his speculations on religion.<sup>15</sup> In "The Trial by Existence" he makes much of biblical phrases such as "The angel host", to suggest that men are from a purely spiritual heritage. There is also a strain running through the poem which has an Emersonian-like link with the mystical theological potpourri of earlier religions. Frost was not as mystical as Emerson. He held the pessimistic belief that man must suffer a trial against the evil which Emerson all but denied existed.

"The Trial by Existence" is in many ways an immature introduction to Frost's later, more convincing, "trial by market" poems. Yet there are aspects of the poet's thoughts regarding the balance of fancy with

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15. The Transcendentalist, Parker, declared in a sermon in 1852, "Of course I do not believe in a devil, external torment, nor in a particle of absolute evil in God's world or in God....I take not the Bible for my master...I try all things by human faculties." Hutchinson, *op.cit.*, p. 108.

fact that can be learnt from this early poem. First it shows that Santayana's words that "illusions ... are not dangerous in the end, because illusion finds in experience a natural though painful cure"<sup>16</sup> were not as great an influence on Frost during the writing of the early Romantic poems of *A Boy's Will* as they were to be with the more rational *North of Boston* and *Mountain Interval*. Thus an idealistic view of heaven is portrayed in "The Trial by Existence" in an attempt to describe the youth's desperate resolve "to know definitely what he thinks about his soul". No experience or fact is available to give credence to the portrayal, however, the result being that the unfounded spiritual longings of the youth dissolve into melodrama.

The poem opens with an idealistic acclaim that valour reigns supreme in paradise as it does on earth and the reader is informed that the reward "Of daring should be still to dare", or in short, to retain the ability to remain spiritually independent even after death. It is as if the main virtue of souls is their courage to be self-determining. In the poem this trait becomes a goal to strive for in both the spiritual and material worlds. The poet seems to rebel against the idea of man placidly accepting his place in the scheme of things and bitterly resents his intelligence being unable to fathom the meaning of existence. The unsuccessful efforts of its composer to seek spiritual peace in a fanciful religious optimism causes "The Trial by Existence" to take on a melancholy aspect. It also shows the poet's pessimistic belief that man's existence on earth is a trial of suffering in the struggle against causality and that only by enduring this trial will he have a chance of spiritual reward.

"The Trial by Existence" gives meaning to Frost's statement, "My life was a risk I had to take - and took",<sup>17</sup> for no one discovers a new world without first forsaking the old one. There is no guarantee that the new one will be any better, but the point is made that only volunteers are taken,

And none are taken but who will,  
Having first heard the life read out  
That opens eastward, good and ill,

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16. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason Vol. 3: Reason in Religion* (New York, 1905), pp. 51-52. From Thompson, *Early Years*, pp. 244-45.

17. Morrison, op.cit., p. 17.

thus restating the need for self-determination. By the poet's deity (after all, Frost's fanciful god in this case is little more than a product of his own wishful thinking) allowing the souls no memory of their spiritual life to ease their trial, the poet is conveniently able to rationalize this as the reason why man is unable to fathom why he is on earth.

One cannot escape the feeling that "The Trial by Existence" is only the expression by a young poet of his particular fancy that there is a benevolent force in the universe and that man is, in fact, in God's "especial care". If "The tale of earth's unhonored things / Sounds nobler there than 'neath the sun" so too can the peace of mind of an unquestioning believer appear attractive to those burdened with a melancholy doubt about their spiritual fate.

The poem that begins as a manifestation of the idealistic existentialist fancies of a novice poet over the number of potentialities man has the power to select and develop at will, ends with a lament about the pain of a material existence made no easier by man's ignorance of his situation which he bears "crushed and mystified". The reader could be excused for feeling repugnance towards the self-centred introversions abundant in a poem lost in a fog of the Romantic cultivation of the ego and all the unfounded hope that goes with it.

Frost was far more successful when he attuned his fanciful notions more finely with the facts provided by nature. The concrete symbols drawn from nature could be used to impart clarity and understanding to the presentation of the apparent absurdities that compose the dreams and illusions of man's subconscious mind. The symbols allow a kind of "nature mysticism" that helps connect the hidden mysteries of the inner spiritual life to an outer objective one that can give it some meaning.

Such "nature mysticism" is particularly evident in "Mowing" from *A Boy's Will*. With its atmosphere of spiritual and dreamy introspection, "Mowing" appears to have been influenced by Thoreau's chapter "The Bean Field" in *Walden*. The sonnet is divided into two single sentences which catalogue the subject's (once again the youth) dreams and touch sensitively on the young man's reaction to the surrounding stimulus of nature. In so doing the poem echoes Emerson's words in "Love" that

"We are by nature observers, and thereby learners. That is our permanent state."<sup>18</sup>

"Mowing" also deals with the topic of the spiritual contact available among men through the medium of nature. In this belief Frost is akin to Emerson, who wrote in "History" that "There is one mind common to all individual men" and that he "Who hath access to this universal mind is a party to all that is or can be done".<sup>19</sup> In his poetry of fact and fancy Frost saw the link between the conscious and the subconscious as the objective fact, and symbols offered by nature as the things that give substance to the escapist fantasies of man. These fantasies make life on earth the "sweet pang" of being more bearable, but paradoxically, more difficult by establishing a contrast between what is spiritually desired and what is fact.

The gloss given on "Mowing" states of the youth, "He takes up life simply with the small tasks." In this poem where the youth is shown working there is no idle dream of leisure, but instead his task of mowing stimulates his powers of observation. From these observations, Frost thought, man accumulates facts upon which to base his judgements. A combination of this sensual perception and subsequent interpretation the poet deemed worthy experience.

Unfortunately the dual virtues of perception of nature and subsequent interpretation are rare among men, including the New England rustics. As the fault is often a case of man not knowing what to "look" for, "Mowing" advises the reader not to romanticize too deeply, but to seek pleasure in commonplace things since they are most easily related to spiritual ideals such as awareness of others. By this means vision and fact can be related without either being compromised. A fanciful imagination can be enhanced by the mysterious workings of nature in an acceptable conspiracy that functions without the auspices of a benevolent, but fictitious, deity.

Perhaps it was the botanist element in Frost's character that instilled in him the concept of nature as a mysterious force and therefore

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18. Emerson, op.cit., p. 123.

19. Ibid., p. 3.

something to be regarded with suspicion because it could not be manipulated by man. What the scythe whispers to the grass, then, remains a secret to man. But this does not prevent him from making his fanciful speculations, "Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun, / Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound - ". Thus, although nature confines itself to fact, "Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak", and takes no overt concern in man's affairs, it acts as a keen stimulus to his mental processes. These processes subsequently search for a philosophy to meet the trial of a material existence that offers no ultimate spiritual surety.

The best way for man to approach the objectivity of nature, the poet considered, is through the medium of labour, "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." It is a sombre thought that man must subject himself to a life of toil in order to establish a realistic lattice for his speculation on an afterlife, but it is even more distressful to consider that such toil heightens the desire for a spiritual reward. Frost saw this being the case with the hard-working New England farmers and captured, with his dual vision, their melancholy doubt about ever equating the sum of their toil on earth to the product of a rewarding afterlife.

In "Mowing" Frost still managed to convey the impression that more exists than the natural fact. The reader is made more aware than in "The Trial by Existence" of a spiritual dimension; one that can be approached through an affinity to nature. Unfortunately, however, even someone as close to nature as the mower is unable to understand fully its message,

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,  
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.  
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;

In July 1913 Frost wrote to his friend Mosher, 'In "Mowing"... I came so near what I long to get that I almost despair of coming nearer.'<sup>20</sup> Frost acknowledged, therefore, the impossibility of his poetic vision achieving a clearer focus on anything much beyond the natural fact. The best he could do was present an immediate experience on which a persona's fanciful imaginings could be superimposed.

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20. John F. Lynen, "Frost's Works and Days", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 60 (January, 1961), p. 117.

The objective fact upon which the better poems of fact and fancy are constructed give a guide to the spiritual desires, but it is up to each person to draw his own inference from such facts and draw on the experience of others in order to deduce a satisfactory philosophy.

Once again in "Mowing" symbolism plays an important part in providing expression of the unconscious mind. Fleeting thoughts beyond the grasp of conscious reason are given spontaneity by means of the symbol. The unconscious and often suppressed aspects of a person's perception of reality appear not always as rational thought, but sometimes as a symbolic image. These images, however, tend to be as universal and objective as facts and thus equally open to different interpretations. The "bright green snake" of "Mowing" can represent either rebirth (the shedding of the snake's skin), or the evil traditionally associated with the serpent. This is the trouble with the symbols - they cast light, but not in any particular direction.

It is up to a reader, once given the "tools of knowledge", to construct his own approach to a particular situation. In the lyric idyll "After Apple Picking", for example, the symbolic images provide insight into what would otherwise be an apple farmer's amorphous imaginings<sup>21</sup> about what comes after death. The poem makes the reader aware that life concerns itself with the vexatious issue of the passage of time bringing an inevitable decay of man's mortal being. The reader is made to realise the sad fact that life, the thesis, must necessarily produce death, the antithesis.

In many ways Frost's rejection of much of the religious heritage passed on by his mother intensified his pessimism about a spiritual existence after death. Like the earlier Puritan poets he became transfixed by the spectre of the grave, but did not see it as representing

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21. Kant saw three types of imagination:
- a. that which connects ideas because of their affinity and is brought out in reflection. This is the case with the farmer;
  - b. associative imagination which connects ideas in time; and
  - c. plastic imagination which, if uncontrolled, becomes a world of fantasy and dreams. This occurs with the personae of "The Hill Wife" and "A Dream Pang".

H.J. Patton, op.cit., p. 366.

eternal damnation. His was the agony of doubt about whether, after death, there would be a division of the flesh and the spirit, or whether the spirit would perish alongside man's physical body. Burdened with this melancholy doubt about the very existence of his soul, it seemed presumptuous to the poet to speculate further about whether his soul would, in fact, be one of those "saved".

Awareness of inevitable death, Frost believed, forces man, often unwillingly, because of his instinctive fear of the unknown, to speculate on the enigma of his purpose in life and what follows afterwards. Because of man's instinctive fear of consciously facing death, Frost found it necessary to pry into the subconscious fancies of his subjects in the context of their daily lives. The fact that no one knows what is beyond death enhanced the potency of this poetic investigation, but it also prevented the poet from writing as surely as he could otherwise have done with a subject involving personal experience. Frost was faced with the fact that although man can grasp the concept of infinity, his conscious mind tends to reject his own finiteness. Frost's melancholy vision examined this surface duality of awareness and rejection and looked deep into the subconscious mind where the awareness of death aroused wide-ranging speculations of an afterlife.

In "After Apple Picking" death is examined in the context of a reward after the satisfactory completion of physical labour. The thoughts of an apple farmer are stimulated by nature into contemplating something that his pragmatic nature would otherwise deem a waste of time,

I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight  
I got from looking through a pane of glass  
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough  
And held against the world of hoary grass.

Although the ice is subject to the real laws of nature and melts, the farmer's mind, once stimulated, can transcend the laws,

It melted, and I let it fall and break.  
But I was well  
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,  
And I could tell  
What form my dreaming was about to take.

The dream takes the form of a melancholy acceptance of the inevitable end of all things living.



Fanciful departure from the real world as is the case with the farmer is not an original poetic device to offer insight into a person's subconscious;<sup>22</sup> nevertheless, it remains effective for Frost who believed that one could not seek metaphysical certainties in sensual experience alone. Conversely, the metaphysical investigation could not be so vague as to confuse those who tried to follow it. Therefore Frost combined fact with fantasy by making his persona a farmer, a practical man, not a foggy-minded dreamer. Physical sensations experienced by the farmer are mentioned to aid reader assimilation, "My instep arch not only keeps the ache, / It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round." The apples of the harvest, though real, become magnified with "every fleck of russet showing clear". The magnification of the apple symbol represents the farmer's increased thirst for knowledge of the unknown in his wish to bridge the gap between physical labour and spiritual peace.

To the farmer death becomes a chance for relief from the pain of toil, something to be looked forward to as sleep is after a hard day's work. He also sees it as a form of rebirth. He does not lose, however, his instinctive feeling for the self-preservation of the body. The need for self-preservation is a manifestation of his fear of the unknown associated with death, the greatest of all mysteries and something from which no man is exempt.

The "death fear", as portrayed in poems such as "After Apple Picking" and "The Hill Wife", is more complex than it initially appears. It takes on the form of a death-wish, or what Freud termed a "death instinct" (thanatos), which opposes the survival instinct (eros). By his dual vision Frost sought to give equal regard to both these forces within the subconscious mind. A look into the farmer's subconscious in "After Apple Picking" shows his awareness of the imminence of death, "But I am done with apple picking now", while his musings on the secret

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22. Much earlier Sir Francis Bacon wrote in *The Advancement of Learning*, "For the mind of man is far from the nature of a clear and equal glass, wherein the beams of things should reflect according to their incidence; nay, it is rather like an enchanted glass". Doyle, op.cit., p. 28.

of the relationship between life and death are put into a spiritual context, perhaps too obviously, by lines such as "My long two-pointed ladder's striking through a tree / Toward heaven still".

The situation presented in this poem captures, as do most of the other poems where fact and fancy are juxtaposed, the euphemistic manner in which death is treated by Western culture. It is a culture where words like "grief therapist" are used as a substitute for undertaker, or "slumber room" for the room in a house where a body is laid out. It is all part of the effort by Western culture to protect the conscious mind from man's transience. The subconscious part of the mind may, however, associate the fatigue felt after work with the everlasting "rest" of death. Such an association occurs with the farmer of "Birches" who muses,

For I have had too much  
Of apple-picking: I am overtired  
Of the great harvest I myself desired.

The farmer's subconscious mind is further prompted to think of a spiritual afterlife by its being autumn, the season of death and decay of nature's living things. But whereas in nature the cyclic rebirth of spring is assured, for the farmer and for man in general there is only the melancholy doubt about the reincarnation of his spirit.

The farmer observes the hibernation of one of nature's creatures, the woodchuck, to be more profound than man's sleep. He realizes, like Emerson in "Experience", that "Fox and woodchuck, hawk and snipe and bittern, when nearly seen, have no more root in the deep world than man, and are just such superficial tenants of the globe."<sup>2 3</sup> The farmer reflects that

One can see what will trouble  
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.  
Were he not gone,  
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his  
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,  
Or just some human sleep.

The implied question is will the farmer's "sleep" in the autumn of his

life be one like the woodchuck's where he awakens to a spring of rebirth, or will his spirit remain a slave to the causal forces in the universe.

Naturally, the poet does not answer the question. He cannot for he knows no more about what comes after death than the reader; however, he does present one man's spiritual fancies in a realistic setting that keeps them free from sentiment, and in so doing provides a measuring stick by which others can gauge the extent of their own feelings about the survival of the spirit after death.

Frost regarded the tenuousness of the reward of the afterlife for a life of labour on earth as particularly burdensome, but he could not condone unreservedly a complete escape from the reality of toil. Perhaps it was a harmful thing for man, by his dreams, to alienate himself from the objective world of contact with his fellows. Such a situation could lead to delusion in a pluralistic universe where subjective fancies become indistinguishable from objective realities. In this regard day dreams such as those experienced by the personae of "Birches" and "After Apple Picking" are particularly dangerous since they appear to be more real and factual than the dreams of the night. Fantasies of the day remain more orderly and materially cohesive with their symbols cunningly arranged so that they purport to hold the truth, but in fact, deny even the most pressing realities.

To discern what is real and what is fancy in poems such as "After Apple Picking", some distinction should be made between waking consciousness and "day-dream consciousness." Distinctions are difficult to make, however, since dreams are primarily mental images which have a sensory nucleus fed on visual perception of the objective world. The situation is further complicated by dreams seemingly being able to predict the future by means of premonition. Elaborate fantasies, engendered by a situation of the present, are made about the future so that it becomes impossible to distinguish the real from the unreal in these instinctive projections.

Frost would have been the first to acknowledge sadly that all too often the facts of a situation are juggled to suit the fancy. A process like this could be termed "wishfulfilment". He thought this wishfulfilment caused men to be subjugated to a life of labour while they fantasized about a non-existent spiritual reward.

The poet was astute enough to impart a degree of versimilitude to the visions of his personae by realizing that such visions usually occur in the critical phases of life, such as when death approaches. But more than this, Frost knew that these visions were essentially reproductive, and though they appeared irrational in that they lacked the logical sequence followed by the conscious mind, of a beginning, a middle and an end, they did, in fact, offer an insight into problems by way of vivid representative analogies. In short, they helped explore the zone between man's conscious and his sub-conscious, between fact and fancy.

Throughout the early poetry one is constantly aware of the poet's involvement with the idea of physical work. Perhaps this is because he lived among a hard-working people and felt guilty about his own physical laziness. Frost also saw a certain dignity and sense of achievement derived from labour and appears to echo Emerson's thoughts advanced in "Compensation" — "But because of the dual constitution of things, in labor as in life, there can be no cheating....For the real price of labor is knowledge and virtue".<sup>24</sup> It is almost as if by labour man can achieve a sense of purpose in his materialist environment; but once again, as Emerson foresaw, the labour must be within the law of nature, "The law of nature is, Do the thing, and you shall have the power; but they who do not the thing have not the power."<sup>25</sup>

Frost found it unsatisfactory to be governed by the laws of physical nature. Emerson claimed (somewhat surprisingly since he himself knew very little labour) that "Human labor, through all its forms ... is one immense illustration of the perfect compensation of the universe."<sup>26</sup> Frost, however, remained sceptical of such an oversimplistic view: there had to be more to the story of existence than something which left no scope for the intellectually-inspired imagination, or for the realm of the mind. Therefore, although the farmer in "After Apple Picking" is portrayed displaying a fundamental pride in his work, Frost also shows him seeking through his imagination the same spiritual perfection after death as he achieved in life through his painstaking toil. Labour, to Frost, besides giving a degree of earthly satisfaction, could also lead man to self-destruction when it becomes, in the material

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24. Ibid., p. 76.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

world, a means to an end. It was a melancholy view of man allowing his spiritual aspirations to fade into his subconscious because of the doubt about their ever being fulfilled.

Not all of the poems of fact and fancy, however, are so coolly and philosophically treated as "Birches" or "After Apple Picking". Some, like "The Hill Wife", are permeated by the darkness of mental alienation as well as by the general note of sadness that is evident throughout the early verse. "The Hill Wife" is perhaps the poet's most interesting experiment with the dramatic approach and is composed of five distinct lyrics written over a period of eight years; each lyric is to the poem as a whole as are individual acts to a play.

The first lyric, or Part I, entitled "Loneliness", establishes the hill wife's feeling of detachment from her surroundings. "House Fear" extends her detachment into fear, while Part III, "The Smile", shows how fear causes her to see danger manifest in the simple things of life. Part IV, "The Oft-Repeated Dream", is set on the psychological plane and depicts the irrational nightmares the woman suffers, while the final lyric, "The Impulse", the most enigmatic, provides the poem with a conclusion that is every bit as mysterious as the workings of the woman's mind.

Despite powerful anti-mystical tendencies such as scientific rationalism, in vogue at the time of the poet's composing "The Hill Wife", the poem still manages to retain a strong Romantic element. A dream world of supernatural happenings and fantastic scenery is intermingled with the harsh realism of the woman's lonely existence to create the feeling of nostalgia that surrounds the story of her spiritual trial. In fact, a stage is reached where it becomes impossible for the reader, like the woman, to discern what is fact and what is fancy. So closely are the woman's delusions linked to her rural surroundings, from which they find their expression, that a blend, or what Emerson termed an "affection", of the physical and the mental occurs.

"The Hill Wife", then, is a melancholy combination of the psychological and (in the case of the first lyric, "Loneliness", and the third, "The Smile") the dramatic monologue. In "Loneliness", the woman describes how she and her husband miss the birds and are too glad

when they return,

One ought not to have to care  
So much as you and I  
Care when the birds come round the house  
To seem to say goodbye;

The birds, of course, in reality are concerned only for their own affairs and it is purely a figment of a Romantic imagination to fancy them troubling to feel for humans. One advantage of being close to the reality of nature, Frost knew, was that it sometimes allowed one the gloomy insight that nature and her creatures are indifferent to man's material existence.

The woman's subjective inference, or intuition, gives the first segment the eerie quality of spiritual detachment from the material things around her, especially when she discerns the truth about the birds,

As we are too sad for the other here —  
With birds that fill their breasts  
But with each other and themselves  
And their built or driven nests

In contrast the descriptive "House Fear" is given objectivity by being related by a narrator external to the action of the poem. About the young couple the narrator says,

They learned to rattle the lock and key  
To give whatever might chance to be,  
Warning and time to be off in flight.

When the couple return to their lonely house from the fields, their action is rationally described thus highlighting by the contrast the irrationality of their behaviour. Fear, not in a particular sense, but as something nebulous and omnipresent to man, is evident in this simple example of the couple's disquiet over darkness and the unknown, even in the home, man's traditional spiritual haven. It was an anxiety that the poet himself was particularly susceptible to<sup>27</sup> and it is not

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27. Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 205. Thompson further explains that Frost's anxiety in this regard also inspired "The Lockless Door" and two prose plays. The first was a one act play entitled "A Way out", published in *The Seven Arts*, Vol. 1 (February, 1917), pp. 347-362. The second was a three act play written during the summer of 1941 called "The Guardian". This latter play was never published or produced. *Ibid.*, p. 526.

difficult for the reader to go a little further and imagine how much greater must be fear of the spiritual unknown after death.

The third lyric, "The Smile", is once again told in the dramatic monologue of the wife who expounds her fanciful phobia of strangers. Hers is the distressful case of a tense neuroticism arising from paranoia and hints at the poet's own morbid misgivings about tramps; it was an infectious fear, for his daughter Lesley, wrote "Our house was isolated. We were a little scared all the time - tramps!"<sup>28</sup>

Frost's xenophobia extended well beyond mere tramps. While a teacher at Pinkerton he judged the other teachers to be jealous and suspicious of him, "There was plenty of it - and bitter jealousy too, among the teachers. They weren't careful to conceal it, either. But I got my revenge on one of them. Vengeance was mine."<sup>29</sup> Further evidence of this xenophobia comes when the Frosts were in England and the poet wrote that the peasants of Gloucestershire were "Full of native prejudice they thought there must be something wrong or we wouldn't be there....Why, in the early days of the war they got to spreading stories about me, saying I was a German spy, at least a sympathiser.... The provincials would talk all around about me. They watched every move I made, day and night. They even got the constabulary down to investigate me. I was to them always an utter stranger."<sup>30</sup> What the poet did not realize, of course, was that his own hostile reaction towards others was to a large degree responsible for his alienation.

Frost's persecution complex helped him to understand more fully the predicament of the hill wife. He knew what it was like to be discontented with the material surroundings yet be unable to see any escape in the spiritual sense of companionship with others. In such unhappy cases the survival instinct buried deep in the id can arise tempered with irrationality to govern a person's judgement towards certain things and people. The way someone looks, hesitates or even,

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28. Sergeant, op.cit., p. 80.

29. Mertins, op.cit., p. 99.

30. Ibid., p. 118. It seems that people were made suspicious by Frost's books. This was confirmed by a woman whom the poet revisited in 1953. Ibid., p. 347. In fairness, however, it must be said that Frost's paranoic leanings blew the incident out of all proportion.

as in the case in "The Smile", smiles, can be twisted out of all perspective,

I didn't like the way he went away.  
That smile! It never came of being gay.  
Still he smiled - did you see him? - I was sure!

When the wife's unfounded anxiety reaches the phobia stage, "I wonder how far down the road he's got. / He's watching from the woods as like as not", it becomes an insidious thing that upsets her mental balance. The wife's subsequent unstable state causes her to have dreams of an anthropomorphic quality. If Freud can be believed that the dream fantasy is a generalized expression of the particular, the dark pine with its "tireless but ineffectual hands" becomes in the fourth lyric, "The Oft-Repeated Dream", a threatening phallic symbol manifested by the woman's frustrated sexual fancies.<sup>31</sup>

Although the point can be made that there can be no definite interpretation of dream fantasies, it is generally thought that they work towards restoring the psychological balance by making people face the fears they refuse to acknowledge in their conscious hours. The tree, then, with its capacity for a myriad of symbolic meanings, can be seen to represent the woman's subconscious acknowledgement of her resentment towards her husband. She sees him as a threat by his lack of understanding towards her spiritual needs,<sup>32</sup>

She had no saying dark enough  
For the dark pine that kept  
Forever trying the window latch  
Of the room where they slept.

It is significant that "only one of the two / Was afraid in an oft-repeated dream / Of what the tree might do." In this fourth segment it is difficult to determine exactly how much is pure nightmare, where emotions are objectified and personified for a while before normality returns, and how much is the result of a permanent state of neurosis. The title with its explicit statement of frequency of occurrence seems to make the melancholy implication that the latter is the case.

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31. A white birch had branches that scraped Frost's windows at Derry causing him nightmares. Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 309.

32. In an earlier version of the poem the tree was identified as "he". Eben Bass, "Frost's Poetry of Fear", *American Literature*, Vol. 43 (January, 1972), p. 611.



Like the romantic young man's feelings in "A Dream Pang", the hill wife's experience is a personal fantasy rather than something stemming from a collective unconscious. Her fantasy is unlike the youth's masochistic self-torture brought about by him indulging his fancies, despite awareness of the facts, to give himself a "sweet pang". The woman's pangs are by no means "sweet", nor are they masochistic; they are totally destructive to her spirit.

In the final segment, "The Impulse", the reader's suspicions about truth behind the woman's unhappiness are confirmed,

It was too lonely for her there,  
And too wild,  
And since there were but two of them,  
And no child,

With no preoccupation with labour to achieve material ends as her husband has, nor spiritual solace by way of a child, the woman would follow her spouse to work in a mood conducive to dreaming while singing a sad song "only to herself". The spiritual breakdown between male and female is thus complete and the woman begins to lose touch with her husband, "She strayed so far she scarcely heard / When he called her -".

Despite confirming the reader's suspicions about the woman's spiritual downfall, in many ways "The Impulse" remains the most enigmatic part of "The Hill Wife". Perhaps this is because one automatically seeks a logical conclusion to a tale built up in gradual sequence. Like the husband, the reader is lulled into a false sense of security, until "Sudden and swift and light as that / The ties gave" leaving everyone floundering in a sea of wonder. To suggest that the woman has not physically disappeared, but simply gone mad<sup>33</sup> seems to overlook the lines

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

Obviously, the husband would not be searching in physical places if it was only his wife's mental balance that was missing.

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33. See Barry, *Robert Frost*, p. 40.

In the enigma of "The Impulse" can be found justification for Frost's being termed a metaphysical poet whose vision goes beyond the mere factual to seek fundamental answers to existence and what follows. In this he had something akin to the "Oneness and Otherness" philosophy expounded by Emerson where a bond was thought to exist between the physical body and a higher self. The mystery of the wife's disappearance is a metaphysical one that involves a melancholy interaction between her spirit and the matter of surrounding nature. Where the earlier episodes of "The Hill Wife" hint at the breakdown of the woman's grasp of conscious reality in her refusing to accept what is, yet failing to obtain what could be, the final lyric confirms that breakdown.

With all the irony of a true metaphysical poem it turns out that a tree, something most feared by the woman, plays a part in what could best be described as her eventual non-existence. It happened when "once she went to break a bough / Of black alder." The "black" alludes to the "dark" pine providing a common ominous link with the tree imagery. The reader is not told whether the woman succeeded in her "attack" on the alder; but it seems that her action, perhaps prompted by her subconscious desire to break the mystical subjugation that the trees, as symbols of masculine indifference, had over her, failed.

The reader is left with the pessimistic message that the spirit cannot overcome the materialism of its surroundings; that one is alone in the desperate battle for existence because others do not share the same mystical fancies. The hill wife is shown to be swallowed up by a malevolent nature. She is absorbed by the nothingness from which man came and to which he must eventually return. And of her insensitive husband? Well, his fate was to hold a bewildered grief as "he learned of finalities / Besides the grave".

## CHAPTER VII

### ENVIRONMENT

The city had withdrawn into itself  
And left at last the country to the country

"Christmas Trees"

Nature and spirit are inseparable, and are best  
studied as a unit.... The idealist's point of view  
is the obverse of the naturalist's.<sup>1</sup>

Amos Bronson Alcott

1. From Feidelson, op.cit., p. 116.

Although Frost said "Most of my earlier poems had to do with country things"<sup>2</sup> he was not a nature poet in the sense that Wordsworth or the later Georgian poets were. In fact, apart from the odd minor poem of which "Now Close the Windows" serves as an example, very little of his early verse consists purely of the observation of nature. The poet was more concerned with spiritual man, his place in the material environment, the effect he had on it during his limited life span, and the influence it had on him in his formulation of a philosophy of life.

"A single good man, at one with God" Parker once said, "makes the morning and evening sun seem little and very low"<sup>3</sup> and, like him, Frost was preoccupied with man's involvement with the spiritual dimension. He did not try to present a panorama of the natural world. Frost went as far as to claim that he had never written a poem with a theme purely to do with nature.<sup>4</sup> He stressed that his poems were about human nature or about the drama of man in an alien environment. This human emphasis is in line with his thoughts that the artist should not attempt to reproduce nature in great detail, but instead examine the kinship, if any, between physical nature and the human mind.

Frost was interested in the mind of man, which sought to reduce the constricting effects of the material world when it came to determining one's place in life. While being aware of man's tendency to blame external influences for his own spiritual weakness, the poet also knew that the material environment exerted a power over man that could not be ignored. The difficulty man had in resisting this power added to Frost's pessimistic view of life.

Undoubtedly Frost would have preferred nature to have been more benevolent towards human aspirations. He was a realist, however, and chose for his poetic vision a melancholy conception of nature as something chaotic. His was not the transcendentalist view of an ordered universe.

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2. Mertins, op.cit., p. 78.

3. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, ed., *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion* (Boston, 1907), p. 200. From Lawrence Buell, op.cit., p. 146.

4. Theodore Morrison, "Frost: Country Poet and Cosmopolitan Poet", *The Yale Review*, Vol. 59 (December, 1970), p. 179.

Frost's characters are shown struggling to impose their will on the surrounding environment. The poet discerned that if ever man gave up in this spiritual struggle he would be lost; it was better to blunder on instinctively than acquiesce, like so many of Hardy's characters, to blind fate, or adopt the dubious materialist values of the new urban societies. Thus he saw man's life on earth as one of continuous suffering.

Frost looked upon nature as creating a setting for man to learn about life. The environment imposes limitations on his personal designs and there is a continual contradiction between man's desire for spiritual self-determination and these physical constrictions of nature. This contradiction is examined in "Range Finding" from *Mountain Interval* by the juxtaposition of two distinctive worlds: the man-made battlefield, and the world of nature; both worlds feature death as the common factor that plagues physical beings.

In a letter to Amy Lowell on 22 October 1917, Frost stated that he wrote this Petrarchan sonnet (dealing, in part, with war) during a time of peace and saved it only because his friend Edward Thomas displayed a liking for it. By using the fact that nature's objects only tend to attract man's attention when they overwhelm him with their sensory stimuli, Frost based "Range Finding" on visual aesthetics which direct the unsuspecting reader towards a false impression of brilliance

The battle rent a cobweb diamond - strung  
And cut a flower beside a groundbird's nest  
Before it stained a single human breast.

The destructive element present in both the worlds of man and of nature, is linked effectively with the delicacy of nature to give the poem an aura of dark fatalism. To make matters even bleaker, it becomes evident that the nature presented in this poem has nothing in common with the innocence commonly attached to it. Instead, Frost's scenario becomes one of the "stricken flower bent double" and "the bare upland pasture". Nature is not looked upon with Romantic eyes as a benevolent provider of spiritual inspiration and healing; nor as a bible by which man can be guided in his spiritual actions. With his melancholy vision the poet encompasses both killer man and killer nature and shows them up for what they are, with nature seeming all the worse because of its insidious attempt to hide its creatures' death struggles under a cloak of false beauty.

In a poem that is not aggressive enough to be called a satire, Frost nevertheless manages to capture the bitter irony of the glittering and "inviting" spider's web being torn by a death-dealing bullet from a man's rifle. Man the destroyer is shown to be no worse than nature since in the material universe it is a fact that some must die so others can live. Scepticism is evident about the power of God to control the cosmos he supposedly created. This scepticism was spurred on by James' *Pragmatism* which casts doubt upon the reasoning that everything was designed for a good intent with statements such as "To the grub under the bark the exquisite fitness of the woodpecker's organism to extract him would certainly argue a diabolical designer."<sup>5</sup>

The real pessimism of the poet's vision becomes apparent, however, when the insidious quality conveyed by the word "greet" is implanted into the spider-fly scenario, "The indwelling spider ran to greet the fly, / But finding nothing sullenly withdrew". Because of the affiliation between man and the natural environment (it was man's bullet after all that shook the "diamonds" free of the web, exposing it for what it was), the spider's treachery reflects unfavourably on man's purpose. The initial distinction created in the octave between man the killer and nature the wonderful is smashed in the sestet. Frost was of the gloomy disposition that it was useless for man to seek escape in nature from his own spiritual failings, (such as war) because in truth he is merely an unrefined extension of his environment. Besides dissociating himself from the literary cult which believed in the need for man to slavishly follow nature's examples, Frost showed nature to be often a sinister and harmful influence on those who blindly emulated her. Certainly, he did not see nature as a token of God's awesome power.

In this belief Frost was unlike most of the Transcendentalists who, as humanists rather than naturalists, tended to view nature as a splendid abstraction while overlooking her other inherent evils. Unlike the Transcendentalists, or even the later Georgians, Frost did not see the material environment that surrounded man as necessarily consoling or spiritually meaningful. His was a pessimistic view that spiritually-oriented man can never feel altogether at home in nature since the physical make-up of his body is subject to the limitations imposed upon

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5. Williams James, *Pragmatism* (New York, 1907), p. 111. From Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 386.

it by the external forces of an unsympathetic environment.

When presenting his poetic vision of man's struggle on earth, Frost did not feel it necessary to employ the eccentric: details were not selected to present his theme purely because they were peculiar to New England, but because they were universally applicable in supporting his melancholy revelations. By using the details from the natural world he was familiar with, the poet succeeded in bolstering the universal with the particular. He still maintained, however, "I am not a regionalist. I am a realmist. I write about realms of democracy and realms of the spirit".<sup>6</sup> It would be closer to the truth, therefore, to acknowledge Frost as an "environmentalist" in that his early poems involved with nature encompass more than the physical: they examine the total effect of the interaction between spiritually-oriented man and his material surroundings.

It could be said that the New England environment found in the early verse is merely a microcosm that mirrors the old, sweeping philosophic values that the poet held so dear. It serves as a symbol that achieves its effect by remaining apart and by being presented in detail to enhance a reader's understanding of complex, abstract emotions. These emotions arise as a product of man's frustrating struggle against the universe's external forces that seek to make him a puppet of their unfathomable whims. Thus a paradox is established: the more a poet identifies with a particular locality, the easier it becomes for him to present a clearer vision of things as he sees them in general.

During the time that Frost wrote his early poetry, New England was in a state of flux. This made his task of examining man within his environment more complicated since there was the danger of a sentimental nostalgia creeping into the verse he sought to keep objective. At best, the poet was only partially successful in this battle for objectivity. By avoiding the effete rusticity that plagued the Georgian poets, he was able to achieve a tenuous reconciliation of the physical and the metaphysical. Efforts at trying to extract some metaphysical meaning from the physical environment were, however, with the single exception of "Putting in the Seed", doomed to a melancholy failure.

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6. Elizabeth Jennings, *Frost* (Edinburgh and London, 1964), p. 99.

The impossible task of endeavouring to couple the forces of mind and matter in a single revealing vision did much towards prompting the poet to adopt a pessimistic approach in his early poetry. A distinct lack of pessimism in "Putting in the Seed", written while the poet was living at "Little Iddens" in England, could be due to the poem's concern with the theme of rebirth. Frost linked the theme to the mythology that surrounds ancient pagan fertility rites to provide the added depth and mystery which he saw as appropriate to the subject of rebirth.

In this poem dealing with the rebirth of the physical environment, the seed becomes the symbol of latent forces - the mysterious spiritual properties that are the justification for future hope for transitory man. The poem manages to combine a sense of origin with the idea of growth and continuation since its action is integrated with the everlasting cyclic sequence of the seasons. The integration allows the narrator to throw off momentarily the feeling of despondency caused by the knowledge of the inevitable death of physical things. Frost captures a universal feeling that occurs briefly in spring which, in the case of seed sowing, has been made sacred by fertility rites and the mythology that surrounds the notion of regeneration.

It has been said that myth "demands no overt, formal assent... it is flexible. It yields and changes... as the environment...changes... it remains on the whole true and accurate; it reflects accurately the collective emotional life of the tribe in its relations with the environment".<sup>7</sup> The strong allusion in "Putting in the Seed" to myth with its theme of rebirth, then, is no accident. The fact that man is a citizen of two worlds, that of the spirit, and that of the flesh, is made plain by the poem's mythological emphasis on regeneration and the powers of the material soil. Both spirit and flesh need rejuvenating, and in "Putting in the Seed" this dual need is satisfied by the farmer's feeling of elation at the growth of his crops. The farmer is connected in turn by his individual physical being to the universal idea of nature, shown by the growing plants being given the physical attributes of the human body, "The sturdy seedling with

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7. Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (1937) (London, revised ed., 1946), p. 36.



arched body comes / Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs."

Because it approaches nature optimistically, with complete integrity towards the physical scene, "Putting in the Seed" seems incongruous alongside many of the other poems of *Mountain Interval* with basically similar, but more pessimistically slanted themes of man's spiritual struggle on earth. Pagan mythology, with its stories of rebirth after sexual fertility rites in the fields,<sup>8</sup> shows the affinity man is traditionally regarded as having with nature. By man and external nature being set in apposition, a sense of eternity of living things is established while no attempt is made to resist the "cyclic will" of nature's seasons as she dictates them to man. One wonders, however, about the sincerity of the poem's optimistic mood since it advocates, in a manner most uncharacteristic of the poet, that rather than fight against the external dictates of a physical world, it is better for man to bow to its demands and become a "Slave to a springtime passion for the earth."

Frost's New England represents a society full of ancestral memories that had grown up in isolation to the values of the new urban world. Throughout the poetry of the environment there exists a melancholy longing for the lost serenity and moral integrity which the poet identified with the once untainted rural landscape of New England. Tranquillity of the spirit is associated with the lonely hillside farms and the rocky fields marked off with stone walls built so labouriously. In short, New England came to represent the true spiritual values of old America that were being overrun by harsh new material ones. This caused Frost much heartache and resulted in a sadness that is clearly evident in his poetic vision.

The poetry of the environment seems more a revolt against the new material values of metropolitan life than a peaceful retreat from them. The verse is full of the melancholy protestations of a poet whose experiences during his formative years were gained mainly while living on a small farm surrounded by people who were threatened by the

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8. Perhaps best known by its appearance in the myth of Demeter and Iasion, sexual intercourse in the fields is thought to have developed from Greek fertility rituals. Sir James Fraser termed this "sympathetic magic". See Sir James Fraser, *The New Golden Bough*, Theodore Gaster ed. (New York, 1964), pp. 124-139.

effects of spreading industrialization. Of the relationship between his personal experiences and his verses, Frost wrote,

To a large extent the terrain of my poetry is the Derry landscape, the Derry farm. Poems growing out of this, though composite, were built on incidents and are therefore autobiographical. There was something about the experience at Derry which stayed in my mind, and was tapped for poetry in the years that came after.<sup>9</sup>

The poet believed that man in his natural state is organically related to the natural world and is separated from those of the urban world by a host of social, economic and cultural differences. A further belief was that moral integrity could best be examined in an unconscious, unintellectual and spontaneous setting such as provided by nature, but which unfortunately was diminishing rapidly.

In the short idyll, "Hyla Brook", Frost succeeded in presenting the feeling of the locality he was personally familiar with, while at the same time showing that, like man, nature too is imperfect by being subject to the pattern of the seasons. In summer the brook described in the poem runs dry and only those who are able to "remember long" can recall it as a reality. Water imagery associated with the brook is used to convey the dualistic idea of life and inert matter: life in that water is active and needed by all living things; matter by the fact that water is itself inert. Man is shown to be "connected" to matter and therefore a comparison can be more easily made between the two.

In "Hyla Brook" the brook is seen as transitory, "By June our brook's run out of song and speed." With it go the lively frogs "That shouted in the mist a month ago, / Like ghost of sleigh bells in a ghost of snow".<sup>10</sup> The repetition of the word "ghost" implies the spiritual lingering that some people think occurs after death - because for the brook all that remains is "dead leaves stuck together by the heat". Even the sonnet's irregular fifteenth line which states "We love the things we love for what they are", as though added as an afterthought to help break the sadness of the mood, cannot dispel the idea that the poet is

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9. Mertins, *op.cit.*, p. 72.

10. In a letter to John W. Haines on 5 April 1915, Frost wrote: "The Hyla is a small frog that shouts like jingling bells in the marshes in spring". Thompson, ed., *Letters*, p. 171.

unable to accept the end of man's physical life as easily as he accepts the end of the brook's flow. There is historical evidence that the brook will be "reborn" with the change of the seasons; no such reassurance exists for man.

Throughout Frost's early verse the question of a spiritual afterlife is of great importance and the poetry of the environment is no exception. The poet's hopes of finding a heaven after death are balanced by a pessimistic doubt about man's spiritual future beyond the physical world he struggles to exist in. This pessimism over what lies beyond the known universe forced Frost into the paradoxical situation of seeking an escape into the nature he distrusted for being totally indifferent to man's needs. The result is a continual interplay in the poetry, presented by way of a dual vision, of the spiritual and the physical; it is this two-fold approach to opposing values and the continual questioning of them that makes the poems consistently good.

The early sonnet, "The Vantage Point", is one such poem that places special emphasis on natural detail yet in reality is more concerned with describing a young man's search for a spiritual ideal and his subsequent escapes back to the physical world when he becomes disillusioned over ever finding what he seeks. Perhaps the sonnet, written in the Romantic tradition with a leaning to the egotistic, can be criticized as "too escapist" to be taken seriously. It must be remembered, however, that it was composed by a man who had not yet come to terms with his personal idiom and thus was forced into an expression as uncertain as is the subject of the poem in his choice between the world of man and that of nature.

"The Vantage Point", like so many of the other poems of *A Boy's Will*, suffers from a heavy Romantic influence. In the case of this poem it is evident in the over-sentimentalization of a nature that represents the escapist instinct of anybody who seeks amnesty from the pressures of life. The problem is that external reality cannot substitute for man's spiritual instincts and thus his relationship with nature, despite its seemingly assured tone, must remain distinctly uneasy. There always remains a depressing gap between man's aspirations and his true position.

Even with the Romantic influence on *A Boy's Will*, Frost still managed to portray his dual vision of the gulf between mind and matter, between spiritual man and the material environment in which he must exist. Unlike Wordsworth's verse there is in Frost's poetry no easy relationship for man and nature. Frost found himself in the position of seeking an escape from his surroundings, as remodelled by man, into something which he knew to be severely limited and therefore little better than that from which he was fleeing. When he wrote to Susan Hayes Ward on 6 August 1907, about "The Vantage Point", he mentioned that he originally called the poem the "Choice of Society". This first title shows the spiritual dilemma the poet faced in that the subject of the poem never finally makes the choice between the world of man and that of nature.

The persona is presented standing at a point of balance where he tries to observe objectively the spiritual world that is offered by man. The world of man encompasses the threat of urbanization and emphasizes man's transitory life-span by its cleared paddocks containing gravestones. Yet the physical world of nature, which seems to offer escape and everlasting regeneration, is shown to be a façade that remains indifferent to man's spiritual needs. Frost's melancholy vision indicates that whichever way the young man turns he cannot make a spiritually satisfying choice.

Perhaps it is the Romantic influence that makes the portrayal of the natural environment in *A Boy's Will* more symbolic than in either *North of Boston* or *Mountain Interval*. The woods of "The Vantage Point", for instance, are symbolic of what the young man sees as the introspective life; yet symbols are all they are and all they can ever become. The poem depicts the paddocks that separate the industrialized world from the wild forests while representing the middle ground where he found himself at odds over which environment to relate to. The result is that a compromise is sought which at best is only temporary,

If tired of trees I seek again mankind,  
Well I know where to hie me - in the dawn,  
To a slope where the cattle keep the lawn.

From his vantage point the persona lives out the poet's own desire to observe society without taking the trouble to become involved spiritually. The houses and the graves of men, symbols of their

vulnerability, act as reminders of their inevitable demise,

Far off the homes of men, and farther still,  
The graves of men on an opposing hill,  
Living or dead, whichever are to mind.

The houses and graves are a caution to one who would otherwise embrace the company of fellow men. The antithesis of life and death, separation and society, are thus encompassed in a single glance.

Not surprisingly, the attitude of the persona towards nature remains one of respect since it offers at least a hint of relief from the thought of inevitable decay. The persona prefers the natural environment to that of the cities, yet still fears it as if it is something alien to his own spiritual being. He wishes to counter the dangerous attraction of the woods by sustaining a painful involvement with his fellow man. The need for involvement causes a sense of oscillation between advance and retreat and the youth discovers that any choice between two unsavoury alternatives is a melancholy one indeed.

Like the persona of "The Vantage Point", the poet found himself in the position of on one hand seeking an escape from the innovations of man, while on the other hand being unable to reject the existence and influence of the science that was behind the innovations. It was a case of the natural world being at best indifferent to man's spiritual aspirations, while artificial values, created by science, helped man to become increasingly self-determining, but at the same time showed up his weakness in this regard. Frost preferred to wage his struggle for spiritual survival within the natural context that he knew and much of his early verse mourns the passing of its values. The old farms, synonymous with the true values of the American civilization were being deserted in favour of the rapidly spreading cities. The primitive living conditions which Frost, like Thoreau, believed were needed to gauge the farthest spiritual advances of man, were being lost in the materialist intricacies of the urban world.

A place such as New England, where so much living and toil has taken place, always seems doubly empty when deserted by the population.<sup>11</sup>

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11. This migration of the rural population of New England is generally termed the "Yankee Exodus".

The poetry of the environment often laments this loss of the New England rural economy and the community it supported. With the community went the farmer who, by speaking out at local meetings and fulfilling the primary mechanism of democracy, partially satisfied the spiritual desires of self-determining man. Frost saw that the very technology with which man sought to free himself from the shackles of physical laws, allowed for the creation of a vast metropolis where the chances of self-determination were limited rather than enhanced.

Many of Frost's poems of the environment deal either directly or indirectly with the theme of death or regeneration. Yet there is seldom evidence that the poet viewed death as an agent for any sort of deity. Unlike the Puritan poets who were sure of their heaven and hell, Frost did not speculate beyond death in any positive manner. Instead his vision concentrated on the hell-on-earth that man knew and with which he was confronted daily. The poet knew that a theme had to be credible if it was to be taken seriously; yet credibility alone was insufficient for his artistic purpose. Therefore he sought by means of his dual vision to portray the basic hardships of life within a material setting, while simultaneously lifting his subject to a higher plane by viewing man's spiritual struggles in the context of the battle of life and death.

In "The Exposed Nest" from *Mountain Interval*, Frost considered that if man is emotionally callous at times it is because his existence is transitory and this tends to make him overlook things which need a fuller consideration. Nature, however, has no such excuse. The hypocrisy of holding up nature as a shining example for man to follow, when in reality it is careless of individual worth, did much to darken Frost's vision.

"The Exposed Nest" deals with a child and a man (presumably a farmer because he shows the child how to make new-cut hay stay against the breeze) who encounter a bird's nest "left defenseless to the heat and light." Man and his machine with its "cutter bar" are directly responsible for the plight of the young birds left in the nest, but it is the harshness of nature that continually, and almost maliciously, threatens their survival. The two humans are confronted with the dilemma of whether to interfere and save the birds from "too much world at once" or leave the situation unchanged in case the mother-bird be made afraid and flee, never to return, because of their meddling. The

farmer finds it pathetically touching to see

The way the nest-full every time we stirred  
 Stood up to us as to a mother-bird  
 Whose coming home has been too long deferred

and thus decides to help the young birds because, as he puts it, he and the boy could "not spare to do the best we could / Though harm should come of it..." It appears, then, that the two humans are more concerned about placating their own consciences than objectively assessing the best chances of survival for the birds. They are driven on by their spiritual instincts to "prove we cared"... The poem shows that man, feeling helpless within the harsh indifference of the material environment, can only reflect unhappily on his own inadequacy to do anything other than a superficial action to ease his sense of moral obligation.

Nowhere in "The Exposed Nest" is there evidence of the optimistic Transcendentalist view of nature's inherent goodness or its usefulness in instructing man in the determination of a value system. Being cruelly honest with himself and with mankind in general, the narrator says

No more to tell? We turned to other things.  
 I haven't any memory - have you? -  
 Of even coming to the place again  
 To see if the birds lived the first night through,  
 And so at last to learn to use their wings.

Implicit in this self-condemnation is a melancholy awareness of the indifference of the universe to the fate of its living creatures. There is no doubt that the narrator, being a farmer, understands the workings of this natural environment, but he is too introspective, too cynically wise to attempt to adopt its unmerciful ways.

Generally it can be said that as Frost progressed in his early poetry he came to adopt the complex and almost paradoxical position of no longer seeing nature as an escape from moral decision (as is the case with many of the very early poems of *A Boy's Will*); nevertheless, he saw it as preferable to the artificial world created by man through his science. By his gradually seeing nature as being often a harmful, and at best an indifferent example to man, Frost was radically different in his philosophic outlook from most previous American poets who tended towards an easy conservatism in their view of the world around them.

In some respects Frost's vision of the environment was a dual one in that his ideas and concepts were torn between the dogma of inherited values and the latent anarchy of his beliefs on the spiritual oppression of man.

The poet saw many individual peculiarities deriving from experience in the natural environment, peculiarities not readily amenable to scientific analysis and therefore largely outside man's understanding. He adopted the belief that since the mind is a direct expression of the spirit it cannot be fully understood by science. And although man has developed his technical skills to a high competence, the poet insisted that the realms of the spirit remain inaccessible and, in fact, anti-thetical to modern technology. Science cannot help man, therefore, to bolster himself against any spiritual trials imposed upon him. Instead its machines serve to replace the old, natural values of the environment with strange new ones, while making man's constitution weaker because of his growing dependence on them.

"The Line Gang", with its Italian rhyme scheme, advances the theme of the spread of technology like a cancer into the rural areas of New England. Brought to mind is the thought that man is as good with his manipulation of technical things as he is bad at his handling of spiritual relationships. About this difference between man's inner and outer development it has been said that "The conduct of human affairs, in contrast to progress in science and technology, has suffered from irrational reliance upon generalities, superstitions, fallacies, and prejudices."<sup>12</sup> From his readings, Frost knew that Kant saw science penetrating beyond passing sensations but only to a world of things as they appear to be not necessarily how they really are. If Kant was correct, science makes man's situation on earth ironic since irony is the comparison of an awareness of reality against what appears to be the case. Frost agreed with Kant by saying "The end reached by observation as a method...is dualism, - that is, a set of axioms and laws founded on distinctions. The distinctions are based on appearances and both they and appearances are treated as reasonably final data."<sup>13</sup>

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12. Ross Stagner, ed., *The Dimensions of Human Conflict* (Detroit, 1967), p. 32.

13. Munson, *A Study*, p. 103.



By advocating that the countryside offered the best unbroken horizon, with its "melancholy of uniform and infinite vegetation"<sup>14</sup> for man to discern values, Emerson earlier proposed a poetic vision requiring a focal distance of "unlimited extent". Similarly Thoreau also considered that the poet and scientist (in this case a botanist) look differently at similar objects and recommended a balanced view of things, "See not with the eye of science, which is barren, nor of youthful poetry, which is impotent. But taste the world and digest it."<sup>15</sup> Thoreau asserted that the only true way to spiritual awareness was in an environment free of encumbrances and his distrust of the material world of appearances is evident in his declaring, "We do not learn with the eyes"<sup>16</sup> and also that "Man cannot afford ... to look at Nature directly, but only with the side of his eye. He must look through her and beyond her."<sup>17</sup> To Frost, with his dual vision, this came as sound advice. Thus Kant was not the only man to influence Frost in his view of metaphysics as something not open to quantitative analysis. From his study of the Yankees Frost realized that man is an unaccountable creature who does not work according to calculated laws: his spiritual feelings are not verifiable nor are they measurable. A more subjective and sensitive interrogation of man by man is needed.

This view of the inadequacy of science in the spiritual field partially explains the poet's gloomy outlook in "The Line Gang" in relation to what he saw as the gradual loss of the social values of the rural culture. The poem shows that the usually pragmatic poet refused to compromise in his idealistic defence against the encroaching "progress" of urbanization. Awareness of the danger of failing to take a popular or a commonsense view of things only increased his feeling of despondency. The brutal scenario describing the erection of the telegraph poles, that would serve as symbols of things to come is coloured by this despondency,

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14. Sherman Paul, "The Angels of Vision". From Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher, eds., *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 165.

15. Matthiessen, *op.cit.*, p. 76.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

17. Paul, *op.cit.*, p. 165.

Here come the line-gang pioneering by.  
 They throw a forest down less cut than broken.  
 They plant dead trees for living, and the dead  
 They string together with a living thread.

By the time of the publishing of *Mountain Interval* Frost acknowledged that man with his technology could at times be infinitely more powerful than the forces of the natural environment, and far more dangerous to himself. It was his ability to see beyond "unthinking" science that caused him to present the distressful results of man's technology on the spirit rather than a mere recitation of physical events. This fits in with Emerson's remarks in "The Poet" that "The poet alone knows astronomy, chemistry, vegetation, and animation, for he does not stop at these facts, but employs them as signs...in every word he speaks he rides on them as the horses of thought."<sup>18</sup>

Frost's dual vision allowed him to see the darker side of man's intellectual development. It fired his cynicism towards a mode of thought he considered too unimaginative and too concerned with factual, material things to be reckoned synonymous with the spiritual advancement of man. In his poetry of the environment he sought to simplify the struggle of spiritual man to discover himself within the material universe, be it natural or artificial, by ensuring that all secondary distractions were cut away from the problem at hand.

By withdrawing to what remained of the rural world of New England Frost sought to portray the values of spiritual perception. Thus, Sergeant's statement that "Frost's poetry shows little evidence of the interest in the growing industrial world to which he was considerably exposed, north of Boston, through his family connections and his own adolescent jobs"<sup>19</sup> misses the truth. It was reaction against such industrialization that caused Frost's uneasy withdrawal into the natural world that he feared. The confusion caused by the upheaval in the traditional environment of New England was implied by the poet's evaluation of the urban way of life, only the symbols of which feature in his poems. The pressure of these symbols, such as the "dead trees" of "The Line Gang," is felt behind much of the poet's diagnosis of the urban disease eating away at the vitals of the rural culture. But it was more than the sad fate of the traditional New England environment

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18. Emerson, *op.cit.*, pp. 251-52.

19. Sergeant, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

that concerned the poet. He saw urbanization threatening the spiritual extinction not only of the Yankee culture but of the human race, since man can only function when his external world is in tune with the needs inherited from his social past: the metaphysical questions he must ask himself cannot be answered from within an alien culture.

Frost leaves the final judgement of the situation presented in "The Line Gang" to the reader. The reader must determine whether the benefits gained by the telephone and telegraph warrant the cost in other terms. There is little doubt about where the poet himself stands when he describes the peaceful air of the forest, normally conducive to meditation, now polluted with the noise of the workers

They string an instrument against the sky  
Wherein words whether beaten out or spoken  
Will run as hushed as when they were a thought.  
But in no hush they string it: they go past  
With shouts afar to pull the cable taut

The workers are made to appear as though they are raping the virgin purity of the forest

....With a laugh,  
An oath of towns that set the wild at naught,  
They bring the telephone and telegraph.

Despite man's overwhelming technical superiority there is a feeling in "The Line Gang" that man can never be absolutely victorious in his struggle against nature. Frost thought that there could be no escape from the relentless physical forces when they were combined with the malevolence of an unpredictable fate. But he also considered a substitution of nature by man's unharnessed technology, based on materialism, a step backward in terms of spiritual development; he was in pessimistic agreement with Montaigne's admonition that "Science without conscience is but the death of the soul."

Although many of the poems of the environment present what at first glance is an idyllic pastoral scene, they are in truth pessimistic in their overall scope. The vestiges of Romanticism that exist in *Mountain Interval* in poems such as "The Oven Bird", where animals are addressed as if they had human emotions and an ability to read thoughts, lack the heroic quality of earlier Romantic verse. In "The Oven Bird" Frost succeeds in imposing his own melancholy mood on the subject of his

poem without engendering the sentimentality usually attached to such efforts. This is done in the irregular thirteen line sonnet by use of emotionally intense symbols reminiscent of the Georgian style, but with an emphasis on "show rather than tell". Thus the poem achieves a more dramatic impact on the reader with abstract thoughts of regret intermingled with concrete elements such as "solid tree trunks".

With its setting of the New England countryside facing the approach of autumn, a season redolent of death, "The Oven Bird" begins as a lament for the transience of earthly beauty. The lament quickly develops into a far more complex examination of the "other fall", or death, that comes with the encroachment upon the natural world of the new values. These new values are synonymous with the industrial world, and the consternation it causes the bird which represents mankind in general. Frost's obsession with sound in this sonnet pays dividends when, by using auditory imagery, he is able to impart a spiritual element into the sad note of the bird's screeching song that shatters the opulence and fecundity of the summer forest.

"The Oven Bird", then, is a bitter protest that calls for a spiritual revolt rather than for a mere stoic acceptance of the all-encompassing materialism that threatens. There is a melancholy awareness that there can be no stopping change, be it the seasons or man's technical progress. The bird, also known because of the strange note of its song as the "teacher-bird", "a singer everyone has heard", instructs the reader on what to think about the change and the loss of an irrecoverable past. The song is a monotonous, melancholy, metallic chant that very much echoes the poet's own feelings.

In music a diminished chord is just short of the full chord, similarly the bird's song is "a diminished thing" that leaves the listener with a feeling of uneasy incompleteness, as if there must be more to come; but there is nothing. Similarly, there is an absence of finality in Frost's sonnet; a state of helplessness seems to overtake the bird when "the highway dust is over all". Lack of certainty over what will happen makes the threat even more ominous and also allows the bird to continue his bitter protest to the end,

The bird would cease and be as other birds  
But that he knows in singing not to sing.  
The question that he frames in all but words  
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

The period after the Civil War marked the start of a rise in the American economy and increasing prosperity, especially in the cities. Vast movements were made towards increasing industrial output and cities close to New England, like New York, grew up to be among the Western world's greatest urban areas; as Hicks says, "Even while the war was going on, capitalistic industry demonstrated that it was the ruler of the nation". The new machines, many of which were invented by the Yankees themselves, caused a "revolution in agriculture" that "destroyed the farmer's self-sufficiency".<sup>20</sup> When one recalls that many of the early poems of Frost's first three books were written around 1900, often about events which had occurred prior to that date, it is not difficult to appreciate that the poet must have been under considerable pressure from the new materialist force of urbanization. In fact, the poet came to relate the new materialist society to secularism in that it was only concerned with the present and was falsely optimistic about man's progress, whereas the older spiritual values tended to view man as incomplete and vulnerable and therefore always needing to be on his guard against external corruption.

By means of his dual vision of things, Frost was able to contrast the urban environment, with its emphasis on the pragmatic and spontaneous, with the rural, based on spiritual codes. The characteristics of the artificial and the natural were not always diametrically opposed. They were antithetical enough, however, to distress the poet and this despondency is evident in his early verse. He saw the monolithic industrial world with its cities, slums, traffic and pollution usurping the rural areas which were no longer vital in their accomplishments. People on the rocky soil were caught in a struggle for bare survival while being battered by the dislocating forces of modern life and many left the land in what Gilbert Borch of *Fortune* magazine called the "magnificent decline". The poet's dilemma of trying to find a spiritual certainty within the indifference of modern life perhaps is best summarized by Darwin who, in respect of the changing environment, declared, "We are faced with a spiritual conflict of the most acute kind, a sort of social schizophrenia which divides the soul of society between

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20. Granville Hicks, *A Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War* (New York, revised ed., 1935), p. 2.

a non-moral will to power served by inhuman techniques and a religious faith and a moral idealism which have no power to influence human life."<sup>21</sup>

It is a misconception, however, to think that Frost's early verse of the environment is totally concerned with the threat of the urban world. Many of his poems are concerned solely with his attitude to the still technologically free part of the landscape that surrounded him. Most of these particular poems, perhaps influenced somewhat by Longfellow's gentle style, retain the milder aspects of the Romantic mood and remain undisturbed by the contentious social changes of the time. More traditionally, they are concerned with man's place in the natural universe. In his study of this subject Frost, with his dual vision, concurred with Alcott who had earlier remarked that "Nature and spirit are inseparable, and are best studied as a unit." Frost also agreed that 'The idealist's point of view is the obverse of the naturalist's'<sup>22</sup> and thus endeavoured to combine the passion and imagination of the idealist with the realism of the scientist.

Frost was a writer of elemental force and much of his early verse of the environment contains a mixture of the changing seasons, the storm and calm, light and darkness, solitary sadness and fleeting ebullience. The semi-ballad, "A Line Storm Song", which first made an appearance in *The New England Magazine* in October 1907, and again later in *A Boy's Will* is just such a poem full of the changing moods and the turbulent weather of New England. In this case the unsettled conditions are juxtaposed with the initial feeling of emptiness the youth has over a brief separation from his lover,

The line - storm clouds fly tattered and swift.  
The road is forlorn all day,  
Where a myriad snowy quartz-stones lift,  
And the hoofprints vanish away.

After an initial "doubt" the lovers are reunited: "And it seems like the time when, after doubt / Our love came back again". The poem suffers, however, from an over sentimentality that is somehow linked to the masochism of the youth so akin to the poet's own. Whatever

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21. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (London, 1948), p. 217.

22. Feidelson, *op.cit.*, p. 116.

force "A Line Storm Song" has comes from the unstrained descriptions of bleak nature at its most potent, "Oh, never this overwhelming east wind swells / But it seems like the sea's return" and "All song of the woods is crushed like some / Wild, easily shattered rose." The vulnerability of man to the ruthless authority of nature is highlighted (although one could be excused for suspecting that this was achieved somewhat unintentionally) when the sickly-sweet joy of reunited lovers is overshadowed by the ravages of the New England weather.

Those poems of the environment which are coloured by the storms and the sombre shades of autumn (as befitting the poet's despondent vision towards matter's indifference to man) show Frost to prefer the sad days of the year's end, just as Whittier had preferred the crisp bite of winter. With the seasons so often used to reflect the moods of man, autumn can be seen to represent Frost's notion of the lack of spiritual growth of man.

The richly suggestive "October", another poem of the autumnal mood ("O hushed October morning mild, / Thy leaves have ripened to the fall") is enhanced by the influence of Thoreau's *Week* in stating its author's mood. The poem, however, is an early one from *A Boy's Will* and it displays much of the Romantic idealism that permeates that volume. "October" directs, in the rather idealistic manner of one with an existentialist vision of life, what the season should do, instead of being content to describe what actually happens,

O hushed October morning mild,  
Begin the hours of this day slow.  
Make the day seem to us less brief  
Hearts not averse to being beguiled,  
Beguile us in the way you know.

"October" contains the same tired Romantic escapism of a poet who in his formative years was full of pessimism about man's ability to achieve anything except at the whim of nature. He knew the appeal to "Slow, slow" the day's passing was useless since with characteristic indifference the autumn days would become shorter as winter approached. The calls of the crows and man's pathetic appeals for October to "Retard the sun with gentle mist" are treated by nature with the contempt such idealism deserves. The poet, basically a pragmatic man, seems to be torturing himself with his dual spiritual wants; first, to

be as one with the beauty of autumn, and second, to suffer the self-imposed rejection his sorrowful vision knew to be inevitable, and which he refused to hide from.

Doyle does not see "October" as an "*Il Penseroso*" to the "*L'Allegro*" of "To the Thawing Wind"<sup>2,3</sup> but nevertheless regards it as a companion poem in that the two depict the almost totally contrasting moods of their composer. Whereas "October" regrets both the ending of a season and of growth, the other jubilantly rejoices in the coming of the spring, the season of rebirth and symbol for the regeneration of all living things. "To the Thawing Wind" was based on Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" with its "platonic breeze" that drives the thoughts of the stagnant and unrecognized poet to "new birth". It was written in an all-out effort by the impotent poet (as he unhappily saw himself) to identify with the rejuvenation synonymous with the coming of spring.

"To the Thawing Wind" seems incongruous among the early poems when compared with most of the others in Frost's first three books of verse. Full of unrestrained joy, it does not see nature's processes as always resulting in the death of living things. Yet one suspects that the joy is not securely founded since it was held by a man who at that period of his life as a poet (and poetry was his life) had nothing to be in raptures over. One can presume that this short verse, with its blasting couplets and triple rhyme

Come with rain, O loud Southwester!  
Bring the singer, bring the nester;  
Give the buried flower a dream;  
Make the settled snowbank steam

was composed by the poet in a moment of brief exuberance to spur himself on since he knew the mood would soon be lost in his overall melancholy outlook. Yet despite its suspect mood of false optimism, "To the Thawing Wind" succeeds in displaying something rare in the first three books - the poet's emotions over the need for fresh ideals and life for his verse. Such emotion is seen in the shout to the wind to

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23. Doyle, *op.cit.*, p. 143.



Burst into my narrow stall;  
 Swing the picture on the wall;  
 Run the rattling pages o'er;  
 Scatter poems on the floor;  
 Turn the poet out of door.

It is significant that the appeals for new life are few in verse that grieves so much for the passing of present existence without much hope for future spiritual rebirth. In his verse on the environment and its seasons, most of the poet's time was occupied by melancholy thoughts of autumnal decay such as seen in the mythological-like "My November Guest". In this poem the almost intolerable beauty and ecstasy of colour, the hallmarks of autumn, are linked with the idea of inescapable death and decay. The beauty of the season is made to seem iniquitous since it misleads the observer into a false sense of security.

The human element is brought into what otherwise would be a descriptive poem by the narrator of "My November Guest" personifying his wretched mood as a woman named "Sorrow",

My Sorrow, when she's here with me,  
 Thinks these dark days of autumn rain  
 Are beautiful as days can be

Sorrow and the speaker are one ("She talks and I am fain to list") to the extent that the poem could almost be judged self-indulgent if not for the objectivity of the sweeping and beautiful descriptions of the surrounding New England countryside with its "desolate, deserted trees" and "faded earth".

As with many poems in *A Boy's Will*, "My November Guest" has leanings towards the masochistic, with the poet attempting to use the symbol of the dying natural environment to enhance his unfathomable spiritual anguish. He can appreciate the sensuous blacks and browns of autumn without "Sorrow's" company, but the world of nature is made "better for her praise"; or in short, the narrator's sadness at the end of a love affair is given an added masochistic poignancy by the season's symbolic meaning of the end of things. A paradox of "brightness in darkness" is created by the narrator being content in his melancholy. Even with such Romantic self-indulgence bordering on the sentimental, however, the poem's overall effect is saved by the real loveliness of of the autumn world described by a man who loved it dearly.

If a general summary could be made of Robert Frost's feelings towards the natural environment, it might be said that in his first book, *A Boy's Will*, he looks upon nature as a powerful, untamable force. In his second book, *North of Boston*, he is more meditative about nature, which he sees taking a more passive role in man's affairs. In *North of Boston*, nature creates a background mood to reflect the sombre emotions of the characters. In his third book, *Mountain Interval* (except in odd exceptions such as "An Old Man's Winter Night") Frost is concerned with the declining power of nature to influence man's value judgements.

In *North of Boston*, where nature is seen to play an indifferent background role, "The Wood-Pile" is the only poem that concentrates in any detail on the influence of the material environment upon spiritual man, in this case the persona who was "Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day". The poem seems to allude to the chapter entitled "house-Warming" in *Walden*, where Thoreau tells of the comfort and meaning that a wood-pile can have for man. Although Frost makes the ironic remark, however, about his wood-pile "warming" the outdoors, his woodpile probably has more in common with that found in Melville's *Israel Potter*<sup>24</sup> which symbolizes dashed hopes and spiritual frustration. It is indicative of the melancholy mood of this poem that it is set in a "frozen swamp", and that the only living creature met is a bird which is suspicious of the narrator's motives.

The problem of the decay of physical things is examined in "The Wood-Pile" where the portrayal of desolation suggests the futility of man's existence, no matter how assiduously he approaches the task of living on earth. Man is made to appear antithetical to the natural forces rather than shown to exist harmoniously with them. The poem's main concentration on the theme of decay enhances its secondary metaphysical concern which becomes apparent when the persona becomes intoxicated by the sight of an abandoned wood-pile and the thoughts it provokes in relation to man's purpose on earth.

The persona is a man with powers of observation. He is familiar with his natural surroundings, although not necessarily at ease with them.

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24. See William Van O'Connor, "Robert Frost: Profane Optimist", *The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays* (Carbondale, 1962), p. 137.

As a practical countryman he understands the degree of labour required to collect firewood, and the initial bewilderment upon seeing the abandoned wood-pile,

It was a cord of maple, cut and split  
And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.  
And not another like it could I see.

soon gives way to a metaphysical speculation as to why so much work should go in vain. One cannot help wondering, along with the persona, if this example is but a microcosm of man's futile existence within an indifferent environment.

To present as complete a vision as possible the poet uses the Puritan duality that sees the soul as divided between the true ascetic nature of things in a material environment, and the artist's spiritual optimism. This duality explains why it is not sufficient for the inanimate wood-pile to be the sole object that stimulates the walker's thoughts. He is attracted by the antics of a suspicious bird ("He thought that I was after him for a feather") whose vivacious actions serve as a complete contrast to the silent stillness of the swamp. The lively bird causes him to become even more disillusioned over discovering the purpose of man's existence on earth.

The walker is of two minds about the bird's strange behaviour. Initially he ridicules the Romantic notion that nature's dumb creatures can have human sympathies, "And say no word to tell me who he was / Who was so foolish as to think what he thought." He finds, however, that the bird's untrusting actions, "A small bird flew before me. He was careful / To put a tree between us when he lighted", cause him to attribute to it the taciturn personality of the Yankee farmer, who hides his private thoughts as someone who takes "Everything said as personal to himself." The bird, therefore, becomes a manifestation of the spiritual unfriendliness of man towards his fellows, something the persona is also guilty of by choosing to walk alone in a hostile material environment rather than seek the company of other human beings.

By allowing the bird a personality Frost is able to instil movement and a sense of human involvement into a poem which otherwise would suffer a danger of becoming static. "The Wood Pile" avoids

charges of Romantic sentimentality by the persona's rational nature judging it as ludicrous to think that nature's creatures could truly have similar feelings as man. What is left is the fact that nature's objects and creatures can become intricately involved with the mind of man in his consideration of his position on earth. The drama of spiritual man is tied up with an indifferent environment, which is a pessimistic manipulation of Thoreau's words "What is nature unless there is an eventful human life passing within her?"

Like Emerson who wrote, "every individual is at once the focus and the channel of mankind's long and wide endeavour, that all nature exists for the education of the human soul",<sup>25</sup> Frost, in his first two books at least, believed that man could learn by observation of his natural surroundings. An interplay was recognized, such as that evident in "The Wood-Pile", between the senses of man, and the environment. This recognition originated from the Kantian notion that placed the creative spiritual self against alien materialism. In *Mountain Interval*, however, Frost is less sure that nature can be of value to man. Emerson may have preached that "Nature is the Bible in which man may read all things, providing his mind is attuned to the tongue nature employs. Nature serves man for Commodity, for Beauty, for Language, and for Discipline",<sup>26</sup> but Frost would not concur that "nature is the symbol of the spirit"<sup>27</sup> and that the natural environment is readily identifiable with man. There always remained the distinction between the physical and the mental; nature was important only in relation to what man's senses by chance pick up in the stream of life.

The "stream of life" element is apparent to an extent in "The Wood-Pile" as it is concerned with time and the limited period man has on earth. The notion of the passing of the years is given by the narrator's assessment of the age of the wood-pile,

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25. John Dewey, "Ralph Waldo Emerson", *Characters and Events*, Vol. 1, John Dewey and Joseph Ratner, eds., (New York, 1929). From Konvitz and Whicher, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

26. Gerber, *op.cit.*, p. 56.

27. Matthiessen, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.  
 And it was older sure than this year's cutting,  
 Or even last year's or the year's before.  
 The wood was gray and the bark warping off it  
 And the pile somewhat sunken...

Time is seen as an ultimate necessity when assessing finite human experience because human sensibility is affected by time and the age of things as they appear. The link between time and finite man is made particularly clear by the "sunken" wood-pile having a similar appearance to an ancient human. But, as Frost's dual vision perceives, as some things decay, so new life evolves in nature's everlasting cycle. This life-death biplicity is represented by the dead bundle of wood that is encircled by growing clematis.

In his poetry of the environment Frost was concerned with a whole range of complex issues such as the threat posed to the natural world by industrialization, the indifference of nature to man's aspirations, and man's inability to fathom his own destiny. These issues fall together loosely in a vision that shrank from the harsh new values of a technological age and viewed with suspicion the indifference of nature. Frost believed that despite his efforts to survive, man will always be the victim of his surroundings, be they artificial or natural, and that the heat of his spiritual fire, like that of the wood-pile, will be spent uselessly "To warm the frozen swamp as best it could / With the slow smokeless burning of decay."

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

It hit the moon.  
 Then there were three there, making a dim row,  
 The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.  
 Warren returned too soon, it seemed to her—  
 Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.  
 "Warren?" she questioned.  
 "Dead," was all he answered.

"The Death of the Hired Man"

The whole theory of two independent factors of existence,  
 Mind and Matter, Force and Enertia, is an absurdity.<sup>1</sup>

J.B. Stallo

1. Feidelson, op.cit., p. 115.

It has long been the thesis of those with a dual vision of man that in him both the external and internal coexist, that he is the sole meeting point of spirit and matter. When Adam ate the apple from the tree of good and evil this careful balance between spirit and matter was upset; man lost a part of his spiritual makeup and consequently became a prisoner of the physical world. This mystery about an ultimate spiritual fate was passed as an unhappy legacy to all mankind. Many have since sought, unsuccessfully, to re-establish the tenuous metaphysical links between the body and the mind. Such failures, however, did not prevent Frost, as one who saw man's spiritual transcendency in doubt, from presenting his poetic vision of the melancholy dualism that faced man.

Man, to Frost, is not merely a mind dealing with alien matter, he is organically linked to it. He agreed with Emerson, who in "Compensation" wrote, "dualism underlies the nature and condition of man. Every excess causes a defect; every defect an excess. Every sweet has its sour; every evil its good."<sup>2</sup> And further, that "Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female....An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; as spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective".<sup>3</sup>

But Emerson searched for a knowledge by which man could exist comfortably in adverse conditions rather than like Frost, trying to determine the facts of the situation. In a cosmos where there is no action without reaction, Frost considered it impossible to define accurately a philosophy in which the values of spirit and matter conveniently comprise a harmonious entity. Thus, although Frost agreed with much of Emerson's basic transcendental teachings, he was unable to accept the concept of a complete union of the duality within mankind. Such an acceptance would have been to acknowledge that man was no longer in ignorance of what lay beyond material existence on earth.

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2. Emerson, op.cit., p. 65.

3. Ibid., p. 64.

To grasp the concept of Frost's brand of dualism as expounded in his early verse, it has been necessary to understand the influences of certain earlier religious movements and the corresponding movements of American literary art, from the Puritans, Unitarians, and Transcendentalists, through to the twentieth century. And although the overall theme of Frost's early poetry is not specifically religious, but more an examination of the spiritual in relation to the physical, it is worth remembering that he was still influenced by the attitudes of those earlier religious and literary movements. In an area such as New England, it would have been difficult for Frost to have developed without a sound theological grounding. This background was skilfully employed by the poet to impart a spirituality into his symbols, thus enabling him to depict both a physical and a spiritual world simultaneously.

Because of his spiritual inheritance, it is not surprising, when examining Frost's melancholy vision, to find a number of earlier themes intermingled with his conception of things. Calvinism, therefore, with its grim sense of predestination and negative views of earthly life, fights for a place in the poet's vision, along with the comparatively liberal Christianity of the Unitarians. The Unitarians in turn seem coldly intellectual when one is confronted by the optimism of the Transcendentalists. The Transcendentalists, in particular, exerted a strong influence over Frost's vision.<sup>4</sup> Their influence, however, was often a negative one with the poet reacting against his predecessors' optimism rather than blindly adopting it. Frost could not accept an optimistic religious faith; he was of the opinion that there was more to life than the physical, that somewhere there was a spiritual dimension if only man could obtain it. The Puritans, with their ideas of the total depravity of physical man, enabled Frost to balance the overly confident outlook of the Transcendentalists, the result being a vision of melancholy doubt regarding the possibility of a harmonious duality existing within mankind.

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4. It is difficult to determine the exact degree of influence that the Transcendentalists had on Frost, partially because of the nebulous nature of their philosophy. Transcendentalism was any philosophic thought considered to be vague, optimistic, mystical, supernatural, or just lacking in commonsense. The name of the movement was adopted not so much because it encompassed a set of philosophic principles, but because the public liked the ring of the term. See Hutchison, *op.cit.*, p. 23.



It has been shown that of all the Transcendentalists, Emerson,<sup>5</sup> the only member of the group to obtain external recognition, and to some extent, Thoreau, had the most impact on Frost's vision. Nevertheless, Frost rejected the idea that he followed Emerson's "cheerful monism" and at no stage saw man as an Emersonian unit. Instead he saw a constant need for spiritual sacrifice, or what Emerson called "the devotion of love",<sup>6</sup> in order to survive. Frost saw the sad necessity for man to have an acceptance of the proximity of sorrow and bliss as a feature of his existence; thus he balanced odd moments of humour with the darkness in life to produce an overall poetic vision where irony is applied as a spiritual defence. The result are poems which at best are only a "momentary stay against confusion".

Frost shows that man cannot exist within himself and this makes the task of finding a spiritual peace more difficult because to be alienated is to die spiritually. Man must seek communication with others and often this proves to be an impossible, self-destructive task. Within marriage there is conflict; within casual relationships, misunderstanding. The frailty of man's position in the physical world is further exacerbated by the undiscerning power of blind fate which is so often merciless in its workings. Frost, therefore, is seen to portray situations of disaster rather than tragedy. Moments of pathos are glimpsed rather than the slow and logical build-ups that bring about an unhappy event. Use of disaster proves that the poet considered man to have little say in determining his own spiritual destiny. But this in itself is not where the real sadness of the poet's vision lies. It lies in the belief that man could never give up his vain attempts to seek spiritual knowledge. He must always fail, suffering endlessly, but perhaps not needlessly. For without this nebulous spiritual goal man would wither and die at the whim of nature as do the autumn leaves.

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5. Emerson was himself steeped in the spiritual traditions of New England. This background contributed to his brand of philosophy that was passed as a legacy to many later American writers, including Frost.

6. Frost said that in "Give All for Love", Emerson failed to give all his love because "His transcendentalism demanded that friends, home, everything be sacrificed if necessary. The dilemma is unsolvable. Perhaps that is why we have two hands, so that we can hold such opposites". Robert Francis, ed., *Frost: A Time to Talk* (Amherst, 1972), p. 52.

Even nature, with its unsympathetic physical forces that seek to crush the vitality from man, Frost saw as vulnerable. By witnessing the decline of the traditional rural culture of New England the poet knew that at times man's own technology could run wild, replacing the uncaring but often cleansing power of nature with its own awful repression that insidiously undermines man's spiritual will from within. Unlike nature's onslaughts, which either crush man or cause him to develop his spiritual will to survive, the base values of a technological society eat away at man's strength from within, making him a mindless creature who refuses to look beyond the confines of his immediate physical comforts.

The replacement of nature's threat by one from technology increases proportionately towards the last of Frost's early books. In *A Boy's Will* nature takes an active role in man's affairs; in *North of Boston* it seems to have a more passive, background role; while in *Mountain Interval* it declines into a melancholy comment on man's own foolishness. Man wins the physical battle with nature but loses his spiritual war for metaphysical knowledge and certainty of rebirth.

In the early poetry it can be seen that both physics and metaphysics are combined in a search for the meaning of individual experience. The search is an exacting one because of the highly personal nature of the spiritual fancies. Man needs his individualism, but it is this which prevents him from obtaining universal recognition from his fellows and thus harmonious spiritual relationships. It also prevents certain types of individual metaphysical experiences, such as those obtained within the subconscious by means of symbols, from being universally applicable and helpful to others seeking a similar spiritual goal. Each man must cut his own path towards ultimate knowledge until he is "sick to death", and "dies more alone".

It has been shown that in his early poetry, Robert Frost was occupied with the spiritual dimension rather than the panorama of the natural world which is present only because he needed it to balance his vision. Nature provides a setting which either causes man to react to it, or highlights man's reactions to his fellows; in all cases it is man's actions and reactions that are of importance. The poet dissociated himself completely from the literary cult that felt a need to copy nature's

examples. By means of his dual vision Frost saw nature not as a physical fact in itself, but purely in relation to the spirit. He sought an understanding rather than a conclusion about man's inner workings in a material universe.

The poet shows that man's inability to determine an ultimate metaphysical certainty leads to spiritual frustration. He does not, however, attempt to instruct on often incomprehensible and unprovable concepts, but merely to delineate the problems facing man. Portrayal of man's brave yet fruitless efforts to achieve spiritual knowledge within physical bonds, to strive for the hallowed link between mind and matter, body and soul, is what makes the poet's vision truly a melancholy dualism.

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