The Problem of Knowledge in the Poetry of Robert Frost

A Thesis

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To the memory

of the late Professor Robert Nathaniel Hallstead

An Abstract of

The Problem of Knowledge in the Poetry of Robert Frost

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In a considerable number of his poems, Robert Frost conducts an informal investigation into the limits and validity of various modes of knowing. Essentially, it is an inquiry into the basic problem of how one sees reality, conducted not in philosophic language, but in language such as Frost uses in "Wild Grapes":

> I had not taken the first step in knowledge;
> I had not learned to let go with the hands,
> As I still have not learned to with the heart,
> And have no wish to with the heart--nor need,
> That I can see. The mind--is not the heart.
> I may yet live, as I know others live,
> To wish in vain to let go with the mind--
> Of cares, at night, to sleep; but nothing tells me
> That I need learn to let go with the heart.[1]

Though this passage is not representative of Frost's inquiry into the problems of knowledge, it serves to indicate Frost's attitudes: he sees the process of knowing as involving at least a momentary release of one's grip of those things which can be clutched in the hands; he feels a tension between mind and heart, between what one knows and what one wishes. These biases remain constant throughout the greater part of Frost's canon. The exploration was motivated in part by Frost's desire for a positive religious belief which he could accept intellectually

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[1] Complete Poems of Robert Frost, 1949, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), p. 243.

as well as emotionally.

By shifting positions, or adopting different personae, or by placing his personae in various natural contexts, Frost conducts his inquiry. A common Frostian device is to have a human figure (in narrative poems) or a persona (in philosophical lyrics) respond to some particular natural phenomenon in such a way that nature seems to function as a teacher. Yet the tone makes one aware that Frost knows that nature cannot really teach man anything; it is man's mind which finds meaning in an experience and gives it the form of a thought or of a poem. It is by this juxtaposition of natural and human that Frost achieves his ironic flexibility: since he is making analogies between man and nature, he can vary the analogy to create various moods, comic or serious.

Changes in the quality of Frost's irony indicate shifts in his poetic vision. In the poems of _A Boy's Will_ (1913) and _Mountain Interval_ (1916), the irony tends to be playfully humorous, although there is also a dark undertone to that humor. In the poems of _New Hampshire_ (1923), _West-running Brook_ (1928), _A Further Range_ (1936), and _A Witness Tree_ (1942) Frost's ironic control varies considerably, yet these volumes are unified by Frost's emphasis upon the fragmentation of the universe, and by Frost's intellectual skepticism--his refusal to adopt any one philosophic viewpoint as final. In these volumes he celebrates man's mind, though he also recognizes it to be potentially destructive. He emphasizes the freedom the contemplation gives man, enabling him to rise, at least momentarily, above the flux in nature and the battles of

society. He contrasts various approaches to knowledge, various ways of using knowledge, tacitly preferring a common-sensical approach neither wholly fanciful (though he admits the necessity and the delights of flights of fancy) nor rigidly logical (for the mind, as he puts it in "Wild Grapes," is not the heart).

Steeple Bush (1947) marks Frost's gradual adoption of a new perspective on life. He turns away somewhat from things of the heart and hands and things of nature and lifts his eyes to observe and comment upon social phenomena. This diminishing concern with the problem of knowledge suggests Frost's increasing security in his religious belief. In the Clearing (1962) represents the clarification of Frost's vision, but there is a loss of tension in his poetry. The irony tends to be merely coy:

> It takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling
> To get adapted to my kind of fooling.[2]

[2]In the Clearing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 100.

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INTRODUCTION

Though Robert Frost's poetry has been subjected to critical scrutiny since 1913, it demands re-examination now that his letters, interviews, a selection of his prose, and the first volume of a full-length official critical biography are available.[1] With the information that these recent publications provide it is possible to challenge a number of suppositions about Frost's poetry. One theory that I shall test is that "Frost has no crises, no turning points, and no apparent center."[2] My thesis is, first, that a close reading of the poems reveals that Frost did suffer crises, and that there are, as a result, distinct turning points in his poetic development. In order to test this aspect of my thesis, I propose to isolate one of Frost's favorite poetic techniques, that of posing nature as a teacher, and then to trace through his canon of poems his use of that device. Secondly, and this is the major aspect of my thesis, I posit that Robert Frost's poetry centres on a deliberate exploration of the problems of knowledge. Frost conducts in many of his poems an oblique Socratic dialogue, implicitly asking questions about the process of knowing, and about the limits

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[1]The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963); Lawrance Thompson (ed.), Selected Letters of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964); Edward Connery Lathem (ed.), Interviews with Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966); Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

[2]James M. Cox, "Introduction," Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 12.

and validity of various ways of knowing, and, inevitably, presenting answers to these questions. But his answers are only tentative; he assumes a variety of viewpoints in the process of exploration; in fact, it is by shifting perspectives that Frost conducts his inquiry. Obviously, this inquiry is not evident in all of Frost's poems, but it appears most clearly in those poems in which he juxtaposes man and nature.

Chapter I is devoted to an explanation of Frost's technique of juxtaposing the human and the natural, and to a discussion of the immediate origins of the technique, and to an analysis of its epistemological implications. The remaining chapters illustrate Frost's use of the device and consider his poetic vision at various stages of his career. Chapter II considers how Frost exploited the ironic possibilities of the technique in _A Boy's Will_ (1913) and _Mountain Interval_ (1916). Chapter III considers how in _New Hampshire_ (1923) and _West-running Brook_ (1928) Frost pursued his exploration of the problem of knowledge to the extent of subjecting the tool of exploration, man's mind, to critical scrutiny, and to the extent of constructing a metaphysic which postulates that intellect is the sacred essence of man. Chapter IV discusses the poems of _A Further Range_ (1936) in which Frost carefully masks his uneasiness about an intellectual approach to religious problems, and those of _A Witness Tree_ (1942) in which Frost momentarily drops his mask and speaks directly, not of the sacredness, but of the utility of intellect. Chapter V discusses the change in Frost's attitude

towards knowledge as it is evident in *Steeple Bush* (1947) and its companion piece, *An Afterword* (1949). Here Frost no longer explores new ways of knowing, but reveals a desire for the certainty of a positive religious faith, a certainty which the skeptical intellect cannot provide. Chapter VI considers how Frost turned in *In the Clearing* (1962) from question to discourse, from knowledge to faith, from skepticism to belief.

CHAPTER I

For Robert Frost, exposure to the concept of nature as a teacher began literally at his mother's knee.[1] Isabelle Moodie Frost, a school teacher and poetess, enjoyed reading to her children (Robert and his sister, Jeannie) introducing them to the poems of Wordsworth, Bryant, and Emerson,[2] all of whom advocated a study of nature as a means to gain moral and spiritual truths. One dictum in particular, from Bryant's "Thanatopsis"--"Go forth under the sky, and list to Nature's teachings," was quoted frequently.[3] Both mother and son took the notion to heart, but Robert was to manipulate the concept in ways which probably would have been unacceptable to his mother.

In his mother's work the concept that nature holds riches in store for those who study her was reflected in a conventional romantic way. Her poem "The Artist's Motive," first published in the San Francisco Daily Evening Post, March 29, 1884,[4] offers an example of some of the ideas about nature and poetry which were part of the atmosphere of the Frosts' home. The poem relates how the motives of a young painter changed from mere wealth-seeking to

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[1]The biographical details of this chapter have been gleaned from Lawrance Thompson's Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), hereafter cited as The Early Years.

[2]The Early Years, p. 71.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Reproduced from that source by Thompson in The Early Years, pp. 488-491.

a desire to glorify God. The spiritual growth of the young man was slow and painful; at one point, dismayed at seeing his inner greed for wealth and fame reflected in the quality of his paintings, he gave up his work and retired to the school of nature to learn humility. Eventually, he returned to painting, his heart filled with a new willingness to learn about himself and his art. He began anew,

> Sometime with steady hand, and then
> Again so tremblingly and slow,
> That heart turned sick at the poor line
> Which needs must be erased, and said:
> "Alas! thou art not ready for this work divine.
> Thou must attend once more God's School:
> Yea, many times, and add to thy poor soul of truth
> Rich gems from his exhaustless store."[5]

Both the attitude that nature holds wondrous truths in store for one who really seeks them and the high regard for the work of the artist--"work divine"--appear, though in transmuted form, in the poems of Robert Frost. The habit of regarding nature as a vatic influence permeates one of Frost's juvenile poems, "God's Garden." The last stanza sums up the moral of the poem:

> O, cease to heed the glamour
>   That blinds your foolish eyes,
> Look upward to the glitter
>   Of stars in God's clear skies.
> Their ways are pure and harmless
>   And will not lead astray,
> But aid your erring footsteps
>   To keep the narrow way.

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[5]Isabelle Moodie Frost, "The Artist's Motive," The Early Years, p. 490.

And when the sun shines brightly
  Tend flowers that God has given
And keep the pathway open
  That leads you on to heaven.[6]

Frost obviously outgrew the self-conscious seriousness that characterizes this poem, or at least he learned to mask his self-awareness behind an ironic tone. He did not, at any rate, lapse again into such irksome over-seriousness until very late in his career, and even there (as for example, in the couplet "It takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling/ To get adapted to my kind of fooling"[7] from In the Clearing) Frost attempted to disguise the self-awareness by assuming the pose of a clever schoolmaster.

The other significant notion in Isabelle Moodie Frost's poem--that artistic endeavor is somehow "work divine"--never occurs in so blatant a form in Robert Frost's poems, but it is hinted at several times. Rather than regarding the task of the artist as "work divine," Frost considers it very human, for it is motivated by need as well as by love. Whether or not the work is divine is not for man to say:

My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,

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[6]First published in The Boston Evening Transcript, June 23, 1898. Reprinted by Lawrance Thompson in The Early Years, pp. 540-541.

[7]In the Clearing, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 100.

> And the work is play for mortal stakes,
> Is the deed ever really done
> For Heaven and the future's sakes.[8]

The hope is that the human work of playing for mortal stakes here and now will somehow ensure the future of one's body and soul.

These lines illustrate the same tension between knowing and wishing that underlies Frost's use of the nature-as-a-teacher technique. Frost's intellect recognized that man is a limited finite being, but another part of his self wished for the absolute and infinite. Though it becomes overt only occasionally, this struggle permeates much of Frost's work. The dilemma is the plight of modern man: he sees himself and his world fragmented and yearns or strives to re-establish a sense of integrity or wholeness.

Frost was certainly not the first to feel such a tension, nor is the twentieth century the first age to experience a split between head and heart. But the modern sense of schizophrenia is perhaps more intense than ever before. Frost's mother, certainly, seems not to have doubted the ultimate beneficence of the universe. The very fact of her optimism must have heightened Frost's anxiety when he realized that the demands of his intellect were leading him into skepticism.

In a paper "On Emerson," read in 1959, Frost outlined what he conceived to be the similarities and the distinctions between his

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[8] "Two Tramps in Mud Time," Complete Poems of Robert Frost, 1949 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), p. 359.

vision and that of his mother, whose views he identified with Emerson's. Frost would not accept the "cheerful Monism" of his predecessors. "A melancholy dualism," he said, "is the only soundness."[9] But Frost qualified this disavowal by posing a question which tacitly recognizes the inadequacy of a sound, rational, scientific view of the world: "The question is: is soundness of the essence."[10] The "unsoundness," the tendency to monism, Frost admitted, had influenced his early thinking:

> My own unsoundness has a strange history. My mother was a Presbyterian. We were here on my father's side for three hundred years but my mother was fresh a Presbyterian from Scotland. The smart thing when she was young was to be reading Emerson and Poe as it is today to be reading St. John Perse or T. S. Eliot. Reading Emerson turned her into a Unitarian. That was about the time I came into the world; so I suppose I started a sort of Presbyterian-Unitarian. I was transitional. Reading on into Emerson, that is into "Representative Men" until she got to Swedenborg, the mystic, made her a Swedenborgian. I was brought up in all three of these religions, I suppose. I don't know whether I was baptized in them all. But as you see it was pretty much under the auspices of Emerson. It was all very Emersonian. Phrases of his began to come to me early.[11]

What Frost does not seem to have recognized (or at least, does not here admit) is that what he terms "soundness"--a dualistic view of the world (Frost himself must have added the "melancholy")--is also a part of his inheritance from Emerson. Frost certainly did

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[9]Robert Frost, "On Emerson," in Selected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 112.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

not have a purely Emersonian vision of the relationship between man and nature, but there are significant similarities. Frost can be seen as having taken Emerson's practical epistemological insights and developed them to their logical conclusion, ending in a position seemingly antithetical to "cheerful Monism." Though he blossomed into a poet-thinker very different from his mentor, Frost never completely uprooted himself from the Emersonian tradition.

The core of the bond between the two can be found in the epistemological comments of Emerson. In the "Idealism" section of his essay "Nature," he describes how man's intellectual faculties first analyze (how they dis-integrate[12] the universe), before synthesizing it. He begins by defining the lowest level of knowing, the realm of "the senses and unrenewed understanding . . .":[13]

> In their view man and nature are indissolubly joined. Things are ultimates, and they never look beyond their sphere. The presence of Reason mars this faith. The first effort of thought tends to relax this despotism of the senses which binds us to nature as if we were a part of it, and shows us nature aloof, and, as it were, afloat. Until this higher agency intervened, the animal eye sees, with wonderful accuracy, sharp outlines and colored surfaces.[14]

At this primary level, the understanding also "adds, divides, combines, measures, and finds nutriment and room for its activity" in

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[12] I have deliberately hyphenated the word "disintegrates" in order to emphasize that perception, from a common-sense "pragmatic" point of view, depends essentially upon sensory selectivity.

[13] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 43.

[14] Ibid.

the material world.[15] When Reason begins to function, the bondage of the mind to the material is temporarily released.

> When the eye of Reason opens, to outline and surface are at once added grace and expression. These proceed from imagination and affection, and abate somewhat of the angular distinctiveness of objects.[16]

Taken this far only, Emerson's words can be considered as representative of Frost's theory of knowledge. Man is seen as both part of nature and above it: he is bound to the material world by his need for grist in order to operate his conceptual mill, but once the grist is gathered the bond is momentarily relaxed in a moment of cogitation. By dint of his ability to conceptualize man can objectify (the word means "to throw out") external reality. The addition of "grace and expression" by the "eye of Reason" to the outlines and surfaces by the "animal eye" occurs in that ideal moment when percept and concept are joined. Frost would have accepted, I think, this view of the workings of man's mind. "In us," he wrote in a letter to *The Amherst Student* in 1935, "nature reaches its height of form and through us exceeds itself."[17] The gist of this statement is remarkably similar (at least in the first part) to the Emersonian argument. It recognizes that man is a part of nature, yet capable of objectifying nature. In us nature reaches

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[15]*Ibid.*, p. 37.

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 43.

[17]*Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 418.

its ideal form: because we idealize or conceptualize nature we are the dominant creatures of the natural world.

The difference between Frost and Emerson lies in what Frost means by "exceeds itself." To what Emerson deems the highest level of knowledge, Frost would not assent. Emerson ends by arguing that there is a spiritual world to be seen by Reason in its highest mood:

> If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The best moments of life are these delicious awakenings of the higher powers, and the reverential withdrawing of nature before its God.[18]

When Frost says nature exceeds itself through us, he means that what was confused and chaotic in nature may become organized, informed. Out of the chaotic rush of natural forces, a form may be created--for example, a poem--which exceeds nature in that it is ordered, concentrated, and at least potentially permanent. Man's mind is not the God or creator of nature, in Frost's view, but a shaping, informing tool. That final unity of mind and nature that Emerson envisaged was a wispy impossibility in Frost's view. He saw man irrevocably separated from nature, though still a part of nature:

> The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration. . . . To me any little form I assert upon that background is velvet, as the saying is, and to be considered for how much more it is than nothing. If I were a Platonist I should have to consider it, I suppose, for how much less it is than everything.[19]

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[18] Emerson, "Nature," Selections, p. 43.

[19] Selected Letters of Robert Frost, P. 419.

Another point at which Frost and Emerson would seem to be in agreement is in seeing nature as a disciplinarian of man. "To this one end of Discipline," Emerson wrote in "Nature," "all parts of nature conspire."[20] But here again there are important qualifications to be made, although the basic fact of the similarity in attitude must be kept in mind. A few sentences from the "Discipline" section of "Nature" will serve to illustrate the differences:

> The exercise of the Will, or the lesson of power, is taught in every event. . . . Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which may mold into what is useful. Man is never weary of working it up. He forges the subtile and delicate air into wise and melodious words, and gives them wing as angels of persuasion and command. One after another his victorious thought comes up with and reduces all things, until the world becomes at last only a realized will,--the double of the man.[21]

Frost almost certainly would have taken exception to the notion that nature receives the will of man meekly. He would also have doubted the possibility of the world at last becoming "only a realized will,--the double of man." Frost saw man as limited in both body and mind. He was ready to be satisfied with whatever "little form" he could assert on the face of a threatening universe. One might say that Frost aimed low and hit the mark.

What Frost cast off, then, at least in part, by the time he came to publish A Boy's Will in 1913, was the rather smug optimism that

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[20]Emerson, op. cit., p. 42.

[21]Ibid., p. 38.

characterizes, for example, his mother's poem, "The Artist's Motive" and Emerson's "Nature." He could not blithely preach that nature was a reservoir of moral and spiritual truths, nor could he entirely leave behind the teachings he had imbibed. Although he knew man was limited, Frost could not but wish for the absolute. Consequently Frost adopted what he has characterized as a "melancholy dualism," a compromise between enthusiastic monism and agnosticism. Frost took a middle stand. Rather than preaching of Nature's proclivity for teaching man, Frost used individual natural phenomena as a type of sounding board against which he might throw his questions about man. He could not bring himself to speak of transcendental ideal Forms (or as Emerson said, "causes and spirits"[22]) which somehow can be seen peeping through the material facts of nature if one seeks aright; he spoke instead of the value of little man-made forms, figures of order and concentration which can be apprehended by the sensory eye.

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[22]See above page 8.

CHAPTER II

That Frost questioned the idea that nature is man's teacher is illustrated both by the quality and the pervasiveness of irony in his poetry. It is this irony, above all, which distinguishes Frost's poetry, ranging in quality from the gentle teasing of "The Pasture," a love poem, through the dark Sophoclean irony of "Desert Places," to the sophomoric pose of "It takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling/ To get adapted to my kind of fooling."[1] As one might expect, that ironic quality gradually changed from volume to volume. Indeed, the irony of the later years--*Steeple Bush*, 1947, and *In the Clearing*, 1962--tends to be sophomoric, that is, intellectually cute, or sly,[2] while the irony of the poetry of the middle period of his career (during which *New Hampshire*, 1923, *West-running Brook*, 1928, *A Further Range*, 1936, and *A Witness Tree*, 1942, were published), especially in the poems in which nature functions as a teacher, tends to be dark, sombre, "Sophoclean" in quality.[3] The antecedents of both extremes are evident in poems of Frost's early years as a publishing poet, though Frost was somewhat reluctant at first to unveil the dark side of his poetic vision.

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[1] Albert E. Stone in his excellent essay, "Robert Frost," delimits Frost's irony with the terms "Sophoclean" and "sophomoric," *Emory University Quarterly*, XXI, no. 1 (Spring, 1965), p. 64.

[2] See below, Chapters V and VI.

[3] See below, Chapters III and IV.

"Storm Fear" of A Boy's Will (1913) is a case in point. Growing out of the Emersonian concept that nature functions as man's disciplinarian,[4] Frost's poem first questions whether or not man has the strength to resist the onslaught of a winter storm:

> When the wind works against us in the dark,
> And pelts with snow
> The lower chamber window on the east,
> And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
> The beast,
> 'Come out! Come out!'--
> It costs no inward struggle not to go,
> Ah, no!
> I count our strength,
> Two and a child,
> Those of us not asleep subdued to mark
> How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length,--
> How drifts are piled,
> Dooryard and road ungraded,
> Till even the comforting barn grows far away,
> And my heart owns a doubt
> Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
> And save ourselves unaided.[5]

The poem deals with the fundamental facts that man's powers are limited and that as a being who feels as well as thinks, he is susceptible to seductive invitations to sell his soul and escape from the responsibilities of his human being. The speaker's identity is assaulted from both fronts, inner and outer. Submission to the urge to go outside would be to suffer complete physical obliteration under the creeping

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[4]A sentence from Emerson's 1841 essay "Nature," provides an interesting commentary upon one theme of "Storm Fear": "Man is fallen; nature is erect, and serves as a differential thermometer, detecting the presence or absence of the divine sentiment in man." Essays: Second Series (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1878), p. 178.

[5]Complete Poems of Robert Frost, 1949 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), p. 13.

snow. And the experience of having withstood the enormity of that desire to go outside has etiolated the speaker's sense of self-confidence. Sensing that the power of the fire (symbolic of the spiritual element) is diminishing and that the "comforting barn" is fading from sight, he doubts his own salvation and his family's, and, thereby, in effect, utters a prayer for divine intervention. Once he has made the fundamental perception that nature is alien to man, the logic of the speaker's situation is inexorable. A physical threat precipitates a psychological struggle which so shakes the speaker that he is willing to admit, however negatively, that there is a power superior to man. This allowance that man needs help in order to save his soul, the speaker's having controlled his inner yearnings, and the existence of the poem constitute something of an affirmation.[6] Somehow the speaker has survived and given poetic form to his experiences.

Though an element of doubt permeates "Storm Fear" (and the poem "Stars"),[7] Frost would not allow that doubt to be representative of his "mature" attitude. In the original publication of A Boy's Will, Frost placed the poems of doubt in a context which tends to vitiate the impact of their negation. "Storm Fear" is included in the first part of a three-part pattern designed to indicate the stages of a

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[6]Reuben Brower describes "Storm Fear" as humorous in The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellation of Intention (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 111-112; but Frost regarded humor as a defense mechanism. See my discussion of this quality below, Chapter IV, pp. 41 ff.

[7]Complete Poems, p. 12.

youth's growth to maturity. Lawrance Thompson describes the structure:

> . . . part one began with a dramatic and symbolic act of complete withdrawal; but it ended with a special kind of return. Part two was built out of lyrics that carried forward the theme of return by representing various poetic expressions of affirmation. Part three was made up of a few lyrics which viewed wistfully and even passionately those withdrawals that were inevitable--such as the end of a life or a love or a season.[8]

In effect, the Frost who assembled the poems for A Boy's Will deliberately attempted to detach himself from the attitude expressed in the poems of the first part of the volume. He even went so far as to conduct his campaign in his letters. In 1913 he wrote of A Boy's Will to the editor of The Youth's Companion: "The psychologist in me ached to call it 'The Record of a Phase of Post-adolescence.'"[9]

One can understand Frost's motives for attempting to dissociate himself from the immaturity of some of the attitudes expressed in the volume. But in view of some of the later poems--"Acquainted with the Night," "Desert Places," and "Design," for example--one feels that Frost worked too hard to mask the dark side of his vision. North of Boston (1914), and Mountain Interval (1916), taken together, also seem to project an outlook not often disturbed by the terrors of

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[8] Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 397-398.

[9] An undated letter quoted by Thompson, The Early Years, p. xxi. In the original volume, Frost also included ironic commentaries on the poems in the table of contents, but he later dropped them. See The Early Years, pp. 398-400.

"Once by the Pacific" or "Tree at My Window."[10]

Two poems in which Frost used nature as a teacher, "Hyla Brook" and "The Oven Bird," both of Mountain Interval, illustrate this point. Though concerned, like "Storm Fear," with a fallen world, they represent a confident confrontation with the universe. "Hyla Brook," in particular, has about it a casual sophisticated air:

By June our brook's run out of song and speed
Sought for much after that, it will be found
Either to have gone groping underground
(And taken with it all the Hyla breed
That shouted in the mist a month ago,
Like ghost of sleigh-bells in a ghost of snow)--
Or flourished and come up in a jewel-weed,
Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent
Even against the way its waters went.
Its bed is left a faded paper sheet
Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat--
A brook to none but who remember long.
This as it will be seen is other far
Than with brooks taken otherwhere in song.
We love the things we love for what they are.[11]

The poem contrasts two ways of looking at the brook, or at reality; both ways are in a sense true and valid. Those who regard the brook only with the animal eye[12] will perceive that there is no brook

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[10] I do not mean to suggest that the emotional intensity of "Home Burial," or "The Fear," and the psychological horrors of "A Servant to Servants" and the stark realism of "'Out, Out--'" do not, when read together, suggest that dark side of Frost's poetic outlook. My point is that this quality is considerably diffused in the early volumes by the number of light and humorous poems which surround them.

[11] Complete Poems, p. 149.

[12] See quotations from Emerson's essay, "Nature," pp. 6-7 above. The immediately relevant passage is: ". . . the animal eye sees, with wonderful accuracy, sharp outlines and colored surfaces. When the eye of Reason opens, to outline and surface are at once added grace and expression. These proceed from imagination and affection, and abate somewhat of the angular distinctness of objects."

at all. In seeking it they will discover only weeds and dead leaves. This is the view of those who are tied solely to sense data, and Frost implicitly admits that there is a certain validity in this viewpoint. But he prefers the attitude of those whose vision of externals is softened by imagination and affection. Those who seek the brook with this imaginative eye (Emerson calls it the "eye of Reason")[13] will perceive that the brook has sprung up in the foliage of the poet's verses--the poem itself is the "jewel-weed." The bed of the brook, that in which it now "rests," is the "faded paper sheet" of the poem which, created out of the warmth of the poet's love ("stuck together by the heat"), memorializes the brook's existence. The shouting sounds of the "Hyla breed" have not disappeared at all. As author, or father, of the poem, the speaker is chief of that breed with a song as elusive as "ghost of sleigh-bells in a ghost of snow".

Ironically, the moral resides in the entire poem and not just in the final line. Those who do not seek to know with the mind's eye and the mind's ear, the poet would have us realize, will not capture the poet's tone (which implies a meaning contrary to that expressed in the run of the sentence, just as the foliage of the jewel-weed bends contrary to what used to be the current of the brook, and images of sleigh-bells and snows contradict the aridity of June). They therefore will not recognize that the brook exists (the verbs in the last line are in the present tense) in the poem. What is mutable in nature be-

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[13]See preceding footnote.

comes potentially permanent in art.

The question of mutability and permanence is framed and answered again by Frost in "The Oven Bird," which immediately follows "Hyla Brook" in Mountain Interval. As the title suggests, "The Oven Bird" represents a detached, objective comment upon a thing of nature; it thus balances and complements the seemingly subjective judgment of the speaker who uses the first person possessive in speaking of Hyla Brook. But the basic poetic device is the same in both poems--nature is made to function as a teacher. Both poems convey an affirmation based upon hard, clear recognition of outer and inner facts. Just as Frost muted this realism in "Hyla Brook" by closing with a seemingly sentimental moral, he softened the directness of "The Oven Bird" by ending with what at first reading seems to be a question:

> There is a singer everyone has heard,
> Loud, a mid-summer and mid-wood bird,
> Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
> He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
> Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
> He says the early petal-fall is past
> When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
> On sunny days a moment overcast;
> And comes that other fall we name the fall.
> He says the highway dust is over all.
> 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.[14]

The poem seems somewhat gloomy. As the speaker relates what he has learned from the bird, the extent to which the world has become a

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[14] Complete Poems, p. 150.

"diminished thing" is revealed. Mid-summer beauty cannot compare with the beauty of spring. Autumn is hard upon the heels of what little summer beauty there is. And, in a more ominous tone, the descent of highway dust has cloaked everything. In lines eleven and twelve, the speaker shifts from reporting to interpreting, and we learn that the bird, though he has been heard by "everyone," is a unique creature. He possesses knowledge by which he surpasses other birds. The oven bird does not sing out and reveal his nesting place or his perch. He remains in the middle of the woods conveying his song by way of rebounding his sound off tree trunks. But in the last two lines the speaker reveals the limitations of the bird--he cannot frame his question in words. Finally, then, the poem focuses not upon the question of the oven bird, but upon the poet whose ability to make oven birds talk surpasses the ability of the birds to make tree trunks sing. The poet is the unique singer, yet in transmitting his song through the oven bird, he does not sing at all.

Paradoxically the poem answers the question in posing it. There need be no reluctance in accepting the fall, for in creating a poem, man creates a little world with its own integrity. "The Oven Bird" itself illustrates how a poem is a world in microcosm. There is a natural hierarchy established: the tree trunks, incapable of creating sound, are one rank lower than the oven bird; the oven bird itself is one rank lower than the poet. As Frost wrote in his letter to _The Amherst Student_, "In us nature reaches its height of form and through us exceeds itself."[15] Within the fallen microcosmic world of the poem,

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[15] _Selected Letters of Robert Frost_, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 418.

the human being dominates. Within the larger natural world, any form that man creates is precious, and as Frost said, "to be considered for how much more it is than nothing."[16]

A full appreciation of the value that Frost placed upon the achievement of form cannot be gained by consideration of only his first three volumes. These poems, "Hyla Brook" and "The Oven Bird," give the impression that Frost was satisfied with the means he had discovered for coping with the universe, while "Storm Fear" only hints at the depths of doubt into which Frost later plunged. The questions the early volumes raise are too few, the answers presented with too much facility. On the whole they suggest a more optimistic viewpoint than we can give the Frost of the middle years credit for.

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[16]_Ibid._, p. 419.

CHAPTER III

The poems of Frost's middle years (New Hampshire, 1923, West-running Brook, 1928, and A Further Range, 1936)[1] in which nature is made to function as a teacher represent a more mature confrontation with the problems of knowledge, love, and faith than "Storm Fear" (at least in its original emasculated context[2]), "Hyla Brook," or "The Oven Bird." It is in these volumes more than in any others that Frost defines poetically what he meant when he wrote in 1935 of the world that "The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos . . . ." This is not to say that the poems of the middle years suggest only a pessimistic aspect of Frost's outlook. An affirmative quality is there, but the volumes are unified by a common recognition of a terrifying, fragmented universe.[3] Even man's capacity to give some sort of form and order to his universe is critically examined in poems such as "A Boundless Moment" and "A Brook in the City." Frost's concern with form is summed up in "West-running Brook," although later poems such

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[1] A Witness Tree, 1942, can also be considered as part of the "middle years" of Frost's poetic career in that in many respects it represents the culmination of trends evident in these three volumes from 1923 through 1936. But since there are a number of significant differences as well, I shall discuss A Witness Tree and A Further Range in a separate chapter.

[2] See above, pp. 12-14.

[3] Consider for example the images of loneliness and isolation in such poems as "The Census-Taker," "A Fountain, A Bottle, A Donkey's Ears and Some Books" (from New Hampshire), "Bereft," "Acquainted with the Night," "The Birthplace" (in West-running Brook), and "Not All There" of A Further Range.

as "Design" and "Take Something Like a Star" somewhat modify that position.

Like "Hyla Brook," "A Boundless Moment" revolves around the opposition of two different ways of knowing, but in the later poem Frost distinguishes between functional and non-functional knowledge. Both viewpoints are, in a sense, intellectual: on the one hand is the fanciful, romantic perception of the shape standing in such "white luxuriance"[4] against the darker background of the woods; in contrast to the romantic notion that the shape is "'the Paradise-in-bloom'" is the pragmatic recognition that the shape is really "A young beech clinging to its last year's leaves." Significantly, it is the speaker who makes both suggestions; his fellow traveller (one "too ready to believe the most") at first wonders what the ghost-like shape might be, and it is partly because of this hyper-imaginative gullibility on the part of his comrade that the speaker remarks that the pale shape is "'the Paradise-in-bloom'". But the tree is indeed "fair enough for flowers" even though it is the month of March, and they stop for a moment. The pause, however, does not particularly excite the speaker:

> We stood a moment so in a strange world,
> Myself as one of his own pretense deceives;
> And then I said the truth (and we moved on).
> A young beech clinging to its last year's leaves.

This poem works many ways in its ironic implications. At one level the poem is a teasing rejection of the notion that a moment can be boundless, a poetic rebuff to that idealism which finds in things

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[4]*Complete Poems*, p. 288.

what it wants to find. Though he does not explicitly make the point, the speaker implies that what distinguishes him from his companion is his own ironic awareness that he pretends the leaves are actually flowers. The world of pretence is a "strange world" to him, and (since he identifies his final remark with "truth") even a false world.[5] The poem is also a satiric comment on those who do not recognize irony, those who blur the distinctions between the imaginary and the real by their wishful thinking. From this point of view the poem amounts to something of a veiled challenge to the reader in the same way that "Hyla Brook" makes a challenge. To grasp the import of these poems the reader must meet them directly on their own terms; he who is "too ready to believe the most" is likely to be deceived.

Similarly, "A Brook in the City" contains a central tension between two distinct ways of seeing reality. But the ways of perceiving the world and responding to it which are contrasted in the later poem are not the same as those which were opposed in "Hyla Brook." In the earlier poem two essentially intellectual modes of perception were contrasted--a basically rational approach was posed against an imaginative one. There Frost definitely favored the

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[5]This poem complements "Birches" in which Frost celebrates the delights of the fanciful world and suggests that getting away from the matter-of-fact world of ice-storms and pathless woods and lashing twigs is not only a delight, as it is here in "A Boundless Moment," but also a necessity.

imaginative. In "A Brook in the City" one intellectual mode, the strictly ratiocinative, is opposed to a sexual-religious mode of knowing. Although it is clear that the speaker favors the latter mode of knowledge, there is no affirmation in the poem; rather the poem questions whether man's tendency to reduce the natural world to the orderly formal patterns dictated by a purely objective intellect leads to anxiety and despair.

Frost frames the question by contrasting two patterns of living--rural and urban--each of which is the outcome of a peculiar way of looking at reality. The speaker's bias is immediately clear: his tone indicates his concern with the rural farmhouse, a concern which is only partly ameliorated by a recognition that the farmhouse has not completely submitted to the ways of the city: "The farmhouse lingers, though averse to square/ With the new city street it has to wear/ A number in."[6] What disturbs the speaker, though, is that a brook with which he had been familiar has entirely disappeared:

> But what about the brook
> That held the house as in an elbow-crook?
> I ask as one who knew the brook, its strength
> And impulse, having dipped a finger length
> And made it leap my knuckle, having tossed
> A flower to try its currents where they crossed.

The tension between the two ways of knowledge has been established: on the one hand, there is the city, an external manifestation of the

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[6]"A Brook in the City," Complete Poems, p. 285.

abstracting intellect which has used coercion to "square" the houses by having them wear numbers; in contrast to the implicit sterility of the urbanising mind is the casual, implicitly sexual knowledge of the speaker.[7]

Irked by the absence of the brook, the speaker further questions the significance of man's penchant for reducing nature to the forms and categories of his mind. The disposal of a brook, he asks, surely does man no good:

> The meadow grass could be cemented down
> From growing under pavements of a town;
> The apple trees be sent to hearth-stone flame.
> Is water wood to serve a brook the same?

Then follows a more pointed question as the speaker begins to realize the implications of the burial of the brook:

> How else dispose of an immortal force
> No longer needed? Staunch it at its source
> With cinder loads dumped down?

The ultimate vanity of man's efforts lies in the fact that the brook, an immortal force, cannot be stopped:

> The brook was thrown
> Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone
> In fetid darkness still to live and run--
> And all for nothing it had ever done
> Except forget to go in fear perhaps.

The irony of these lines may not be immediately evident, but when one compares it with a passage on the relationship between fear and reli-

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[7] I discuss the matter of sexual knowledge, below, p. 26.

gious faith at the end of A Masque of Mercy, the direction of Frost's thinking is clear. Frost gives the words to Paul:

> Yes, there you have it at the root of things.
> We have to stay afraid deep in our souls
> Our sacrifice, the best we have to offer,
> And not our worst nor second best, our best,
> Our very best, our lives laid down like Jonah's,
> Our lives laid down in war and peace, may not
> Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight.[8]

The main idea of this passage is that fear accompanies religious faith. It is a human responsibility, or at least a human response, "to go in fear." In the lines from "A Brook in the City" Frost has reversed the roles: he suggests that the brook should go in fear of man. But the brook, as a brook, is incapable of any emotion whatsoever, and, as an "immortal force", transcends human anxieties. In essence, then, "A Brook in the City" is an obliquely satirical comment on modern man's idolatrous presumption that, as the measure of all things (the words "square" and "number" imply mathematical, that is, abstract measurement), he can bury an immortal force beneath the refuse of his civilization. The building of cities typifies man's efforts to reduce everything about him to an orderly pattern: the "elbow-crook" of the brook has been replaced by the squareness of the city streets, a natural figure replaced by a geometric figure foreign to nature.

The ramifications of man's civilising efforts are far-reaching:

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[8] A Masque of Mercy from Complete Poems, pp. 641-642.

> No one would know except for ancient maps
> That such a brook ran water. But I wonder
> If from its being kept forever under
> The thoughts may not have risen that so keep
> This new-built city from both work and sleep.

The final irony of the poem is that whatever the brook may be, there can be no escaping its influence. That last sentence suggests the frustration which results from the repression of basic needs. Without restricting the poem to psychological statement, one can interpret it in psychological terms: the brook represents the life force; knowledge of the brook, the dipping of the finger, symbolizes sexual knowledge. This carnal knowledge involves the individual in reality: one feels the "strength" and "impulse" of the life force. Repression of this sexual urge has religious repercussions. Because he represses the natural sexual impulses (symbolized by the burial of the brook) modern man commits to an uneasy grave not only the immanent life urges, but the transcendent "immortal force" as well. If the natural forces are not recognized as basic to life, if they are not enjoyed in the spirit of freedom in which the speaker suggests he once enjoyed the brook, then they will be felt negatively in the thoughts that "so keep/ This new-built city from both work and sleep."

One can readily see the distinctions between such a poem as "A Brook in the City" and the earlier "Hyla Brook." Though in each case the general method of development is the same (the speaker's thoughts seem motivated by the absence of a once-familiar brook), the poems differ in texture and theme. "Hyla Brook" affirms the speaker's love for the dried-up brook in a quietly ironic tone; "A Brook in the

City" questions the implications of the forced, or artificial, disposal of the brook in a tone at once melancholy, bitter, and despairing. The latter poem also involves a more complex interaction of motifs. (This is not to argue that "A Brook in the City" is somehow a more successful poem than "Hyla Brook," but simply to point up some of the differences in order to illustrate the changes in Frost's poetic vision). Imaginative level of knowledge in "Hyla Brook" is colored by "love", but the love in "Hyla Brook" is a love of "things". The implicit love in "A Brook in the City" is, as the images suggest, a kind of carnal knowledge which is ultimately religious. "A Brook in the City" seems to embody a deepening of the poet's sensibilities, a more realistic, more mature, recognition of man's psychological, social and religious predicament in the modern world. The whole temper of the poem is more inquisitive and exploratory than "Hyla Brook" or "The Oven Bird"; it goes so far as to question the premise underlying the confidence of those poems. In effect "A Brook in the City" recognizes that man's mind can be destructive as well as creative, in fact so destructive that it inhibits in a mightmarish way the very working and sleeping of man.

The element of resistance in the attitude of the speaker in "A Brook in the City" deserves further discussion, for it constitutes one of the unifying motifs of the poems of the middle years. In "Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening" (New Hampshire), the traveller's sense of social responsibility leads him to resist the seductive beauty of the deep, dark woods and the invitation to death.[9]

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[9] Complete Poems, p. 275.

Similarly, in "Sand Dunes" of West-running Brook Frost implies that man's intellect will resist and overcome the threat of an onrushing sea, whether it be of water or of sand:

> She [the sea] may know cove and cape
> But she does not know mankind
> If by any change of shape,
> She hopes to cut off mind.[10]

In the title poem of West-running Brook Frost asserts that "resistance" to the inevitable natural processes is an essentially human quality which may be "sacred." "West-running Brook," though it is a love poem as well as a philosophic poem, has a special significance in our consideration of Frost's poetic vision because it is so intimately related (as I shall attempt to demonstrate) to "A Brook in the City" and "A Boundless Moment" which precede it, as well as to Frost's letter to The Amherst Student, and to several later poems, particularly "To a Moth Seen in Winter" and "Take Something Like a Star."

"West-running Brook" consists of a playful argument between husband and wife. The conversation begins with the wife's comment that the west-running brook, in that it moves contrary to the other brooks of the region, can be thought of as representing her relationship with her husband:

> 'What does it think it's doing running west
> When all the other country brooks flow east
> To reach the ocean? It must be the brook

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[10] Ibid., p. 330.

> Can trust itself to go by contraries
> The way I can with you--and you with me--
> Because we're--we're--I don't know what we are.'[11]

The wfie goes on to suggest that they marry themselves to the brook since it represents so well their relationship:

> 'As you and I are married to each other,
> We'll both be married to the brook. We'll build
> Our bridge across it, and the bridge shall be
> Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it.
> Look, look it's waving to us with a wave
> To let us know it hears me.'

The husband's reaction is more realistic; from his point of view there is no special significance in the wave of the brook:

> 'That wave's been standing off this jut of shore
> Even since rivers, I was going to say,
> Were made in heaven. It wasn't waved to us.'

His wife acknowledges the fact that it may not have been waved to him, but she remarks that it was to her "'in an annunciation.'" Fred will pursue the matter no further, for he feels that in her insistence that the brook communicates directly with her she has wandered off into "lady-land" where he cannot follow. His wife, though, senses that he has thought of something else to say about the brook, and urges him to tell her.

The main section of the poem consists of Fred's response. He sees differently than his wife, regarding the brook with a keen eye for detail. He never sacrifices the awareness of the distinctions between man and nature to boast of any direct communication from the

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[11] _Ibid._, p. 327.

brook, but builds a complex metaphysical statement upon a recognition of the unity-disparity of man and nature. He begins his statement by commenting on the little wave in the brook and then goes on to suggest how man is part of nature just as the wave is part of the brook. Yet like the wave, man can rise above the matter in which he is rooted:

> 'Speaking of contraries, see how the brook
> In that white wave runs counter to itself.
> It is from that in water we were from
> Long, long before we were from any creature.
> Here we, in our impatience of the steps,
> Get back to the beginning of beginnings,
> The stream of everything that runs away.
> Some say existence like a Pirouot
> And Pirouette, forever in one place,
> Stands still and dances, but it runs away,
> It seriously, sadly runs away
> To fill the abyss' void with emptiness.
> It flows beside us in this water brook,
> But it flows over. It flows between us
> To separate us for a panic moment.
> It flows between us, over us, and with us.
> And it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and love--
> And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;
> The universal cataract of death
> That spends to nothingness--and unresisted,
> Save by some strange resistance in itself,
> Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
> As if regret were in it and were sacred.
> It has this throwing backward on itself
> So that the fall of most of it is always
> Raising a little, sending up a little.
> Our life runs down in sending up the clock.
> The brook runs down in sending up our life.
> The sun runs down in sending up the brook.
> And there is something sending up the sun.
> It is this backward motion toward the source,
> Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
> The tribute of the current to the source.
> It is from this in nature we are from.
> It is most us.'

Clearly this extended metaphor represents a poetic formalization of what Frost meant when he later wrote of the universe that "The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration."[12] That image of the tiny wave throwing itself back against the "universal cataract of death" epitomizes the resistance to death in "Stopping by Woods," and the resistance to the encroachment of the urban life of "A Brook in the City," and the resistance to an impossible never-never land in "A Boundless Moment." And that little wave, rooted in the brook, yet somehow able to rise above it, metaphorically suggests what Frost meant when he said, "In us nature reaches its height of form and through us exceeds itself."[13] That "strange resistance" is most us.

As we have seen, Frost was troubled with the problem of faith even in his early mature work.[14] "West-running Brook" constitutes something of a reconciliation of his inner doubts, perhaps the only possible reconciliation, given Frost's intellectual leanings and his dualistic epistemology. The poem, like Frost's other metaphysical statements, represents a cautious religious affirmation: the

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[12] Selected Letters, p. 419.

[13] Ibid., p. 418.

[14] Notably "Stars" and "Storm Fear" of A Boy's Will. See above pp. 13-14.

wave constitutes "a strange resistance" in the brook itself, "a throwing back,/ As if regret were in it and were sacred." The important words here, in that they qualify and modify the implicit religious statement, are "As if". Such reticence qualifies the religious affirmation of Frost's letter to The Amherst Student:

> When in doubt there is always form for us to go on with. Anyone who has achieved the least form to be sure of it, is lost to the larger excruciations. I think it must stroke faith the right way.[15]

In "Kitty Hawk," too, the association of sacredness, or holiness, with the creation of form is presented in a modest way (though less so than in "West-running Brook"):

> But the comfort is
> In the covenant
> We may get control
> If not of the whole
> Of at least some part
> Where not too immense,
> So by craft or art
> We can give the part
> Wholeness in a sense.[16]

In each of these instances Frost strikes some sort of balance between extremes, but his final position is never the result of a facile compromise. If "A Brook in the City" satirizes rampant orderliness, "A Boundless Moment" satirizes the boundless freedom of wishful thinking. As Frost sees him, man is both limited and free,

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[15]Selected Letters, p. 418.

[16]"Kitty Hawk," In the Clearing, p. 56.

and his greatest freedom is exercised when he ranges from one extreme to the other, testing the boundaries of knowledge, defining himself by discovering his limitations. The wave of the west-running brook is more definitely a wave the higher it rises out of the stream. But the wave can define itself only against that stream; there can be no disjunction. Man, too, is part of nature, yet capable of exceeding nature. Therein lies both the source of doubt and the possibility of hope.

Whatever else one concludes about Robert Frost's poetic vision, one must acknowledge its probing quality. Because so many of Frost's poems are clearly intellectual--intellectual in the sense that they deal with man's ways of perceiving his universe with the limitations of those modes of perception--one cannot justifiably see Frost, as Ivor Winters does, as a "spiritual drifter."[17] The label does not apply simply because Frost is more concerned with problems of knowing than with problems of belief. The difference is a matter of emphasis but it needs to be pointed out in order to counterbalance what Winters has written about Frost as an intellectual poet.

> Frost has said that Emerson is his favorite American poet, and he himself appears to be something of an Emersonian . . . . In moral and aesthetic doctrine, Emerson was a relativist; his most thorough-going disciples in

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[17]Ivor Winters, "Robert Frost: Or the Spiritual Drifter as Poet," Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), pp. 58-82.

> American literature were Walt Whitman and Hart Crane. In Frost, on the other hand, we find a disciple without Emerson's religious conviction: Frost believes in the rightness of impulse, but does not discuss the pantheistic doctrine which would give authority to impulse; as a result of his belief in impulse, he is of necessity a relativist, but his relativism, apparently since it derives from no intense religious conviction, has resulted mainly in ill-natured eccentricity and in increasing melancholy. He is an Emersonian who has become sceptical and uncertain without having reformed; and the scepticism and uncertainty do not appear to have been so much the result of thought as the result of the impact upon his sensibility of conflicting notions of his own era--they appear to be the result of his having taken the easy way and having drifted with the various currents of his time.[18]

One cannot accept Winters' notion that Frost is a "believer in the rightness of impulse" when in poems like "Stopping by Woods" and "A Boundless Moment," an impulsive, that is to say, unthinking, response to nature is satirized. At the same time, Frost recognizes that an impulsive response to the beauty of the dark, deep woods in the former poem, or to the attractive young beech in the latter, is a _human_ response. The little horse of "Stopping by Woods" finds nothing in the woods to make him want to stop. Frost indeed believes in impulse, but he regards common sense as more valuable.

Neither can one accept Winters' conclusion that relativism is a necessary result of belief in impulse. Relativism is an inevitable consequence of Frost's epistemology--unable to rationalize any unity other than that achieved in the process of concept-

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[18] _Ibid_., pp. 60-61.

ualizing, Frost could not believe in an absolute unity. Frost's scepticism and uncertainty, then, quite obviously result from his thinking both about the absolute and about the process of thinking itself. To suggest that Frost merely "drifted with the various currents of his time" is to overlook completely or to misread the poems I have been considering.

W. H. Auden strikes much nearer than Winters to the truth when he suggests that Frost is a "Prospero-dominated poet,"[19] that is, a poet more concerned with truth than with beauty.

> We want a poem to be beautiful, that is to say, a verbal earthly paradise, a timeless world of pure play, which gives us delight precisely because of its contrast to our historical existence with all its insoluble problems and inescapable suffering; at the same time we want a poem to be true, that is, to provide us with some kind of revelation about our life which will show us what life is really like and free us from self-enchantment and deception, and a poet cannot bring us any truth without introducing into his poetry the problematic, the painful, the disorderly, the ugly. Though every poem involves some degree of collaboration between Ariel and Prospero, the role of each varies in importance from one poem to another: it is usually possible to say of a poem and, sometimes, of the whole output of a poet, that it is Ariel-dominated or Prospero-dominated.[20]

The realism of attitude presented in "A Boundless Moment" and "A Brook in the City" certainly resembles what Auden has characterized as the Prospero tendency; even "West-running Brook"--to the

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[19] W. H. Auden, "Robert Frost", _The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays_ (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 341.

[20] _Ibid._, p. 338.

extent that the philosophic framework there constructed recognizes "the problematic, the painful," and the "disorderly," if not the "ugly"--is a Prospero-dominated poem. Certainly we must admit that Frost was indeed a poet concerned to give some order to the universe that he perceived, and in giving that order plunged into sophisticated and complex intellectual, yet poetic, arguments.

CHAPTER IV

One cannot but be impressed by the difference in tone between _A Further Range_ and _A Witness Tree_. In the earlier volume an air of confidence prevails, the control of ideas is tight; but in _A Witness Tree_ the ideas are not adequately expressed through metaphor, but overflow into generalized statements. In the latter the poet speaks more and more as Prospero and less and less as Ariel. Though Frost recognized this, he seems to have been unable to achieve a delicate ironic control so readily as he had earlier; indeed, in "The Wind and the Rain" the speaker stops himself to say something which is usually perfectly obvious in the very structure of a poem, "and there is always more than should be said." This statement typifies the tendency to discourse which Frost was less and less able to avoid as he grew older. As Lawrance Thompson points out, "the poem is properly the vehicle for thoughts and ideas in so far as it can control and contain those ideas."[1] There is in most of Frost's work a balance between the Ariel tendency and the Prospero tendency; but in a number of _A Witness Tree_ poems (in addition to "The Wind and the Rain") the poetic container is split asunder by the rush of ideas. This chapter will attempt to illustrate and explain this tightening and loosening of formal control and the concomitant shifts in tone.

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[1]Lawrance Thompson, _Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost_ (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1961), p. 136.

Contrary to what the title invites us to expect, A Further Range of 1936 does not represent an extension of Frost's vision; rather it represents a momentary pause in which the poet tightens his grip on those poetic ideas which were valuable to him. From beginning to end, one senses in reading this volume that Frost has given up that inquiry evident in "Storm Fear" and "A Brook in the City" (to take only two examples) and has contented himself with recapitulation, or rationalization, of his earlier themes. That smugness which mars this volume is evident even in the dedication:

> to E. F.
> for what it may mean to her that
> beyond the White Mountains were the
> Green; beyond both were the Rockies,
> the Sierras, and, in thought, the Andes and
> the Himalyas--range beyond range
> even into the realm of government and religion [.][2]

This dedication, like the volume title, falsely implies that a new dimension is about to be added to Frost's poetic vision. But the poems do not fulfill that promise. Even in such pieces as "Design," "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep," and "Desert Places," Frost does not range into any new realm of thought. In all three poems old wine has been poured into newer, more compact bottles. One might be tempted to conclude from the tone of confidence that Frost has resolved his struggle with doubt and uncertainty, but the anxiety is just below the surface.

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[2]Dedication of A Further Range (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1936).

Frost's oft-quoted "Design" best illustrates the confidence which pervades much of A Further Range. A formal masterpiece, this sonnet has intrigued and delighted Frost's critics:

> I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
> On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
> Like a piece of rigid satin cloth--
> Assorted characters of death and blight
> Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
> Like the ingredients of a witches' broth--
> A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
> And dead wings carried like a paper kite.
>
> What had that flower to do with being white,
> The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
> What brought the kindred spider to that height,
> Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
> What but design of darkness to appall?--
> If design govern in a thing so small.[3]

Reuben Brower's analysis of this poem is particularly brilliant, though his comment is not without shortcomings. He illustrates, for example, how "Design" comments obliquely on some of Emerson's more optimistic pronouncements, and how in some ways the poem has a Swiftian quality.[4] His comment deserves to be read in full, but I quote only one sentence:

> Frost's question opens up a view that is inconsolable, and the defense offered will barely suffice--the exercise of perceptive intelligence in ironic attitudes shading from the harshness of 'begin the morning right' to the humorous-terrible query of the closing lines.[5]

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[3]"Design," Complete Poems of Robert Frost, 1949 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), p. 396.

[4]Reuben A. Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 103-108.

[5]Ibid., pp. 107-108.

Brower, in recognizing the multiplicity of ironic tone (here and elsewhere in Frost), indeed outstrips those critics who see the poem only as terrifying. Lionel Trilling is one who takes the latter viewpoint:

> The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. Read the poem called "Design" and see if you sleep the better for it.[6]

One can agree, in part, with both critical viewpoints. I agree with Brower's emphasis upon Frost's humor; the so-called "terror" of "Design" is not in the poem at all but in the minds of insensitive readers. Can one read the final line of the poem without feeling the presence of the author? The poet's mask slips as he invites us to ask, "What if there is no design at all?" But the existence of the poem obviates the question, for the poem itself is a thing of design. It is a result of the poet's design insofar as a poem is created consciously; that it resembles the traditional design of the sonnet illustrates that the author's designs were conscious. That, of course, is the real joke of the poem, a joke which Trilling, a psychoanalytic critic, has missed.

If we see the poem as a joke, a "witches' broth" concocted by the poet, then we are compelled to ask what has happened to the "hugeness and confusion" that Frost spoke about in his letter to *The Amherst Student* written only one year prior to the publication of

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[6]Lionel Trilling, "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode," *Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. James M. Cox, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 157.

A Further Range? Why the apparent change from certainty about the ubiquity of chaos to a certainty about design in the universe? Can we reconcile Frost's apparent humor with Trilling's judgment that Frost conceives "a terrifying universe . . ."?

There is no simple answer to these questions, but Frost's letters give us some hints. In 1924 Frost wrote to Louis Untermeyer about humor as a defense against fear:

> I own any form of humor shows fear and inferiority. Irony is simply a kind of guardedness. So is a twinkle. It keeps the reader from criticism . . . . Belief is better than anything else, and it is best when rapt, above paying its respects to anybody's doubt whatsoever. At bottom the world isn't a joke. We only joke about it to avoid an issue with someone to let someone know that we know he's there with his questions: to disarm him by seeming to have heard and done justice to his side of the standing argument. Humor is the most engaging cowardice. With it myself I have been able to hold some of my enemy in play far out of gunshot.[7]

Surely this is a profound insight, though Frost may have been a little severe: Freud regarded humor as a type of confrontation, not necessarily a form of cowardice. Norman O. Brown explains it this way:

> [Freud] distinguishes humor from the neurotic defense mechanism. Indeed he calls it the highest of all defense functions; quite unlike repression, humor openly confronts ideas that are in themselves painful or are connected with painful images, and thus it is instrumental in overcoming the automatic machinery of defense.[8]

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[7]Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, March 10, 1924, Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), pp. 299-300.

[8]Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p. 65.

The significant point of agreement between Frost and Freud is upon the matter of humor as a defensive measure. As Frost puts it, we joke about the world to avoid an issue. "Design," then, can be seen as a joke which at the same time confronts and avoids the possibility of a chaotic universe. It confronts the idea insofar as it admits it to be possible; but the humor cushions the shock, as it were, of such an idea. Trilling was right in seeing that Frost's universe is terrifying and Brower's assessment of the last two lines of the poem as "humorous-terrible" also seems accurate. But the essential point is that it is Frost's universe that is terrifying; that he should joke about something which was so obviously an issue to him bears out this point.[9] Yet the terror is in Frost's mind, not in the poem, and only the reader with a similar desire for universal design can see the poem as terrifying. Such a predilection for order has led one critic, Edward Stone, into arguing that "'Design' is merely the most frightening (and for this reason, perhaps the least typical) of Frost's expressions of distaste, of

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[9]Consider a poem which Frost repressed during his lifetime. He sent it to Untermeyer first in July, 1921, and again with variants September, 1921, and January, 1942. Here is the first copy as reproduced in Selected Letters, pp. 270-271:

> To prayer, to prayer I go--I think I go--
> I go to prayer
> Along a solemn corridor of woe
> And down a stair
> In every step of which I am abased;
> A cowl I wear,
> I wear a halter-rope about the waist,
> I bear a candle-end put out with haste.
> I go to prayer.

disbelief in God . . . ."[10] The poem betrays not disbelief in God but a deeprooted anxiety about the possibility of the non-existence of God. There is certainly no expression of distaste or disbelief in the poem; the poem is a cry for belief, for certainty, for security. And the poem is a piece of self-deception. Frost has left off the playful humor of "Hyla Brook" and "The Oven Bird" and has cast off the role of social analyst (the role of the poet who wrote "A Brook in the City") in order to carry on a futile search for some universal purpose. "Design" represents a flight from human problems, a failure of nerve on the part of the poet.

Biographical details support my contention that Frost was masking his insecurities. During the eight years between the publication of West-running Brook and A Further Range Frost's life was more anxiety-ridden than it ever had been before. Lawrance Thompson writes in the Selected Letters:

> The poetry of Robert Frost contains only veiled hints of the ways in which he became deeply "acquainted with the night." The darkest phase of his life probably occurred during the twelve or thirteen years that began in the autumn of 1926 and continued through at least the spring and summer of 1938. His private darkness was, however, strikingly at odds with his public life, for during these years his reputation as a poet became established with great firmness and assurance. He kept his suffering below the surface of his art; indeed he had both the instinct and capacity for keeping the overly curious out of his secret places.[11]

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[10]Edward Stone, Voices of Despair: Four Motifs in American Literature ([Athens]: Ohio University Press, 1966), p. 128.

[11]Selected Letters, P. 337.

The letters Frost wrote in the period before the publication of A Further Range in May of 1936 describe his private sufferings: they range from minor physical ailments to grief at the death of his daughter Marjorie in 1934 of child-bed fever. (Another death in the family--that of Frost's sister, Jeannie, in the Augusta State Hospital for the Insane in 1929--is unmentioned in any of Frost's published letters.) A Further Range undoubtedly was colored by these experiences. Seen in such a context, Frost's jokes about a universal design and the existence of God[12] become significant indeed, making it possible to suggest an answer to a question that I posed earlier. That is to say that Frost's notion about the chaotic nature of the universe had not disappeared at all, but had become somehow submerged. "Design," for example, treats the possibility of a "design of darkness" rather lightly, but that would seem to be the only way that Frost, at that particular time, could treat such an idea. Lawrance Thompson, explain-

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[12]See "Not All There" in "Ten Mills" section of A Further Range (Complete Poems, p. 408):

> I turned to speak to God
> About the world's despair;
> But to make bad matters worse
> I found God wasn't there.
>
> God turned to speak to me
> (Don't anybody laugh)
> God found I wasn't there--
> At least not over half.

ing the biographical context of the poem,[13] points out that Frost very much needed the support of a religious belief:

> . . . he so desperately needed the consolation of a positive religious belief that he was never long without it. Although he could briefly and intermittently entertain the notion that the Designer might be evil, he preferred to manipulate the notion in a detached way to tease and mock those whose religious beliefs seemed to him to be sentimental. Even in teasing, however, he still very firmly agreed with James and Bergson . . . that all the important purposes of the Designer are benevolent.[14]

In brief, then, "Design," represents no new departure for Frost, for, like "Storm Fear,"[15] it is intimately related to Frost's need of a positive religious belief. That he should treat religious questions humorously in these poems underlines the fact that Frost's intellectual approach to religion heightened his anxieties.[16]

"Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" is another poem which aptly illustrates the superficial confidence of _A Further Range_. Though Frost himself called this poem a little joke at the expense of those who peer into microscopes and telescopes,[17] it is a good deal more

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[13]Frost was provoked to write this mocking sonnet, originally entitled "In White," by the Reverend William Hayes Ward, who dampened Frost's enthusiasm for _Creative Evolution_ by declaring Bergson an atheist! See Thompson's _Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915_ (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 381 ff.

[14]_The Early Years_, p. 388.

[15]See above, Chapter II, pp. 12-13.

[16]See above, Chapter I, pp. 9-10.

[17]_Robert Frost Reads from His Own Works: Yale Series of Recorded Poets_, Decca Records, DL9127.

than that; in a way, it epitomizes his poetic statements about the degree to which man's knowledge is circumscribed:

> The people along the sand
> All turn and look one way.
> They turn their back on the land.
> They look at the sea all day.
>
> As long as it takes to pass
> A ship keeps raising its hull;
> The wetter ground like glass
> Reflects a standing gull.
>
> The land may vary more;
> But wherever the truth may be--
> The water comes ashore,
> And people look at the sea.
>
> They cannot look out far.
> They cannot look in deep.
> But when was that ever a bar
> To any watch they keep?[18]

The irony of man's persistent quest for knowledge is that he always looks beyond what is immediately before him. The speaker suggests that it is because they are looking too far out that people see nothing; if "truth" is in the water, why do people not look at their feet where "The water comes ashore"? To him sea and land are essentially one, the sea is merely "The wetter ground"--the difference is of degree, not kind. He does not know where truth is, and implies that facts are more significant. Yet one senses that he wishes there were a truth beyond the facts. Here again is the tension between knowing and wishing: Frost's mind tells him there is no "truth" apart from the basic facts that the water comes ashore

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[18] Complete Poems, p. 394.

and the people look at the sea, but another part of him wishes for something beyond.

This ambivalence of attitude is a quality of Frost's poems which has been consistently overlooked. On the one hand, critics have maintained that Frost held an anti-intellectual attitude; on the other, critics such as Nina Baym have too rigorously asserted Frost's celebration of the power of the human mind. Baym summarizes the objections of one who sees Frost as anti-intellectual, and replies to that criticism:

> [In Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 1960), p. 209] the author [George Nitchie] maintains that it is far more profound and intellectual to adopt a patently absurd cosmology like Yeats' so long as one is thereby enabled to order the universe teleologically, than to hold fast to uncertainty and attempt to write good poetry without the scaffolding of a myth one cannot believe. To the notion that to be profound is to be teleological, Frost counters that to be profound is to be true to the results of one's thought and observation of the universe. This is the extent of his anti-intellectualism, for he is otherwise a persistent celebrant of the power and glory of the human mind. 19

Hyatt Waggonner is another who, in emphasizing the rigor of Frost's intellectualism, has played down the essential ambivalence of Frost's attitude towards mind:

> Mr. Frost has saved himself from Robinson's melancholy, Eliot's pious despair, and Crane's agony by not asking for a Purpose or a Law, by not attempting to redeem or regenerate the natural, by not listening for the sounding

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19 Nina Baym, "An Approach to Robert Frost's Nature Poetry," American Quarterly, XVII, no. 4 (Winter, 1965), p. 720.

> heel of Elohim, by cracking a joke and listening instead for an ovenbird; in short, by accepting a diminished thing.[20]

These statements of Baym and Waggonner apply more directly to the early Frost than to the Frost of the middle years. The Frost of "A Brook in the City," "Design" and "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" indeed celebrated mind, but he also regarded it with skepticism. And he overtly accepted a diminished thing, but he covertly asked for Purpose and Law and Design.[21] That critics should overlook this basic ambivalence attests to Frost's ability to cover his trail by assuming various poses and tones of voice. It is by skilfully manipulating his masks that Frost was able to partly disguise his anxieties about religious faith.

In "Desert Places," too, one cannot but be aware of the poet's manipulations. One may not agree with Irving Howe that the last stanza collapses into coyness,[22] but the poem does focus finally, not upon desert places, but upon the speaker's defiance of universal emptiness. This confidence betrays the general shift in Frost's poetry from query to statement, a shift which can be seen clearly by juxtaposing "Desert Places" and "Storm Fear." In both poems the

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[20]Hyatt Howe Waggonner, The Heel of Elohim: Science and Values in Modern American Poetry (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), p. 60.

[21]Later, in In the Clearing, Frost wrote ("Accidentally on Purpose," p. 34): "Grant me intention, purpose, and design--/That's near enough for me to the Divine." See below, Chapter VI, pp. 75-76.

[22]Irving Howe, "Robert Frost: A Momentary Stay," The New Republic, Volume 148, no. 12 (March 23, 1963), p. 26.

speaker's initial description of nightfall and snowfall leads to a discovery of an anology between external reality and man's predicament; but "Storm Fear" ends with a question, "And my heart owns a doubt/ Whether 'tis in us to arise with day/ And save ourselves unaided",[23] while "Desert Places" ends with a defiant assertion:

> Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
> In a field I looked into going past,
> And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
> But a few weeds and stubble showing last.
>
> The woods around it have it--it is theirs.
> All animals are smothered in their lairs.
> I am too absent-spirited to count;
> The loneliness includes me unawares.
>
> And lonely as it is that loneliness
> Will be more lonely ere it will be less--
> A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
> With no expression, nothing to express.
>
> They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
> Between stars--on stars where no human race is.
> I have it in me so much nearer home
> To scare myself with my own desert places.[24]

Regardless of how one judges the quality of the last stanza, it is typically Frostian statement, intimately related to the lines in "West-running Brook" in which Frost describes resistance to the "universal cataract of death/ That spends to nothingness" as the essential human response. At first the speaker succumbs to the universal

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[23]Complete Poems, p. 13.

[24]Complete Poems, p. 386.

rush to nothingness--"I am too absent-spirited to count"--but in the last stanza he steps outside himself and breaks the tie that he had felt between himself and the natural world. By admitting that he has it in him to scare himself with "desert places" of his own, the speaker controls that fear. And in defying the power of nature to frighten him, he is proving that he is superior to nature. Like the little wave in "West-running Brook," he is rising up against the downward flow of nature, fulfilling the essential requirement of manhood. And insofar as this recognition of his own ability to control the workings of his imagination came about as a result of seeing himself as part of nature, the speaker's position is consistent with the idea that man is both part of nature and capable of exceeding her.

Like "Design," "Desert Places" focuses not upon any universal problem that a superficial reading might lead one to expect, but upon the speaker's control. In "Design" one feels that the poet knows more than he is telling; in "Desert Places" the speaker's final words draw attention not to his impotence, but to his ability to accept any anxiety. How better to suppress fear than to admit one is afraid? Such formal restraint, of course, is nothing new in terms of Frost's development as a poet, for Frost certainly was in control of his subject in "Hyla Brook" and "The Oven Bird." What is significant is that the stringent control in the later poems is a defensive measure; in the earlier ones the poet's ironic control is playful. There is in "Hyla Brook" and "The Oven Bird" a self-effacing humor which "Design"

and "Desert Places" do not have. This shift from a playful manipulation to a defensive manipulation betrays Frost's covert uncertainty about himself as a poet and about the possibility of certainty in a threatening universe. It is an uncertainty which becomes increasingly evident in the later volumes.

In _A Witness Tree_ this uncertainty is more overt than in _A Further Range_ or in the later volumes, _Steeple Bush_ and _In the Clearing_. A relaxing of ironic control combined with a near-obsessive concern with confusion and death suggests that in many of the poems Frost was purging himself of deep-rooted anxieties. Consider for example the first few lines of "The Wind and the Rain":

> That far-off day the leaves in flight
> Were letting in the colder light.
> A season-ending wind there blew
> That as it did the forest strew
> I leaned on with a singing trust
> And let it drive me deathward too.
> With breaking step I stabbed the dust,
> Yet did not much to shorten stride.
> I sang of death--but I had known
> The many deaths one must have died
> Before he came to meet his own!
> Oh, should a child be left unwarned
> That any song in which he mourned
> Would be as if he prophesied?[25]

Certainly this is a different Frost from the one who so smugly jested about further ranges in 1936! The expletives and unidiomatic syntax suggest that this is an early poem, but its appearance in the 1942

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[25] _Complete Poems_, p. 449.

volume suggests something of Frost's mood when he made his selections. That mood seems to have been one almost of confusion: "We dance round in a ring and suppose,/ But the Secret sits in the middle and knows."[26] On the whole, the irony of A Witness Tree seems strained, less self-assured than in any of the preceding volumes.

Again, biographical details help to explain the lapse of ironic manipulation. As Lawrance Thompson has intimated, Frost's dark years lasted until late 1938, but poems such as "The Wind and the Rain," "To A Moth Seen in Winter," "Time Out," as well as "The Lesson for Today," speak eloquently for extending the termination date to 1942. So do the facts of Frost's life. In 1938 Frost's wife died of a heart attack. His grief was compounded in 1940 when his only surviving son, Carol, committed suicide. This personal suffering must account in large part for the change in quality of Frost's lyrics: there are no jokes about universal design in A Witness Tree.

The autobiographical "To A Moth Seen in Winter" best illustrates Frost's dropping of the ironic mask. Though Frost appended to the poem the note "Circa 1900," there can be little doubt that he was exorcising the anguish of the deaths of Elinor and Carol, as well as re-living the grief of 1900 when Elliott, Frost's first child, and Frost's mother died within five months of each other. The poem deals with the transience of life: the speaker proffers his hand to a moth whose life is jeopardized by the winter cold, but the moth flits away.

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[26] "The Secret Sits," Complete Poems, p. 495.

The speaker realizes the emptiness of his pity, for he has to face the problem of survival himself:

> And what I pity in you is something human,
> The old incurable untimeliness,
> Only begetter of all ills that are.
> But go. You are right. My pity cannot help.
> Go till you wet your pinions and are quenched.
> You must be made more simply wise than I
> To know the hand I stretch impulsively
> Across the gulf of well nigh everything
> May reach to you, but cannot touch your fate.
> I cannot touch your life, much less can save,
> Who am tasked to save my own a little while.[27]

The speaker recognizes the vanity of his pity for the moth, but then, unfortunately, he turns the pitying glance inward and one is left with the unsavory taste of the poet's self-pity. The poet's eye really has not looked outward in this poem at all (consider by way of contrast the hard clear images of "Hyla Brook"); he has merely searched his own mind for a predicament which is analogous to his own. In lapsing into sentimentality, Frost violates a poetic principle which he uttered in 1947:

> "All this rolling around on the floor and kicking and screaming isn't poetry. It must be controlled; emotion must be harnessed to wit-mill and turned out carefully."[28]

The emotion has been only loosely harnessed in this poem and the wit-mill has been able to modulate the scream of a sigh.

Frost had not lost the ability to harness emotion to a wit-mill, in spite of "To A Moth Seen In Winter." This last was placed in a sub-

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[27] Complete Poems, p. 480.

[28] Interviews with Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 114.

section of A Witness Tree, called "Time Out," the title poem of which has sharp ironic tone indicative of collusion between emotion and intellect. Like "To a Moth," "Time Out" represents something of a departure from what Frost had been doing in his poems which play man against nature. Most of the earlier poems dramatize ways of seeing reality, or focus upon those imaginative capabilities which distinguish man from brute, but "To a Moth" is essentially concerned with mere survival and "Time Out" strikes out at society. It is this pugnacious quality which makes "Time Out" particularly germane to a discussion of changes in Frost's poetic vision. In one way Frost is very much on the defensive:

> It took that pause to make him realize
> The mountain he was climbing had the slant
> As of a book held up before his eyes
> (And was a text albeit done in plant).
> Dwarf cornel, gold-thread, and maianthemum,
> He followingly fingered as he read,
> The flowers fading on the seed to come;
> But the thing was the slope it gave his head:
> The same for reading as it was for thought,
> So different from the hard and level stare
> Of enemies defied and battles fought.
> It was the obstinately gentle air
> That may be clamored at by cause and sect
> But it will have its moment to reflect.[29]

I have called this poem pugnacious, but it contains no bellowing or raging; the satirist here uses not a broadsword, but a rapier. The thrust comes quite unexpectedly. First we are given the insight the mountain-climber experiences: he realizes that the slant of the

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[29] Complete Poems, p. 479.

mountain approximates the slant of a book, and that there is something to be read on the mountain slope, which "was a text albeit done in plant . . . ." This quiet witticism provokes no one, nor does the initial comment of the narrator which follows. A contradiction is introduced quietly, yet firmly, "But the thing was the slope it gave his head:/ The same for reading as it was for thought . . . ." Then follows the thrust as the speaker compares the quiet, contemplative attitude of the climber to the "hard and level stare" of those committed to "cause" or "sect".

Though he attributes defiance to those embroiled in fighting battles, the speaker's own attitude is defiant. After all, if he is on the side of common sense (as he indeed seems to be) need he protest so much? The motivation of the satiric barb seems not to be a desire to convert or to effect a change, but to rationalize a withdrawal from a situation demanding a choice of "cause" or "sect". The speaker here seems to take seriously a half-facetious comment Frost makes in "New Hampshire": "'Me for the hills where I don't have to choose.'"[30]

I have emphasized this defensiveness because such an attitude links _A Further Range_ and _A Witness Tree_ not only to each other but also to _West-running Brook_. Akin to what Frost earlier called "some strange resistance" opposing "The universal cataract of death/ That

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[30]_Complete Poems_, p. 210.

spends to nothingness",[31] the concern with defense becomes, in A Witness Tree, an obsession with survival. Consider the final lines of "Our Hold on the Planet":

> There is much in nature against us. But we forget:
> Take nature altogether since time began,
> Including human nature, in peace and war,
> And it must be a little more in favor of man,
> Say a fraction of one per cent at the very least,
> Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,
> Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased.[32]

Consider also the closing lines of "Carpe Diem":

> The present
> Is too much for the senses,
> Too crowding, too confusing--
> Too present to imagine.[33]

And in "Triple Bronze" three coats of mail protecting one's self from "too much" are discussed:

> The Infinite's being so wide
> Is the reason the Powers provide
> For inner defense my hide.
> For next defense outside
>
> I make myself this time
> Of wood or granite or lime
> A wall too hard for crime
> Either to breach or climb.

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[31]See above, pp. 28-32.

[32]Complete Poems, p. 469.

[33]Ibid., p. 448. It is interesting to speculate that the final line of this poem explains the discursive qualities so evident in the poems of this volume. The raw experiences out of which the poems were fostered seem indeed to have overwhelmed the poet; hence the loss of ironic control.

> Then a number of us agree
> On a national boundary.
> And that defense makes three
> Between too much and me.[34]

The difference in tone, then, between *A Further Range* and *A Witness Tree* seems to be related to a difference in emphasis given to the struggle with the disorderly and confusing aspects of the universe. The tactic employed in *A Further Range* was to resist chaos with a smile and to plunge ahead to a further range; the strategy of *A Witness Tree* was to openly acknowledge the confusion. In a way the tone of the latter volume is one of wry resignation:

> And were an epitaph to be my story
> I'd have a short one ready for my own.
> I would have written of me on my stone:
> I had a lover's quarrel with the world.[35]

A Further Range and *A Witness Tree* both are volumes of crises, both essentially are concerned with survival. They mark the end of a period in Frost's career (as Frost obliquely suggests in the title of the volume and in the mock epitaph) in which he wrote his most sensitive and carefully wrought poems. The volume of lyrics which followed, *Steeple Bush*, presents a Frost who still quarrels with the world, but whose quarrel lacks the poignancy of a lover's quarrel.

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[34] *Complete Poems*, p. 468.

[35] "The Lesson for Today," *Complete Poems*, p. 476.

CHAPTER V

Critical opinion of Robert Frost's poetry rarely approaches unanimity, but there is general agreement that Steeple Bush (1947) represents a falling-off of Frost's powers. Even such an ardent admirer of Frost as Randall Jarrell has harsh words for this volume:

> Frost's latest books deserve little more than a footnote, since they have had few of his virtues, most of his vices, and all of his tricks; the heathen who would be converted to Frost by them is hard to construct. Steeple Bush has one wonderful poem, "Directive"; a fairly good, dazzlingly heartless one, "The Ingenuities of Debt"; and nothing else that is not done better somewhere else in Frost. Most of the poems merely remind you, by their persistence in the mannerisms of what was genius, that they are the productions of someone who once, and somewhere else, was a great poet.[1]

George Nitchie agrees with this judgment and goes even further: "To anyone who admires North of Boston--except for members of the cult . . . --Steeple Bush is a painful book, a little treasury of the trivial, with Frost finally become his own Boswell."[2] These are strong words and one must challenge them.

First, it is, critically speaking, more useful to ask, as Elizabeth Jennings does, why Steeple Bush is an unusual book. Her comment runs:

> Steeple Bush lacks the unity of A Witness Tree. The reason for this is partly that Frost seems a little at odds with himself in the later book, and partly that many of the poems are fragmentary, even if the fragments themselves are often very fine.[3]

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[1]Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p. 31.

[2]George Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of a Poet's Convictions (Durham. N.C.: Duke University Press, 1960), p. 201.

[3]Elizabeth Jennings, Frost (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), p. 64.

Frost was indeed at odds with himself, and the central conflict is between fact and dream, between what he knew and what he wished. This volume clearly speaks of Frost's quest for certainty: he wanted the absolute, but could reach only the finite. If the book has a unity at all, it is this conflict which is at its centre. In "Any Size We Please" Frost seems to be describing his own plight:

> No one was looking at his lonely case,
> So like a half-mad outpost sentinel,
> Indulging an absurd dramatic spell,
> Albeit not without some shame of face,
> He stretched his arms out to the dark of space
> And held them absolutely parallel
> In infinite appeal. Then saying, 'Hell'
> He drew them in for warmth of self-embrace.
> He thought if he could have his space all curved
> Wrapped in around itself and self-befriended,
> His science needn't get him so unnerved.
> He had been too all out, too much extended.
> He slapped his breast to verify his purse
> And hugged himself for all his universe.[4]

Absolutist in his wishing, relativistic in his thinking, describes not only Frost himself, but modern scientific man who in the twentieth century tried to prove "his space all curved". Overlooked by critics, this sonnet illustrates Frost's capabilities as a satirist: he has yoked together here in neat paradox "infinite appeal" and "self-embrace."

It is the juxtaposition of universal and particular which unifies *Steeple Bush* and its companion piece *An Afterword*. Several poems indicate that Frost had difficulty keeping his head out of the clouds;

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[4]*Complete Poems of Robert Frost, 1949* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949) p. 564.

the prominent attitude of the personae seems to be that of the "lonely case" of "Any Size We Please"--looking upward toward space. This is particularly true of the poems in the sections entitled "Five Nocturnes" and "A Spire and Belfry," though the same attitude is part of "An Unstamped Letter in Our Rural Letter Box," and of "The Middleness of the Road," "Astrometaphysical," "Skeptic," and "Two Leading Lights" of the sub-section "Out and Away." "Take Something Like a Star" of An Afterword has also that upward-gazing attitude. In dealing with such abstractions as "absolute flight and rest"[5] and "a soul . . . coming on the flesh . . .,"[6] Frost seems to have become a "watcher of the void"[7] who has forgotten his own remark that "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows."[8] To put the matter another way, Frost seems to have been less concerned with the facts of survival and more concerned with his hope for salvation.[9] In this volume it is Frost himself who is etherealizing.[10] Though he

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[5]"The Middleness of the Road," Complete Poems, p. 547.

[6]"A Steeple on the House," Complete Poems, p. 540.

[7]"On Making Certain Anything Has Happened," Complete Poems, p. 532.

[8]"Mowing," Complete Poems, p. 25.

[9]A Masque of Mercy, the final piece of Complete Poems, ends with a type of prayer.

[10]Frost was aware of this change; hence the jocularity of the final lines of "Etherealizing" (Complete Poems, p. 562), "Oh, may the tide be soon enough at high/ To keep our abstract verse from being dry."

never flies from the alone to the Alone, he has difficulty keeping mind clothed in flesh.

To this generalization, however, there are at least three exceptional poems, none of which is obscured by the swirling vapor of religious faith: "One Step Backward Taken," "Skeptic," and "Take Something Like a Star" are concerned either with survival or with facts. At this point these two terms need not be defined, for the poems themselves illustrate their meaning.

"One Step Backward Taken" relates to "Time Out" of A Witness Tree in that it is concerned with survival, though the later poem, unlike "Time Out," is without a social dimension. What both poems emphasize is the necessity for a moment of reflection. In "One Step Backward Taken," what appears at first to be a physical step is really a cognitive step:

> Not only sands and gravels
> Were once more on their travels,
> But gulping muddy gallons
> Great boulders off their balance
> Bumped heads together dully
> And started down the gully.
> Whole capes caked off in slices.
> I felt my standpoint shaken
> In the universal crisis.
> But with one step backward taken
> I saved myself from going.
> A world torn loose went by me.
> Then the rain stopped and the blowing
> And the sun came out to dry me.[11]

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[11] Complete Poems, p. 519.

To consider this poem as concerned with something other than the process of imagining cannot be done without misreading, a crime of which George Nitchie (committed to a thesis of searching out human values, one which necessarily involves seeing a poem principally as a moral document) is surely guilty in his gloss of the poem:

> The trouble with "One Step Backward Taken" is not that it says "Thank God it wasn't me" but that it says only "Thank God it wasn't me," in tone as well as in statement. The preference for immediate woes has been transmuted into a refusal to be touched by external disaster . . . .[12]

Later in his book, Nitchie refers to this poem as callous.[13] Surely neither of these comments is wellfounded. What exactly does Nitchie mean by _it_ in his rhetorical paraphrase of the poem? Nothing happens in the poem that can be passed off with an ambiguous pronoun and that is so simple as to deserve the label "disaster." Does the poem not describe what I have outlined above[14] as the process of conceptualizing as consistently handled by Frost? The "world torn loose", which the speaker describes as going by, symbolizes the physical world. The action the poem describes resembles Thoreau's comments on thinking:

> With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent.[15]

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[12]Nitchie, _op. cit._, p. 143.

[13]_Ibid._, p. 199.

[14]Chapter I, pp. 6-8.

[15]Henry David Thoreau, _Walden_ from _Walden and Civil Disobedience_, ed. Sherman Paul, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 93.

My point is not to illustrate any direct relationship between the poem and Walden (though it is true Frost considered Walden one of his favorite books[16]), but to support my contention that the poem primarily is concerned with thinking. Nitchie has interpreted the backward step as a flight from "external disaster," but that step does not involve fleeing a real world for a world of fancy--the backward step is into another world, one which is as necessary, (and as threatening, as "Desert Places" indicates) to humanity as the extra-mental world. The tone of "One Step Backward Taken," as Nitchie has sensed, is confident and assured because Frost enjoys the security that an intellectual non-involvement gives him. Thoreau explains this phenomenon succinctly:

> I *may* be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I *may not* be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another.[17]

What Nitchie objects to in the poem is the fact that the speaker seems not to be affected by an actual event, or at least so little affected that he takes only one step backward. What that step signifies though, is a conscious effort of the mind to stand aloof from threatening physical actions and their consequences.

The second poem singled out for detailed discussion, "Skeptic," explains convincingly what "facts" meant to Frost. Scientific facts

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[16]Lawrance Thompson, *The Early Years*, p. 549, quoting *Books We Like--Sixty-Two Answers* (Boston, 1936), pp. 141-142.

[17]Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 93.

are rejected:

> Far star that tickles for me my sensitive plate
> And fries a couple of ebon atoms white,
> I don't believe I believe a thing you state.
> I put no faith in the seeming facts of light.
>
> I don't believe I believe you're the last in space,
> I don't believe you're anywhere near the last,
> I don't believe what makes you red in the face
> Is after explosion going away so fast.[18]

The "seeming facts of light" do not illuminate the human situation; therefore, they do not command one's faith. The facts of one's own experience, though such experiences can be described only by way of simile, have far greater significance:

> The universe may or may not be very immense.
> As a matter of fact there are times when I am apt
> To feel it close in tight against my sense
> Like a caul in which I was born and still am wrapped.

This poem modifies Frost's notion of fact-as-dream, "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows."[19] There is no indication in "Skeptic" that a claustrophobic sensation is a pleasant dream; what is emphasized is that facts of sensation are all one can give credence to--they are the facts that one can know. When one experiences such a sensation, mere intellectual data are without impact. Such data are without credence, if one should will not to accept; to dismiss physical sensations by an act of the will is done less easily. It is the body which invites belief and commands it, for man is mostly body.

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[18]Complete Poems, p. 549.

[19]See above, p. 60 , note 8.

It is our fleshly aspect that abstract facts cannot affect and that we, in our wishful moments, tend to disregard. Whether or not "Skeptic" represents a cry for freedom from the fleshly burden, depends upon how one responds to the tone. If one reads the last stanza as expressing a sombre mood, then Elizabeth Jennings' comment would be a propos: "In "Sceptic [sic]," there is no elation, only pain . . . ."[20] There is, however, another reading. One could argue that the last stanza is not sombre at all, but that its tone is one of jocularity, a tongue-in-cheek challenge to those who maintain that "facts of light" are meaningful. To support this point of view one could invoke critics as well as several of Frost's earlier poems:

> Frost tells enough to show that his is a philosophy of attachment, of realization, of intuitive apprehension, of what Whitman unpleasantly called "adhesiveness." . . . He cannot take actuality for granted; he shows an almost bloodthirsty clinging to people and things.[21]

> . . . no subject matter has ever made stronger appeal to Frost, for poetry, than that same question as to how the limited man can make snug in the limitless.[22]

> Yet some say Love by being thrall
> And simply staying possesses all
> In several beauty that Thought fares far
> To find fused in another star.[23]

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[20]Jennings, op. cit., p. 65.

[21]T. K. Whipple, Spokesmen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 107-108.

[22]Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), p. 20.

[23]"Bond and Free," Complete Poems, p. 151.

And if after the hunt goes past
And the double-barreled blast
(Like war and pestilence
And the loss of common sense),

If I can with confidence say
That still for another day,
Or even another year,
I will be there for you, my dear,

It will be because, though small
As measured against the All,
I have been so instinctively thorough
About my crevice and burrow.[24]

All of these passages relate to the idea that "adhesiveness" is both necessary and desirable, that making snug means limiting an incomprehensible limitlessness.

But in "Skeptic" the attitude toward fleshly bondage is ambivalent. This ambivalence is partly a reflection of the attraction the Absolute had for Frost; the lines, "I don't believe I believe you're the last in space,/ I don't believe you're anywhere near the last," betray the strength of that attraction. Earlier poems, such as "Birches" and "Bond and Free," which deal with the attraction of the ethereal, end with a clear adoption of the mundane world: "Earth's the right place for love . . . ."[25] The "adhesiveness" in "Skeptic" is muted by comparison. It seems fair to conclude, then, that there is neither elation, nor pain in the poem; "Skeptic" marks a tendency in Frost that climaxes in the masques--a desire to achieve salvation.

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[24]"A Drumlin Woodchuck," Complete Poems, p. 365.

[25]"Birches," Complete Poems, p. 153.

This tendency did not really harden, though, even in the masques. An Afterword to Steeple Bush, added to the Complete Poems in 1949 (after the masques had been published separately), returns, at least in the poem "Take Something Like a Star," to the problem of survival. (It is significant that Frost, ever concerned with form, should organize his Complete Poems so as to end with the prayer-like statements of Paul and Keeper.[26]) Before we consider the content of the poem, it is necessary to discuss briefly the text.

Originally included in the Complete Poems under the title "Choose Something Like a Star," the poem was changed, at Frost's request, to become "Take Something Like a Star."[27] Also, Frost changed "choose" to "take" in the penultimate line. The revised line runs, "We may take something like a star/ To stay our minds on and be staid."[28] The change is significant, for the word "take" implies a substantially different action than the word "choose." By his change Frost has not ruled out the possibility of choice (the word "may" suggests that "taking" something like a star is but one possible response), but has made taking something like a star less a possible course of action and

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[26]A Masque of Mercy, Complete Poems, pp. 641-642.

[27]The revised poem first appears in Selected Poems of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1963), pp. 269-270. The change is noted on p. [ii], ". . . 'Choose Something Like a Star' has been changed to 'Take Something Like a Star.' "

[28]Complete Poems, p. 575.

more a recommended response. A detailed reading, however, is required before any firm conclusions can be made about the poem.

There are several shifts of tone within the poem: in the first part the persona addresses a star in half-appealing tones of almost mock admiration:

> O Star (the fairest one in sight),
> We grant your loftiness the right
> To some obscurity of cloud--
> It will not do to say of night,
> Since dark is what brings out your light.
> Some mystery becomes the proud.
> But to be wholly taciturn
> In your reserve is not allowed.
> Say something to us and we can learn
> By heart and when alone repeat.

The speaker expects no response, but he evidently enjoys playing with the possibility of learning something from the star: he poses as an insistent investigator, desperate for "facts":

> Say something! And it says "I burn."
> But say with what degree of heat.
> Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
> Use language we can comprehend.
> Tell us what elements you blend.

The star does finally "say" something, but not in words. The speaker gives the words to the star; impressed by the steadfastness of the star, the speaker decides that whatever the star teaches us, it teaches us by example:

> It gives us strangely little aid,
> But does tell something in the end.
> And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
> Not even stooping from its sphere,
> It asks a little of us here.
> It asks of us a certain height,

So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may take something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

A quality of adhesiveness does not dominate this poem as it does "Birches" or "Bond and Free," but it is there. Taking something like a star is only one of several possible steps backward, necessary "when at times the mob is swayed/ To carry praise or blame too far. . . [italics added] ." The poem is decidedly not a manifesto advocating flight from unpleasant circumstances; however, what Whipple called Frost's "bloodthirstiness" in clinging to things and people[29] is absent. It seems just to conclude that "Take Something Like a Star" points up Frost's assumption of a new perspective of which sublunar things are no longer central.

And this gradual shift of focus from earth to the heavens probably accounts, in part, for the severity of critical response to Steeple Bush. As he grew older, Frost seems to have been driven by darkness and confusion into a corner where the writing of poetry was an insufficient means of coping with reality. As a consequence, he turned increasingly to a positive belief in a universal Purpose.

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[29]See above, p. 65, note 21.

CHAPTER VI

Frost's desire for form is nowhere more evident than in his final volume In the Clearing. On the leaf preceding the first poem of the volume, an epigraph appears--"And wait to watch the water clear, I may."[1] Taken from "The Pasture," a poem introductory to Complete Poems, this line seems to designate two things--first, that In the Clearing is to represent the poet's final "vision," and, second, that In the Clearing signals the poet's having moved full circle, and having discovered, during the years of observation, a clarification of the problems of life.

To a certain extent both implications are substantiated by the poems. Taken as a whole, In the Clearing represents the poet's final word on various subjects that he dealt with earlier; in fact, as I shall demonstrate below, in this volume Frost recapitulates, and rationalizes, the themes of his earlier work. The second implication of the epigraph--that the poet ends where he began--is true insofar as the first poem of Complete Poems, "Into My Own,"[3] is complemented by the final piece in In the Clearing, "In winter in the woods alone/ Against the trees I go."[4] Both poems deal with a desire for solitude, and are in a way defiant, but the early poem has about it an adolescent

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[1]In the Clearing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 11.

[2]Complete Poems of Robert Frost, 1949, p. 1.

[3]Complete Poems, p. 5.

[4]In the Clearing, p. 101.

peevishness while the later poem is tolerant and jocular.

But the real importance of In the Clearing lies in the fact that Frost has here written, in a discursive way, a conclusion to his poetic career. The volume is valuable for this very reason: it offers many clues to Frost's poetic vision simply because the formal sophistication so evident in his earlier work (even in Steeple Bush[5]) has dissipated as the ideas of the poems are laid bare. In their nakedness they reveal Frost's enduring obsession with the tension between relative and absolute. Consider the section of "Kitty Hawk" entitled "The Holiness of Wholeness":

> Pilot, though at best your
> Flight is but a gesture,
> And your rise and swoop,
> But a loop the loop,
> Lands on someone hard
> In his own backyard
> From no higher heaven
> Than a bolt of levin,
> I don't say retard.
> Keep on elevating.
> But while meditating
> What we can't or can
> Let's keep starring man
> In the royal role.
> It will not be his
> Ever to create
> One least germ or coal.
> Those two things we can't.
> But the comfort is
> In the covenant
> We may get control
> If not of the whole
> Of at least some part
> Where not too immense,

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[5]See above, Chapter V.

So by craft or art
We can give the part
Wholeness in a sense.
The becoming fear
That becomes us best
Is lest habit ridden
In the kitchen midden
Of our dump of earning
And our dump of learning
We come nowhere near
Getting thought expressed.[6]

Here Frost reiterates what seems to have been almost an obsession with him: the world is fragmented, but by means of art or craft we can achieve a little wholeness. Yet, when one compares the tone of this poem with that of Thoreau in Walden, one doubts that Frost really believed in the efficacy of craftsmanship. The passage from Walden runs:

> I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor.[7]

Thoreau at least felt some enthusiasm for the idea; Frost seems disappointed that an effort must be made.

What is most striking about In the Clearing, though, is the failure of Frost's irony. The irony, as in these lines from "Kitty Hawk," is too weighty, too obvious. It degenerates at times into mere preaching. The reason for this collapse is partly that Frost dropped his technique of using nature as a teacher, of commenting obliquely about man while seeming to be observing something in nature.

6"Kitty Hawk," In the Clearing, pp. 55-56.

7Walden, from Walden and Civil Disobedience, ed. Sherman Paul, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 62.

In this volume Frost has assumed the hard and level stare of a combatant determined either to defend his position, or to provoke recognition of that position. The result is an annoying patronization: Frost seems to have been convinced of his greatness by public recognition and either speaks ex cathedra or descends inelegantly to elbow the reader in the ribs. "Do you see, do you see?" he insists.

This may be a little severe, but, even in the better poems, one feels that Frost is speaking about himself and only himself. Consider "Escapist--Never":

> He is no fugitive--escaped, escaping.
> No one has seen him stumble looking back.
> His fear is not behind him but beside him
> On either hand to make his course perhaps
> A crooked straightness yet no less a straightness.
> He runs face forward. He is a pursuer.
> He seeks a seeker who in his turn seeks
> Another still, lost far into the distance.
> Any who seek him seek in him the seeker.
> His life is a pursuit of a pursuit forever.
> It is the future that creates his present.
> All is an interminable chain of longing.[8]

Rationalizations so bare-faced as this cannot stand up under close scrutiny: the poem emphasizes the forwardness of the seeker's search, but the future, too, can be an escape from the present, particularly if the seeker is pursuing a dream. The future, Frost tells us, "creates" the present. Surely he was closer to describing human experience in

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[8]In the Clearing, p. 27.

"Carpe Diem," when he wrote:

> But bid life seize the present?
> It lives less in the present
> Than in the future always,
> And less in both together
> Than in the past. The present
> Is too much for the senses,
> Too crowding, too confusing--
> Too present to imagine.[9]

One suspects that for the writer of "Escapist--Never" the present was altogether too much and that he turned away from the crowding, confusing world of the senses to live in an unbounded dream world, a world that can be imagined. This poem signals a further step of what I have described above[10] as a tendency to flee the world of sense for a self-made fictive world. But in earlier poems such as "Take Something Like a Star," or "One Step Backward Taken," or "Time Out," the withdrawal from the present was always a relatively temporary step. In "Escapist--Never" there is a leap from the world of sense, where things are relative, into a metaphysical absolute--"All is an interminable chain of longing." Those who seek the seeker in Frost are dismayed to find so definite an answer.

One is also dismayed at the didacticism of "Accidentally on Purpose" in which Frost boldly asserts a "passionate preference" for the "light":

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[9] Complete Poems, p. 448.

[10] Chapters IV and V.

Grant me intention, purpose, and design--
That's near enough for me to the Divine.

And yet for all this help of head and brain
How happily instinctive we remain,
Our best guide upward further to the light,
Passionate preference such as love at sight.[11]

These two poems, "Escapist--Never" and "Accidentally on Purpose," indicate a reversal in Frost's attitude towards the mundane. In earlier poems it was Earth which he considered the right place for love. Now it is "light" that commands love.[12] The Frost who had "a lover's quarrel with the world,"[13] if one compares In the Clearing with A Witness Tree,[14] seems indeed to have died.

The Frost who wrote and compiled In the Clearing seems to have been an embittered and a fearful man. Though Frost speaks of fear in "Escapist--Never" as accompanying rather than motivating the seeker, one may wonder if the poem was motivated by a bitterness akin to fear. What little irony there is in the poem is a defensive rather than playful irony. In the penultimate piece In the Clearing, the irony is obvious again, but this time the ironic mask

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[11]In the Clearing, p. 34.

[12]"Birches," Complete Poems, p. 152; "Bond and Free," Complete Poems, p. 151.

[13]"The Lesson for Today," Complete Poems, p. 476.

[14]Chapter IV above.

is a coy smirk:

> It takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling
> To get adapted to my kind of fooling.[15]

The dismaying thing about this epigram is that it contains what was once a truth. Yet when it was true, Frost did not have to say it. The poems spoke for themselves.

Frost's quest for certainty, then, ends with an emphasis upon faith rather than knowledge. In this, too, Frost's poetic belief is circular: he began with a positive religious belief;[16] he ended, if not believing, at least trying to believe. But it was while moving through periods of doubt towards firm belief that Frost wrote his best poetry. His later poems such as the final poem of In the Clearing challenge the reader, but yield little even after a close reading. One leaves this particular poem uncertain about Frost's meaning, but also uncertain about the importance of discovering the meaning:

> In winter in the woods alone
> Against the trees I go.
> I mark a maple for my own
> And lay the maple low.
>
> At four o'clock I shoulder axe
> And in the afterglow
> I link a line of shadowy tracks
> Across the tinted snow.
>
> I see for Nature no defeat
> In one tree's overthrow
> Or for myself in my retreat
> For yet another blow.[17]

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[15] In the Clearing, p. 100.

[16] See above, Chapter I, pp. 2-3.

[17] In the Clearing, p. 101.

What does the speaker's "retreat" have to do with the rest of the poem? That word seems somewhat out of place, but it is an important word for it reveals how deeply concerned Frost was to clarify and to justify his philosophy and attack. The true irony of In the Clearing, though, lies in the fact that Frost anticipated his own weakness for speaking literally, for discoursing, long before he ever actually did so with much consistency. The poem "Revelation" of A Boy's Will describes the failings and motivations of In the Clearing:

> We make ourselves a place apart
> Behind light words that tease and flout,
> But oh, the agitated heart
> Till someone really find us out.
>
> 'Tis pity if the case require
> (Or so we say) that in the end
> We speak the literal to inspire
> The understanding of a friend.
>
> But so with all, from babes that play
> At hide-and-seek to God afar,
> So all who hide too well away
> Must speak and tell us where they are.[18]

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[18] Complete Poems, p. 27.

CONCLUSION

"I suppose there is no use in asking," Robert Frost wrote in 1935, "but I should think we might be indulged to the extent of having grievances restricted to prose if prose will accept the imposition, and leaving poetry free to go its way in tears."[1] This distinction between prose and poetry might well be used as a measuring stick for distinguishing between In the Clearing and the bulk of Frost's earlier work. Poems of the early and middle years (apart from a few editorials), went their way in tears, faced up to, and sometimes elbowed aside, problematic and disorderly aspects of life. The vitality which exuded from the poems of A Boy's Will, which matured and quickened its pace in North of Boston and Mountain Interval, and which flowed through West-running Brook, A Further Range, A Witness Tree, lingered in Steeple Bush and all but disappeared from In the Clearing. In these last two that vitality dissipated and the persona of many postures was crowded from the stage by a stodgy elder statesman of culture, capable of commanding an audience by dint of his longevity, and eager to speak, though he had little to say. Despite this late failure in self-assessment, though, Frost's poetic personality, from whom we infer his poetic vision, retained a number of distinguishable character traits.

He is first of all an intellectual. His intellectualism loses some of its flexibility (in In the Clearing) as Frost's vision

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[1]"Introduction to King Jasper," Selected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 62.

of life clarified, but it is the same intellect which was capable of sophisticated argumentation within the limitations of metered sentences. Earlier he had asked penetrating questions about man's position in relation to nature. Though man senses nature to be alien, how does he know it to be alien? If nature is alien, what distinguishes it from man? These are questions that Frost's poems ask and sometimes answer. Summed up briefly, Frost's theory of knowledge (a theory only in the sense that it is implicit in the poems) would be this: Man and nature make a dichotomy: man is capable of objectifying nature momentarily in the process of conceptualizing, but is tied to nature by virtue of his dependence upon it for sensory data which stimulate conceptualization.[2] This epistemology is basic to all the nature poems of Frost. There are, however, different kinds of conceptual experience, or different ways of perceiving, each of which has its own limitations. A purely empirical view of nature is limited by its lack of imagination,[3] and, a purely rational view, particularly when it provides a basis for action, can lead to a rigid, repressive structuring of the world.[4] On the other hand, a merely fanciful attitude is limited in that it is too unstable, too far removed from the empirical, to provide a

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[2]See above, Chapter I, pp. 6 ff.

[3]See my discussion of "Hyla Brook," pp. 15-17,above.

[4]See my discussion of "A Brook in the City," pp. 22-27, above.

basis for action.[5] In practical terms, though, the latter approach is delightful and necessary (in any event it is a human response and must, therefore, be recognized as a part of human experience): in that it is whimsical, it subverts the repressive logic of the purely rational and thereby provides a sense of freedom. Yet neither extreme alone is satisfactory, for each eschews the more profound emotions which color man's thinking. Imaginative perception escapes this limitation, for it allows man to see objectively at the same time as he sees wistfully.[6] (Essentially it is this duality of vision which constitutes Frost's irony: in "Hyla Brook," for example, the speaker knows very well that there is no brook at all, but because he loves the brook it exists in his memory.) Imaginative perception has another advantage--when it leads to an action, say the writing of a poem, the result is potentially permanent: the "momentary stay against confusion"[7] can be experienced again and again. An imaginative response to the confusion and chaos of the surrounding world leads to the creation of form, and for Frost it is "to be considered for how much more it is than

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[5]See my discussion of "A Boundless Moment," pp. 21-22, above.

[6]Frost may well have called this mode of apprehension "wit." See below p. 81.

[7]Frost's description of the impact of a poem; see "The Figure a Poem Makes," Complete Poems of Robert Frost, 1949 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston), p. vi.

nothing."[8]

To this celebration of man's intellect there is an important corollary. This is a desire for freedom, although this attitude, too, can only be inferred from the poems. In prose Frost expressed this attitude very succinctly: consider his discussion of scholarly and artistic knowledge in "The Figure a Poem Makes," his most widely known piece of prose:

> Scholars and artists thrown together are often annoyed at the puzzle of where they differ. Both work from knowledge; but I suspect they differ most importantly in the way their knowledge is come by. Scholars get theirs with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic; poets theirs cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books. They stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields. No acquirement is on assignment, or even self-assignment. Knowledge of the second kind is much more available in the wild free ways of wit and art.[9]

The "wild, free ways of wit and art" is what Frost opts for in most of his poems. In "Hyla Brook" it is those who "remember long" that can see a brook where no brook is; those who gather their knowledge "with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic" will perceive only the dried bed of the brook.[10] Similarly, it is the speaker's love of freedom that leads him to attack, in "A Brook in the City," the aggrandizement by city streets of the farmhouse

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[8] Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 419.

[9] Complete Poems, p. viii.

[10] See above, pp. 15-17.

and the concomitant repression and pollution of the brook.[11] It is because of a love of freedom that the mountain-climber of "Time Out" stubbornly resists commitment to a cause or sect and the subsequent involvement in "the hard and level stare/ Of enemies defied and battles fought."[12] Uncommitted, he can read and reflect at will. In "One Step Backward Taken" the speaker delights in his ability to step back into the brilliance of an intellectual world in order to avoid the dangers of a "world torn loose . . . ."[13] Not only his freedom, but his very survival depend upon his taking that step.

Associated with Frost's investigation of man and his mind is a tendency to see the world in terms of a metaphor, or rather, a simile, for Frost prefers the indirect comparison to the direct. Not that he eschews metaphor; "West-running Brook" metaphorically explains the universe as a brook rushing ever downward. In such a universe man stands like a little wave resisting, even countering, the flow of the brook. One of the delights of Frost's poetry, though, is that he does not persist in presenting the universe in any one particular way. He preferred to vary his metaphors, for he recognized that a metaphoric way of seeing, as much as man delights

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[11]See above, pp. 22-27.

[12]See above, pp. 53-55.

[13]See above, pp. 61-63.

in it, can never really provide any lasting answers:

> All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the beauty of it. It is touch and go with metaphor, and until you have lived with it long enough you don't know when it is going. You don't know how much you can get out of it and when it will cease to yield. It is a very living thing. It is life itself.[14]

It is in the realm of simile, or analogy, that Frost is at his best, and simile delighted him. Consider these statements from his "Introduction to King Jasper":

> And there is solid satisfaction in a sadness that is not just a fishing for ministration and consolation. Give us immedicable woes--woes that nothing can be done for--woes flat and final. And then to play. The play's the thing. Play's the thing. All virtue in "as if."[15]

Frost, at his most playful, and his most profound, sees the universe in an analogical way. John Lynen succinctly describes the mode of seeing:

> Obviously Frost's mode of personification is . . . explicit and consciously rendered. He does not merely liken things in nature to man, he explores the resemblance usually at some length. Analogy is the lens through which he examines nature, and personification, which is simply the analogy between man and a natural object, is therefore a primary means of seeing. Frost's preference for personification is indicative of his whole manner of conceiving nature, for such a mode of sustained comparison is only possible within the framework of a world view in which the natural and the human are conceived as distinct and separate yet parallel planes.[16]

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[14]"Education by Poetry," Selected Prose, p. 41.

[15]"Introduction to King Jasper," Selected Prose, p. 67.

[16]John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. 159-160.

It is when Frost works with these two planes that he writes his tightest lyrical poetry: he sets up microcosms in poems of this type, man in parallel with nature, and either ironically, sarcastically, or delicately, elaborates upon the differences or similarities between man and nature. Because the natural setting and natural phenomena play such an important role in these poetic worlds, it seems to the reader that the flash of insight, the epiphany, comes from nature itself, as if it were a teacher:

> I stole forth dimly in the dripping pause
> Between two downpours to see what there was.
> And a masked moon had spread down compass rays
> To a cone mountain in the midnight haze,
> As if the final estimate were hers,
> And as it measured in her calipers,
> The mountain stood exalted in its place.
> So love will take between the hands a face . . . .[17]

When Frost finally came to a clarified and simplified view of life, as he seems to have done in _In the Clearing_, the tension between man and nature disappears, and Frost lifts his eyes from nature to address the reader directly. The same ideas are evident in the late work, but they tend to be rhetorical rather than metaphorical. Consider the lines from "How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King When It's in You and in the Situation":

> "The reason artists show so little interest
> In public freedom is because the freedom
> They've come to feel the need of is a kind
> No one can give them--they can scarce attain--
> The freedom of their own material;
> So, never at a loss in simile,
> They can command the exact affinity
> Of anything they are confronted with.

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[17]"Moon Compasses," _Complete Poems_, p. 393.

This perfect moment of unbafflement,
When no man's name and no noun's adjective
But summons out of nowhere like a jinni.
We know not what we owe this moment to.
It may be wine, but much more likely love--
Possibly just well-being in the body,
Or respite from the thought of rivalry.
It's what my father must mean by departure,
Freedom to flash off into wild connections.
Once to have known it nothing else will do.
Our days pass awaiting its return."[18]

Frost flashed off into these "wild connections" in the seven volumes of lyric verse which precede *In the Clearing*, and it is these flashings of wit that charge his poems with life:

He thought he kept the universe alone;
For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his won
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response.
And nothing ever came of what he cried
Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
In the cliff's talus on the other side,
And then in the far distant water splashed,
But after a time allowed for it to swim,
Instead of proving human when it neared
And someone else additional to him,
As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
And landed pouring like a waterfall,
And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
And forced the underbrush--and that was all.[19]

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[18]*In the Clearing* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 83.

[19]"The Most of It," *Complete Poems*, p. 451.

Here Frost is at his best. He brings man and nature together, but offers no interpretation of the significance of that relationship. The sparsity of detail and the terseness of the poem's denouement heighten the drama of the encounter. No editorializing or discourse disrupts the dramatic tension: a man, seemingly alone, cries out and seems to get a response. That it is a significant response is suggested by the title, "The Most of It." But where does that leave man? With his desires unfulfilled, his understanding of experience severely circumscribed, can man find solace in an uncertain knowledge that he is not alone? Or is the response the gesture of a transcendent Originator? Neither question is answered, but both are elicited, even demanded, by the poem. This is Frost's forte; by exciting us to ask questions he cuts us off from our beliefs and leaves us to find our own meanings in the wild free ways of wit and art.

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