AMBIVALENCE IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

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AMBIVALENCE IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. AMBIGUITY: A CENTRAL ASPECT OF FROST'S POETRY</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. ESCAPE AND RETURN</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. ADVANCE AND RETREAT</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. ROMANTICISM AND REALISM</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. FAITH AND SKEPTICISM</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking features of Frost's poetry noted by critics who have surveyed the body of his work is that quality which has been variously described in such terms as contrariety, polarity, contradiction, or opposition and which is referred to in this study by the all-inclusive term ambivalence. Critics have responded to this quality in Frost with varying degrees of both sympathy and antipathy, the particular response depending, at least in part, on the temperamental bias that the critic, no matter how carefully he guards his objectivity, brings to his subject. Among those critics who deny to Frost a front rank position among the great poets of the century, especially those critics who eye with suspicion Frost's enormous popularity among the philistines, it seems to be those qualities related directly or indirectly to his ambivalence that are a chief target of critical comment. George Nitchie, in his study of values in Frost's poetry, objects to "convictions that reveal among other qualities a degree of incoherence, of incompleteness, even of evasiveness and wrongheadedness."\(^1\) Similarly, Ivor

Winters states that "the skepticism and uncertainty do not appear 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 way and having drifted with the various currents of his time." ² To Winters, "the poet is valuable, therefore, in proportion to his ability to apprehend certain kinds of objective truth; in proportion as he is great, he will not resemble ourselves but will resemble what we ought to be." ³

The more sympathetic critics, on the other hand, seem to understand that an intuitive intelligence such as Frost's makes up in imaginative insight what it lacks in analytical strength, and they do not expect Frost to meet a standard that he did not set for himself, a standard that, in any case, may not be relevant to poetry's chief function:

Granted that Frost's approach is indirect . . . Yet is not such indirection in the nature of all poetry? At its best poetry is always oblique because it is properly concerned with issues so difficult that they will not yield to the frontal assaults of logical argumentation. ⁴

The manner in which Frost's thought processes appeared to operate is not likely to be attractive to those who conceive of thought as progressing systematically from one


³Ibid., p. 60.

logically consistent premise and conclusion to another. Aristotelian logic was less naturally congenial to Frost's temperament than paradoxical logic, which perceives in contradictions, in pairs of opposites. The task of paradoxical logic, according to psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, is the achievement of Heraclitus' "conflicting harmony"\(^5\) rather than the construction of a systematic body of objective truth. Winters' criterion would seem, therefore, to be irrelevant when applied to Frost, for his artistic goal had never been the communication of the objective truth he had apprehended; indeed, it is unlikely that he would have used such a term. Frost never became permanently wedded to a systematic philosophy, nor to a particular complex of emotions or thoughts in response to stimuli. He did not wish to be completely understood, analyzed, and categorized, nor did he need to fit the marvelously puzzling diversity he found in the world into an all-inclusive, comprehensible pattern. To one questioning his diverse responses, he was likely to say, "It is well . . . to have all kinds of feelings, for it's all kinds of a world."\(^6\) And as he grew older, he grew less amenable than ever to the constrictions of systematic thought:

\(\text{\footnotesize I'm less and less for systems and system-building in my old age. I'm afraid of too much structure. Some violence is always done to the wisdom you build a philosophy}\)

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Thus Frost could assert that "no poet can have one and only one philosophy running through all his work. It's all a matter of mood." Yeats and Eliot may have to bear the embarrassment of being appraised as philosophers, for both attempted eventually to structure and operate poetically within self-imposed philosophical frameworks. Whether their intellects served them as well in matters theological and philosophical as they did in their imaginative flights is not relevant to this discussion, though certainly debatable. W. G. O'Donnell suggests that Frost's apparent simplicity, when contrasted to such poetic giants, has possibly been misleading:

Yeats and Eliot concern themselves (a trifle self-consciously) with the interesting question of their own development, and they go to elaborate lengths to document their various crises and conversions. W. H. Auden, though still this side of middle age, has had his periods delimited and his spiritual evolution charted. Robert Frost, however, has declined to furnish any obvious signposts by which one may read the progress of his inner changes. He has given the world the poetry itself—no notes, no extended prose essays directly analyzing himself and his art.

From the beginning the clarity of his verse has obscured the complexities of his development. His lucidity is such that he who runs may read:

Were there nothing in Frost below this superficial

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level, he would certainly have to be set down as a simple bard with a gift for versifying. Reuben Brower, one of Frost's most perceptive and appreciative critics, points out that the complexity in Frost arises in part by virtue of his refusal to maintain a single attitude, by his need to assume many roles. Indeed, it is this heightened ability to engage in a creative dialogue with himself that is considered by more than one critic to be one of Frost's chief assets:

The real poet, to echo Yeats again, is engaged in a quarrel with himself. . . . Something there is in him that does not love a pure, simple, extroverted affirmation, and the special character of his work arises from his resisting the temptation to betray his own nature.

The critic exaggerates to make a point, for it was the pure, simple affirmation that Frost could make; he was allergic; however, to what Hemingway called the big herd words, concepts whose meanings tend to evaporate as they move out of the realm of personal experience into the impersonality of abstraction. If there is affirmation, there is also negation; both experiences were necessary for the attainment of conflicting harmony.

Isaacs chooses "centrist" as the most appropriate term to apply to Frost's approach to life:

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In an address called "Opposites" which he gave at a testimonial dinner on his twenty-fifth anniversary as a published poet, he concluded that the world is full of opposites: not good versus bad, but qualities that are all so good that they destroy each other if they can. Frost was also troubled by the good versus bad antithesis, as Lawrance Thompson points out, but he was too intelligent not to understand that so commingled are these elements that few conflicts could ever be reduced to so simple an equation. The pull of opposites which he experienced was far more complex, for he saw beyond the apparent conflict between good and bad, and he accepted "the incongruities of experience that make for divided feelings." Sidney Cox, an early protégé of Frost's who remained a lifelong friend and admirer until his untimely death, gives strong emphasis to the significance of opposite pulls in Frost's poetry. He speaks of Frost's unique ability "to ride the horns of a dilemma, reconciling incompatible possibilities beyond conflict." Indeed, Cox had every reason to assume that this kind of unity was Frost's personal goal, for in a letter to Cox in which he chides the younger man for limiting himself to the techniques of debate and controversy in his efforts to stimulate his students, the poet says:

Clash is all very well for coming lawyers politicians

\[11\] Isaacs, p. 33.
\[12\] Ibid., p. 99.
and theologians. But I should think there must be a whole realm or plane above that—all sight and insight, perception, intuition, rapture. Narrative is a fearfully safe place to spend your time. Having ideas that are neither pro nor con is the happy thing. Get up there high enough and the differences that make controversy become only the two legs of a body the weight of which is on one in one period, on the other in the next. . . . I have wanted to find ways to transcend the strife-method. I have found some. Mind you I'd fight a healthy amount. This is no pacifism. It is not so much anti-conflict as it is something beyond conflict—such as poetry and religion that is not just theological dialectic.  

Let it not be supposed that the achievement of this kind of reconciliation was easy, however. If Cox tends to minimize the struggle involved for Frost in keeping his mental equilibrium during this precarious balancing act, he does understand and strongly emphasize the fact that Frost had the special kind of mind that is a necessary precondition for the attainment of "transient unity." As noted previously, the mind must be open to paradox and incongruity. One who has such a mind possesses, like Frost, the continuing ability "to keep the door open for the other side of the truth." The transient unity thus achieved goes far deeper than the surface integration achieved by most people, for there has been a vivid inner experience at more than one point on the spectrum of emotional and intellectual response. Such an

14 Thompson, pp. 324-325.
15 Sidney Cox, p. 64.
16 Ibid., p. 16.
explorer understands more areas of experience than most writers do, for he has travelled there. Those critics who rebel against Frost's open-door policy are likely to miss, or dismiss, in Frost's poetry that undercurrent which Cox refers to as "the fidelity of the poem to all the unstated incompatibles."  

But the resultant "centrist" quality that is the natural consequence of this process is considered by some critics to be a weakness. Malcolm Cowley, for example, objects less to Frost's lack of convictions than to his narrowness of concern, his refusal to explore poetically either the heights or depths of inner experience:

And Frost does not strive toward greater depth to compensate for what he lacks in breadth; he does not strike far inward into the wilderness of human nature . . . he sets limits on the exploration of himself, as he sets them on almost every other human activity; here again he displays the sense of measure and decorum that puts him in the classical, or rather the neo-classical, tradition. . . . Frost, even in his finest lyrics, is content to stop outside the woods, either in the thrush-haunted dusk or on a snowy evening.  

That Frost, indeed, had more than once entered the woods, that he had suffered no little pain exploring his uncharted inner regions is made clear in Lawrance Thompson's impressive, recently published biography of Frost's early years.

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17 Ibid., p. 17.

The centrist-quality in Frost would seem to have been prompted not so much by the poet's heeding the classical prescription to avoid extremes as by his having had only too vivid an experience of the extremes within himself. But art was not a release for Frost, as it was, perhaps, for Faulkner (whom Cowley incidentally greatly admires). Poetry, for Frost, did not serve as an emotional cathartic; it served, rather, as a "momentary stay against confusion" which was achieved through the imposition of form and the discipline of self-imposed limitations. Thompson's description of a fundamental pattern that emerges in Frost's work throws further light on the matter:

In this pattern there is the subtle suggestion that for Frost the central problem of his life--artistic non-artistic--was to find orderly ways of dealing with dangerous conflicts he found operative within himself and between himself and others. It was part of his delight to discover many different processes for dealing with these conflicts; but he liked to give his lyrics a surface effect of playful ease and serenity even when some of them dramatized his deepest uneasiness . . . he used his poems as either tools or as weapons for actually trying to bring under control and resolve those conflicts which he viewed as being so dangerous that they might otherwise engulf and destroy him.20

Thus, whether viewed as an asset or as a serious flaw, the kind of depth and power that Cowley finds lacking in Frost's work lies buried beneath its surface.

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Thompson painstakingly charts the progress of Frost's growth during his early years, placing particular emphasis on certain major inner conflicts that plagued Frost and were expressed in his poetry. He stresses the importance of certain early environmental influences in the development of some of Frost's characteristic modes of thinking. For example, he suggests a possible early source of Frost's fondness for antithesis in his description of the Bible stories told to Frost and his sister as small children:

Mrs. Frost made the stories illustrate moral truths which also involved pairs of opposites—evil and good, chaos and order, darkness and light—until Robbie developed a habit of thinking in terms of paired images. Throughout his life, he was inclined to build his thinking and even his poetry around these pairs.21

Thompson points out repeatedly that the opposite pulls Frost experienced gave rise to conflict. At one crucial point in his life, after a particularly disillusioning experience, Frost's awareness of his double vision disturbed him almost to the point of a nervous breakdown:

How could he have confidence in anyone or anything, including his own powers of perception? Almost hysterically he felt that his eyes now gave him a double image of everything; and he was not sure whether it would be better to laugh or cry over his predicament, whether all experience should be viewed as pure comedy or pure tragedy.22

Strong inner contradictions are not amenable to the constriction of any tight mental or emotional enclosure, and Frost's

21 Ibid., p. 20.
22 Ibid., p. 191.
search, accordingly, had to be aimed toward a freer sort of approach. All that he really needed was a respectable premise to use as his jumping-off place, and he found help toward what he was seeking from William James:

Like James, Frost wanted to be "pluralistic" in the sense that he could combine naturalism and idealism, physics and metaphysics, skepticism and mysticism. It was a feat which he managed to maintain throughout the rest of his life, although the consequent fluctuations between these extremes produced some inconsistencies which puzzled him almost as much as they puzzled the intimate members of his family, and eventually, some of his readers.23

Years later Frost made some comments in his personal notebook that give eloquent testimony regarding his continuing awareness of the importance of this attitude in his life and work:

Life is that which can mix oil and water (Emulsion). I can consist of the inconsistent. I can hold in unity the ultimate irreconcilable spirit and matter, good and evil, monism (cohesion) and dualism (reaction), peace and strife. It o'er rules the harsh divorce that parts things natural and divine. Life is something that rides steadily on something else that passes away as light on a gush of water . . . . All a man's art is a bursting unity of opposites.24

If ambivalence is not a universally experienced phenomenon, it is due perhaps to the limitations more than to the soundness of the average man's psychic processes, for it is the heightened ability to engage in a creative dialogue with oneself, as opposed to the endless monologue which occupies

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23Ibid., p. 246.
24Ibid., p. 427.
the average man's conscious thought processes, that characterizes the superior man. The average person in our society, for some reason, seems to restrict his imaginative life and to repress his ambivalences. Yet the ability to visualize and even to imaginatively experience alternatives to one's modes of thinking, feeling, or behaving in response to life is a necessary precondition for real inner growth, rather than mere adjustment, to take place. Thompson tends to emphasize the damaging, rather than the constructive, effect that this dialogue often had on Frost's finely tuned sensibilities. And it would, indeed, seem to have been destructive insofar as it contained elements of self-delusion. Thompson presents convincing evidence to support his conviction that Frost's central inner conflict involved considerable self-deceit, suggesting that his early immersion in concepts of heroic idealism caused him all too often to distort his self-image by endowing it with "mythic values." The gifted, like anyone else, are subject to the inexorable operation of psychic laws, and to the extent that Frost's conflicts and ambivalences were neurotic, they were thereby emotionally crippling. Nevertheless, there remained the larger area of conscious ambivalence in which the oppositions, antitheses, paradoxes, and ambiguities of life were experienced in their puzzling, painful actuality and needed to be resolved on the basis of reality. That many of them were gradually resolved did not mean, however, that the antithetical possibility
ceased to exist. In this state of conflicting harmony the road not taken remained an ever-present, imaginatively experienced alternative.

In the chapters which follow an attempt will be made to demonstrate the existence and significance of some of the opposite pulls evidenced in Frost's poetry and to delineate some of the important areas in which they occur.
CHAPTER II

AMBIVALENCE: A CENTRAL ASPECT OF
FROST'S POETRY

Frost's poetry contains not only explicit statements of his consciousness of the ambivalent feelings and attitudes that were so central a part of his own experience, but also expressions of his awareness of some of the contrary pulls which seemed to be universally common to human experience. An examination of some of these important poetic statements might usefully be preceded, however, by a brief discussion of Frost's preoccupation with the possible dualistic nature of the universe itself. Though he was suspicious of philosophical, moral, and intellectual systems-builders, his concern with the basic premises upon which theories about the nature of reality have been constructed is evidenced by certain poems in which he touches upon the age-old philosophical controversy of mind versus matter. The tentative conclusions to which this preoccupation eventually led him will be discussed in greater depth in a later chapter; at this point it will be most instructive to simply provide evidence of its existence and to point out some of the ways in which Frost gave poetic substance to the concepts involved.

In a late poem entitled "All Revelation," for instance, Frost assumes that a question concerning the dual nature of
reality has been posed, and he suggests that matter was invaded at some point by mind and was thereby given life and illumination:

A head thrusts in as for the view,
But where it is it thrusts in from
Or what it is it thrusts into
By that Cyb'laean avenue,
And what can of its coming come.

And whither it will be withdrawn,
And what take hence or leave behind,
These things the mind has pondered on
A moment and still asking gone.
Strange apparition of the mind!

But the impervious geode
Was entered, and its inner crust
Of crystals with a ray cathode
At every point and facet glowed
In answer to the mental thrust.

Eyes seeking the response of eyes
Bring out the stars, bring out the flowers,
Thus concentrating earth and skies
So none need be afraid of size.
All revelation has been ours.¹

In two poems written even later in his career, Frost particularizes the possible effects of this union of opposites, assuming not only the superior force of mind over matter, but asserting also its prior separate existence. It is the mind in matter that predetermined its ultimate nature and embedded in matter its proclivity for dualisms:

There was never naught,
There was always thought.
But when noticed first
It was fairly burst
Into having weight.
It was in a state

¹Complete Poems, p. 444.
Of atomic one.
Matter was begun—
And yet complete,
One and yet discrete
To conflict and pair.²

Translating the invasion of mind into matter into religious terms, Frost then refers to the consequent dual nature built into man:

Spirit enters flesh
And for all it's worth
Charges into earth
In birth after birth
Ever fresh and fresh.
We may take the view
That its derring-do
Thought of in the large
Was one mighty charge
On our human part
Of the soul's ethereal
Into the material.
In a running start
On a certain slab
Of (we'll say) basalt
In or near Moab
With intent to vault
In a vaulting match,
Never mind with whom—
(No one, I presume,
But ourselves—mankind,
In a love and hate
Rivalry combined.)³

Thus the mind embedded in nature finds its conscious expression in man. But man seeks assurance that he is not alone; he seeks release from his subjectivity. The answer given to his plea is not that which he seeks, however, but a glimpse of reality in its most powerful, natural, and

³"Kitty Hawk," ibid., p. 50.
inhuman form.

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.

Frost seems to be attempting to show the awesome power of the repressed side of man's nature. Is he, indeed, asserting the superior power of mindless matter, or is he simply warning of the futility of seeking a mind in the universe that will signal its all-loving, all-knowing presence? In any case, the tension generated by the opposition of a contrary, unexpected response is striking.

Perhaps the duality which Frost found inherent in the nature of reality helps to explain his seemingly instinctive fondness for contrasts, polarities, ambiguities, and paired concepts and images in his poetry.\(^4\) Antithesis, either stated or implied, provides the framework for the poetic statement in poem after poem.

In "Bond and Free," he makes a clear distinction between love and thought, designating to each its separate domain:


\(^5\)Also noteworthy in this regard is Frost's frequent use of poetic devices designed to subtly emphasize contrasts; he made abundant use of irony, making the tone of a poem contradict its words, and he evolved a technique whereby he captured the cadence, tone, and diction of informal speech (the "sound of sense") within the self-imposed limitation of a usually regular meter.
On snow and sand and turf, I see
Where Love has left a printed trace
With straining in the world's embrace.
And such is Love and glad to be.
But Thought has shaken his ankles free.

Thought cleaves the interstellar gloom
And sits in Sirius' disc all night,
Till day makes him retrace his flight,
With smell of burning on every plume,
Back past the sun to an earthly room.6

The poem seems to provide the philosophical framework for distinctions made elsewhere in Frost's poetry. In "Birches," for instance, he says, "earth's the right place for love:/ I don't know where it's likely to go better,"7 implying that interstellar spaces are probably not hospitable to the heart's yearnings. In another context he again points out the bond-free dichotomy, warning that "the mind--is not the heart."8 The eclogue, "Death of the Hired Man," dramatizes the contrast between the masculine mind principle and the feminine heart principle as both are alternately, and sympathetically, given expression through the personalities of Warren and Mary.

In "Two Leading Lights," Frost whimsically polarizes the sun and the moon, questioning their respective affinities for day and night. He avoids the obvious cliché by pointing out the paradoxical implications of their behavior, observing

6Complete Poems, p. 151.
7Ibid., p. 153.
that neither acts in accordance with the dictates of its relative status in the solar system. The masculine sun, who is the supreme energizing power of our world, confines his radiance to daylight hours, though he "... could in one burst overwhelm/ And dayify the darkest realm/ By right of eminent domain." The moon, to which Frost gives feminine personification, is less restrained:

The Moon for all her light and grace
Has never learned to know her place.
The notedest astronomers
Have set the dark aside for hers.
But there are many nights though clear
She doesn't bother to appear.
Some lunatic or lunar whim
Will bring her out diminished dim
To set herself beside the Sun
As Sheba came to Solomon.
It may be charitably guessed
Comparison is not her quest.
Some rumor of his wishing ring
That changes winter into spring
Has brought her merely visiting,
An irresponsible divinity
Presuming on her femininity. ⁹

In the poem entitled "In Time of Cloudburst," the idea of endlessness and repetition occurs. The impact of a violent rain upon his thirsty farm brings in the wake of its bounty the possibility of "future harm." Yet the poet realizes that even when his "garden has gone down ditch," nature's endless capacity for change bodes well for the emergence of a similar capacity in man. The polar images emphasize the extreme contrasts Frost finds inherent in natural processes:

⁹Ibid., p. 550.
Some force has but to apply,  
And summits shall be immersed,  
The bottom of seas raised dry--  
The slope of the earth reversed.

Then all I need do is run  
To the other end of the slope,  
And on tracts laid new to the sun,  
Begin all over to hope.

Some worn old tool of my own  
Will be turned up by the plow,  
The wood of it changed to stone,  
But as ready to wield as now.

May my application so close  
To so endless a repetition  
Not make me tired and morose,  
And resentful of man's condition.  

In the minor poem, "To a Thinker," he again describes the world process as a kind of Heraclitan flux, and he sees within this constant ebb and flow nature's fondness for antithesis:

From force to matter and back to force,  
From form to content and back to form,  
From norm to crazy and back to norm,  
From bound to free and back to bound,  
From sound to sense and back to sound.  
So back and forth. It almost scares  
A man the way things come in pairs.  

And indeed, Frost's special use of familiar, antithetically paired images in his flawless, laconic little poem "Fire and Ice" is almost enough to scare a man:

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire

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10 Ibid., p. 369.  
11 Ibid., p. 431.
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if I had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice. 12

He contrasts the unsatisfied passion of burning desire (with its further connotative suggestion of hell-fire) to the destructive kind of hate that is cold, indifferent, and insensitive. To Frost, the kind of love for person, object, or idea that is perverted to fanatic self-will is as destructive as its opposite. Clearly, the principles in Frost's brand of dualism, the dualism that man finds locked in his own nature, are not necessarily mutually antagonistic; in this poem the antithesis is not between good and evil, nor is it between opposing goods; it is between opposing evils. Frost, the "centrist," here seems to warn of the destructive power of extremes.

Again and again Frost's poetry contains implicit admonitions about the danger of assigning neat moral labels to the contrary pulls in human nature. Agonizingly aware of his own conflicts, he recognized that man's duality is far more complex than the preachments of moralists would suggest and that even the most commonly prescribed redeeming emotion is not always what it seems:

You know how cunningly mankind is planned:
We have one loving and one hating hand.

12Ibid., p. 268.
The loving's made to hold each other like,  
While with the hating other hand we strike.  

Though good can be put to the service of evil, it is also true, says Frost, that "evil tendencies cancel." In a poem thus entitled, images supplied by his observation of nature seem to suggest to the poet that the effect of one destructive element upon another can be the catalyst for new growth. Nothing in nature is static, and man's short-range view of reality precludes his ability to infallibly appraise and categorize events:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Will the blight end the chestnut?} \\
\text{The farmers rather guess not.} \\
\text{It keeps smoldering at the roots} \\
\text{And sending up new shoots} \\
\text{Till another parasite} \\
\text{Shall come to end the blight.}
\end{align*}
\]

"The most notable of the poems which give personal expression to Frost's consciousness of the ambivalence that was so central a part of his subjective experience is the familiar "The Road Not Taken." The first stanza describes the traveler's dilemma, using the least oblique metaphor imaginable in yet such a way that, in typical Frost fashion, it escapes triteness:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,} \\
\text{And sorry I could not travel both} \\
\text{And be one traveler, long I stood} \\
\text{And looked down one as far as I could}
\end{align*}
\]

\[13\text{"The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus," ibid., p. 512.}\]
\[14\text{Ibid., p. 407.}\]
To where it bent in the undergrowth; . . .

Eventually this dilemma, like many others that Frost faced during his long lifetime, was resolved; the unlikely prospect that the way of the poet would converge with the way of the world became a reality. Yet, long before this happy convergence, the traveler in the poem, considering his choice as it might seem to him in retrospect, characteristically avoids defining the alternatives in simplistic terms of right and wrong; he says only that this traveler's way was the lonelier route, "because it was grassy and wanted wear." In a much later poem, Frost defines the conflict between two people in similar, though more explicit, terms, suggesting his continuing conviction of the complex nature of much human conflict, within and between persons:

But even where thus opposing interests kill,
They are to be thought of as opposing goods
Oftener than as conflicting good and ill. 16

In "The Road Not Taken," Frost insists upon pointing out the ambivalence involved in even so innocuous an inner conflict as the choice between alternatives which, from one person's limited perspective at least, appear equally attractive. The complicating element arises from the poet's acute realization of the fateful nature of such choices, his foreknowledge of the momentum gathered by subsequent, necessarily consequent

15 Ibid., p. 131.
16 "To a Young Wretch," Ibid., p. 470.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence.
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.  

In one of his pseudo-comic, ironic poems entitled "The Bear," Frost shifts to a consideration of intellectual ambivalence, describing the actual mental state of those who pretend to "know." He first describes the freedom of the uncaged bear, who, paradoxically, even in an industrial age, still has more freedom of operation, or at least more illusion of freedom, than does modern man, whom Frost compares to a caged bear. The ambivalent posturing of the caged bear, philosophizing and abstracting, is unmistakable:

He paces back and forth and never rests
The toe-nail click and shuffle of his feet,
The telescope at one end of his beat,
And at the other end the microscope,
Two instruments of nearly equal hope,
And in conjunction giving quite a spread.
Or if he rests from scientific tread
'Tis only to sit back and sway his head
Through ninety odd degrees of arc, it seems,
Between two metaphysical extremes.

At one extreme agreeing with one Greek,
At the other agreeing with another Greek
Which may be thought, but only so to speak.

Even though Frost's temperament forbade his structuring any sort of explicit, rigid, intellectual or philosophical framework to explain the incomprehensible, he did piece

17 Ibid., p. 131.
18 Ibid., pp. 347-348.
together an interpretation of his world that was compatible with the forces he found within himself. In "A Star in a Stone Boat," for example, Frost seems to be describing more than merely the physical nature of the star, an image evolved from a fallen meteor he has been examining, when he compares it with the earth. In the final stanzas of the poem, after assuring the reader that the star is not to be compared "to such resorts of life as Mars and Earth," he describes the way in which, nevertheless, the star in question does resemble the earth-world he has experienced, a planet whose physical nature insists upon all varieties of unpredictable, inexplicable pulls and thrusts between its polar extremes:

Though not, I say, a star of death and sin
It yet has poles, and only needs a spin
To show its worldly nature and begin

To chafe and shuffle in my calloused palm
And run off in strange tangents with my arm
As fish do with the line in first alarm.

Such as it is, it promises the prize
Of the one world complete in any size
That I am like to compass, fool or wise.  

In "West Running Brook," the dramatic dialogue between man and wife as they view a stream running in a contrary direction to other streams in the region, Frost broadens his purview; he offers an expanded view of universal life processes. Frost's development of the stream image seems to suggest that he sees the world as a vast entropic process

\[^{19}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 215.}\]
and that he sees man's life as a microcosmic sample of the process. Once again, the concept of flux is introduced, but this time Frost's view of universal life processes suggests a strange confluence of Arnold's stream of life struggling to express itself and the second law of thermodynamics. The aspect of the process which gives it meaning is the opposition of part of the stream to itself, the pull of the antithetical. Frost seems to imply that man needs the counterthrust to provide the energy, that is, to create the tension necessary for a fully human response to life:

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 us. 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. 20

Frost's biographers confirm that which this poem, especially, reveals about his life. During much of his lifetime, his life moved, like the flow of his beloved stream, in a direction contrary to that of most of his contemporaries. He endured, particularly during this long period of contrariety, the pain generated by his own periodic, frightening lack of resistance to the urge to fill the abyss' void with emptiness, and he endured, also, the confusion created by the continuing inner dialogue which was never completely silenced and which forced him to struggle against himself. The chapters following will attempt to demonstrate, through a study of representative poems, some of the significant ways in which Frost ran counter to himself.

20 Ibid., pp. 328-329.
CHAPTER III

ESCAPE AND RETURN

Perhaps the most extreme, and the most obvious, example of ambivalent attitudes in Frost's work can be found in the contrast between those poems which are anguished expressions of the deep loneliness, dejection, and disenchantment with life and those poems which are spontaneous expressions of his earth-love and his almost pantheistic affirmation of the natural world. An examination of representative poems illustrating this key contrast may help in understanding those poems which directly express Frost's ambivalent attitudes toward escape.

Strains of the severe melancholia which engulfed Frost at intervals throughout his life and which doubtless in his early years summoned to consciousness his urge to escape appear in such moving poems as "Acquainted with the Night," "Desert Places," and "Bereft." In the first poem, the poet conveys his dark mood by describing himself as a lonely wanderer along dark, wet, city streets late at night. Frost's penchant for dramatic understatement, particularly where his own feelings were concerned, heightens rather than diminishes the emotional impact of the poem. Clearly, he feels a strong sense of separation from life; he is aware, also, that this
mood is no mere transitory spell of dejection engendered by some conscious negation or discouragement which will soon enough disappear. His immersion in despondency is tragic and total:

I have been one acquainted with the night.  
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.  
I have outwalked the furthest city light.  

I have looked down the saddest city lane.  
I have passed by the watchman on his beat  
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.  

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet  
When far away an interrupted cry  
Came over houses from another street,  

But not to call me back or say good-by;  
And further still at an unearthly height,  
One luminary clock against the sky  

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.  
I have been one acquainted with the night.  

In "Desert Places," the poet is passing a field which is being completely covered by falling snow. He does not need to contemplate the heavens to realize his own insignificance and emotional emptiness; the oncoming nothingness, the life-destroying quality suggested by the falling snow and by the implied contrasting image of empty, blistering sand, symbolizes his own sense of himself and perhaps further symbolizes his preoccupation with his own sense of ever-impending death. He speaks of his loneliness:

And lonely as it is that loneliness  
Will be more lonely ere it will be less--

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1Ibid., p. 324.
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.  

Again, in "Bereft," Frost conveys his deep sense of loneliness. The sinister tone of the coiling leaves suggest to the poet that his secret is known:

Word I was in the house alone
Somehow must have gotten abroad,
Word I was in my life alone,
Word I had no one left but God.  

An early, unpublished poem entitled "Despair," written during one of Frost's deepest plunges into hopelessness, reveals the anguish suffered by one who imagines that not only has he sunk to the depths of existence, but also that he has dragged down with him one undeserving of such a fate. Nowhere in Frost's published work is the cry of anguish so explicit; nowhere is the desperate urge to escape so terrifyingly implied:

I am like a dead diver after all's
Done, still held fast in the weed's snare below,
Where in the gloom his limbs begin to glow
Swaying at his moorings as the roiled bottom falls.
There was a moment when with vainest calls
He drank the water, saying, "Oh, let me go—
God, let me go!"—for then he could not know
As in the sun's warm light on earth and walls.

I am like a dead diver in this place.
I was alive here too one desperate space,

\[2\] Ibid., p. 386.
\[3\] Ibid., p. 317.
And near prayer in the one whom I invoked.
I tore the muscles from my limbs and choked.
My sudden struggle may have dragged down some
White lily from the air—and now the fishes come.  

In most of the poems avowing the urge to escape, however, the poetic statement, though perhaps more explicit, is muted somewhat by Frost's recurring use of the nature images of trees and woods, suggesting a speculative flirting with the mysterious and the unknown rather than a Freudian wish. He provides the clue to the serious nature of his flirtation when he says in a much later poem, "leaves are all my darker mood." In the first two stanzas of an early poem entitled "Into My Own," however, the ominous note is heard:

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,
But stretched away unto the edge of doom.

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

In "The Sound of Trees," the urge is no less intense, but the statement is made in the lighter tone that is more characteristic of the popular Frost. The listening poet imagines that the trees are forever talking of going but never get away. He makes his counter-assertion boldly, though with perhaps a touch of irony directed at himself.

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4 Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, p. 267.
5 "Leaves Compared with Flowers," Complete Poems, p. 387.
6 Ibid., p. 4.
Is he really so different from that "that talks no less for knowing,/ As it grows wiser and older,/ That now it means to stay"? He would like to think so.

I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice
Some day when they are in voice
And tossing so as to scare
The white clouds over them on.
I shall have less to say,
But I shall be gone.

In "After Apple Picking," the poet, spellbound by "a pane of glass/... skimmed... from the drinking trough," dreams of his abundant harvest and its attendant waste and wonders whether he is drifting into an unnatural sleep:

For I have had too much
Of apple picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe it coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

Frost might well have foundered at some anguished point in his early career in the murky waters of his "Despair," driven by his inner conflicts to a desperate final act of escape, were it not for his enormous capacity for loving

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7 Ibid., p. 195.
8 Ibid., pp. 88-89.
His poetic perception of the actual and his pure delight in concrete natural objects are revealed in countless lyrics. In the early lyric entitled "Mowing," as the poet cuts the long grass, he imagines that his scythe is whispering to him. It is not engaged in sentimental dreaming "of the gift of idle hours,/ Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:" knowing and approving the poet's "earnest love" for his physical task, it speaks the truth:

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.  

In "A Prayer in Spring," the poet infers that God's wish is simply that man be happy in his world and that he affirm God's love with his own affirmation. "October" expresses the poet's wish that the ripe beauty of fall linger not only for his sake, but also that it be "Slow, slow!/ For the grape's sake, . . . Whose clustered fruit must else be lost--." The beautiful lyric, "Rose Pogonias," expresses a feeling of sanctity, notwithstanding the pagan metaphor, in the presence of such beauty:

A saturated meadow
   Sun-shaped and jewel-small,
A circle scarcely wider
   Than the trees around were tall;
Where winds were quite excluded,
   And the air was stifling sweet
With the breath of many flowers,--
   A temple of the heat.

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9 Ibid., p. 25.
10 Ibid., p. 40.
There we bowed us in the burning,
    As the sun's right worship is,
To pick where none could miss them
    A thousand orchises;
For though the grass was scattered,
    Yet every second spear
Seemed tipped with wings of color,
    That tinged the atmosphere.

We raised a simple prayer
    Before we left the spot,
That in the general mowing
    That place might be forgot;
Or if not all so favored,
    Obtain such grace of hours,
That none should mow the grass there
    While so confused with flowers.\textsuperscript{11}

Frost's beloved west-running brook is the subject of yet another beautiful poem, "Hyla Brook," in which the poet sings his unsentimental praise of the actual:

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 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.\textsuperscript{12}

The ambivalent moods, the contrary pulls revealed in all of the foregoing poems when they are contrasted with each other, are occasionally unified into a single poetic statement in which the urge to escape is either resisted, denied,

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 19.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 149.
or allowed only temporary indulgence. In the familiar "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," the driver of the sleigh, mesmerized by the sight of the woods filling up with snow, resists its magnetism and heeds his little horse's signal for a return to reality.

In another familiar poem, "Birches," Frost's ambivalent attitude toward his hold on the planet is unmistakable. The poet remembers his moods of despondency and is prompted to think once again of escape. The image of the birch tree serves as both the lure and the vehicle of his imaginative escape skyward. In another context Frost reveals the symbolic value he gives to the tree and sky images: "the absolute flight and rest/ The universal blue/ And local green suggest." But this time the flight from life is meant to give only temporary respite; he now knows that he can bear life's lacerations.

It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.

That would be good both going and coming back. One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.14

In a late poem entitled "Come In," the poet has little difficulty in resisting firmly the lure of the woods. Indeed, he is not even certain that he experienced its familiar pull:

As I came to the edge of the woods,
Thrush music--hark!
Now if it was dusk outside,
Inside it was dark.

Too dark in the woods for a bird
By sleight of wing
To better its perch for the night,
Though it still could sing.

The last of the light of the sun
That had died in the west
Still lived for one song more
In a thrush's breast.

Far in the pillared dark
Thrush music went--
Almost like a call to come in
To the dark and lament.

But no, I was out for stars:
I would not come in.
I meant not even if asked,
And I hadn't been.15

He places stars in antithesis to woods, implying that stars symbolize something glorious that can be won, in his case, only by resisting the urge to escape. The propulsion toward the fulfillment of his own heroic ideals and the lure of genuine achievement proved stronger than the urge toward

14 Ibid., p. 153.
15 Ibid., p. 446.
anything but temporary escape. Perhaps, to Frost, the stars blinked their insistence that he pursue the destiny they symbolized. Frost once told his friend Edward Thomas, who suffered depressions similar to those that he had endured and was by this time beginning to conquer, that "anyone could survive if he possessed an intuitive desire to accomplish one particular thing."\(^{16}\) Perhaps Frost's intensive search for stars was the strongest counterforce in his overcoming the will to fail and to escape responsibility that was so compelling a force in his nature. Thompson states that after Frost returned from England, he "could look back with enough perspective to see how his early lyrics represented his having been scared away from life--his having been scared almost completely out of life through suicidal temptations--and his having gradually found thought-felt justification for returning to assert so many different kinds of love and cherishing."\(^{17}\)

Paradoxically, those who have most to relinquish in leaving life often fear death least. As Frost ripened into the maturity of old age, he seems to have reached a state of friendly, yet armed, truce with the idea of escape through death. Though he never reached complete reconciliation, he could, ironically or playfully, entertain the idea in his

\(^{16}\) Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, p. 477.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 396.
poetic imagination. In "Away," for example, the tone is light; the grim reaper will not summon him. Instead Frost playfully says:

    Unless I'm wrong
    I but obey
    The urge of a song:
    I'm--bound--away!

    And I may return
    If dissatisfied
    With what I learn
    From having died. 18

In "Escapist--Never," another of Frost's very late poems, his view of himself is again altered. He disclaims having ever run from anything:

    He is no fugitive--escaped, escaping.
    No one has seen him stumble looking back.
    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. 19

He claims that he always ran toward, never away. His earlier poetry, of course, refutes this claim, but perhaps it is safe to say that all who refuse to escape from life, whatever form their temptation to escape takes, must become, like Frost, seekers in pursuit of a pursuit, part of an interminable chain of longing.

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18 In the Clearing, p. 15.
19 Ibid., p. 27.
CHAPTER IV

ADVANCE AND RETREAT

Frost refused the invitation to escape from life which had been offered as a persuasive solution to his conscious and unconscious conflicts, but he did accept, at times, the invitation to retreat from the world of human society and its demands. Though he never totally committed himself in his poetry to a defense of retreat as an honorable solution to the problems of social living, his own compelling need for withdrawal can be deduced from those poems in which he seems to explain, question, or justify this response. On the other hand, Frost did occasionally wholeheartedly affirm the value of human fellowship. Thus, his backing off from the world could not be rationalized by the sentimental cynicisms of the misanthrope, though in his later years Frost did take refuge in certain philosophical and social views which gave logical consistency to his earlier statements and actions. Clearly, he was troubled by ambivalent attitudes toward the ever-impinging, imperfect social world that he both affirmed and negated.

In "The Tuft of Flowers," for example, Frost expresses this ambivalence by describing an experience in which an intense awareness of the inevitable aloneness of human
beings, "whether they work together or apart," is transcended by the poet's discovery of a small tuft of flowers that the mower who preceded him has spared in the cutting. Realizing that he has come upon evidence of an anonymous kindred spirit, he acknowledges the deeper truth that "men work together, . . . ./ Whether they work together or apart."¹ In the simple poem "A Time To Talk," the farmer signifies his readiness to respond to the demands of human fellowship by putting aside his hoe and going up to the stone wall for a friendly chat with a neighbor, the same stone wall that had given rise to an earlier response in a similar vein when he had reacted to his neighbor's repeated atavistic slogan, "good fences make good neighbors," by pondering his own contrary, bemused assertion that "something there is that doesn't love a wall." He had recognized the pointlessness of being enclosed for its own sake:

Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.²

Thus, when Frost chose to erect his own symbolic wall, when he chose to retreat from the demands of human society and assert his individual freedom, he was unable to ignore the pressing question that he, himself, had raised. In "Love and

¹Complete Poems, p. 32.
a Question" the self-questioning is prompted by a concrete dilemma in which the poet is forced to consider the conflicting demands of the heart and to wonder how much "I want" must be tempered by "I should." When the bridegroom answers the knock at his cottage door and finds a stranger who is, presumably, seeking shelter for the night, he wonders how far the demands of charity go. He accepts the obligation "to give/ A dole of bread, a purse,/ A heartfelt prayer for the poor of God,/ Or for the rich a curse;" but he is not convinced that it is required of him to "mar the love of two/ By harboring woe in the bridal house."\(^3\)

But all such choices were not to be so simple, and the answer which Frost gives to a similarly framed question in another context shows that his motivations for retreat were more complex than the earlier poem would suggest. Goethe capsulized an insight that may help to illuminate the specific conflict that is formulated in "Two Tramps in Mudtime" when he said, in effect, that the growth of character demands companionship, while the growth of talent demands solitude. A sensitive and gifted man, once he perceives this truth, is confronted with a conflict that is difficult to resolve, for he cannot, without violating his moral integrity or stifling his creative urge, consciously reject either alternative. Frost's concern with this

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 9.
problem of trying "to justify artistic selfishness without minimizing heroic self-giving" is revealed in the poem, though, in typical Frost fashion, it is understated by its translation into concrete, homely terms. The farmer is working at his task, splitting "unimportant wood," spending on it "the blows that a life of self-control/ Spares to strike for the common good," when he is confronted by two lumberjacks who emerge from the woods:

Nothing on either side was said.
They knew they had but to stay their stay
And all their logic would fill my head:
As that I had no right to play
With what was another man's work for gain.
My right might be love but theirs was need.
And where the two exist in twain
Their was the better right--agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,
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,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

He acknowledges the prior claim of human need, yet he hedges his affirmation, stubbornly insisting on his right to try to eventually make "I should" and "I want" synonymous.

In "A Drumlin Woodchuck" Frost offers yet another possible justification for his "strategic retreat." The woodchuck has dug a "two-door burrow" for extra protection.

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4 Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, p. 377.
5 Complete Poems, pp. 358-359.
against intruders:

With those in mind at my back
I can sit forth exposed to attack
As one who shrewdly pretends
That he and the world are friends.  

He then explains that only in this self-protecting way can he retain his identity and remain intact for those he loves:

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.

The casual tone and simple message of the poem belie its implicit substance. He seems to suggest his awareness of the need for respite from external pressures, for time to gather himself together and calm the conflicts that put such strain on the unstable nerves that were part of his inheritance.

If, as he later conceived it, retreat was a temporary expedient aimed toward his eventual reconciliation with the world, it nevertheless continued to be a necessary strategy at times, and it took on a subtler, more sophisticated mien as he began operating in a world often cruelly unconcerned with protecting sensitive egos. When he began to garner a few laurels and emerged from his burrow into the light cast

\[\text{Ibid., p. 365.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., pp. 365-366.}\]
by recognition, he did not thereafter abandon the pretense mentioned in "A Drumlin Woodchuck," for in the paradoxes of "The Lockless Door" he clearly admits the continuing necessity for emotionally retreating from the world behind the mask of a public image. He implies that because he has no adequate defense, he can claim the right to a certain deliberate hypocrisy if it will protect him from the world's intrusions:

It went many years,
But at last came a knock,
And I thought of the door
With no lock to lock.

I blew out the light,
I tip-toed the floor,
And raised both hands
In prayer to the door.

But the knock came again
My window was wide;
I climbed on the sill
And descended outside.

Back over the sill
I bade a "Come in"
To whatever the knock
At the door may have been.

So at a knock
I emptied my cage
To hide in the world
And alter with age.  

Frost's public pose as the warm, beneficent New England sage, though it was doubtless a valid illumination of one side of his personality, served chiefly as a protection from the too-personal probings of a public which inevitably stakes its claims on anyone to whom it has given fame and fortune.

Ibid., p. 299.
In "Not Quite Social," Frost seems to be assuming this pose, as he gently and playfully reproves those who took his retreat seriously. In a sense, he retreats shrewdly behind his own partial admission of guilt followed by a disclaimer:

Some of you will be glad I did what I did,
And the rest won't want to punish me too severely
For finding a thing to do that though not forbid
Yet wasn't enjoined and wasn't expected clearly.

To punish me overcrually wouldn't be right
For merely giving you once more gentle proof
That the city's hold on a man is no more tight
Than when its walls rose higher than any roof.

You may taunt me with not being able to flee the earth.
You have me there, but loosely as I would be held.
The way of understanding is partly mirth.
I would not be taken as ever having rebelled.

And anyone is free to condemn me to death--
If he leaves it to nature to carry out the sentence.
I shall will to the common stock of air my breath
And pay a death-tax of fairly polite repentance.9

But Frost also found effective as a protection the ironic detachment that was as natural an expression of his temperament as whimsy, for it allowed him to maintain the emotional distance that he required. If "Haec Fabula Doget," for instance, is not read ironically, it might be taken as an allegorical act of contrition for having willfully gone it alone:

A Blindman by the name of La Fontaine,
Relying on himself and on his cane,
Came tap-tap-tapping down the village street,
The apogee of human blind conceit.
Now just ahead of him was seen to yawn
A trench where water pipes were laying on.
The Blindman might have found it with his ferrule,
But someone overanxious at his peril

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9Ibid., p. 403.
Not only warned him with a loud command,
But ran against him with a staying hand.
Enraged at what he could but think officious,
The Blindman missed him with a blow so vicious
He gave his own poor iliac a wrench
And plunged himself head foremost in the trench:
Where with a glee no less for being grim
The workmen all turned to and buried him.

Moral

The moral is it hardly need be shown
All those who try to go it sole alone,
Too proud to be beholden for relief,
Are absolutely sure to come to grief.10

In his political pastoral, "Build Soil," Frost's comments on
the modern scene are made by means of a dialogue between a
poet-farmer and a potato man, both of whom are appropriately
equipped with classical Roman names. The poet-farmer,
Tityrus, warns Meliboeus that he makes some comments with
tongue-in-cheek:

Don't let the things I say against myself
Betray you into taking sides against me,
Or it might get you into trouble with me.11

He might have added that the contrary was also true.

Yet the poem is essentially a clever collection of ex-
plicit, and presumably serious, statements culminating in a
sermon on the values of retreat:

I bid you to a one-man revolution--
The only revolution that is coming.
We're too unseparate out among each other--
With goods to sell and notions to impart.
A youngster comes to me with half a quatraine

To ask me if I think it worth the pains
Of working out the rest, the other half.
I am brought guaranteed young prattle poems
Made publicly in school, above suspicion
Of plagiarism and help of cheating parents.
We congregate embracing from distrust
As much as love, and too close in to strike
And be so very striking. Steal away
The song says. Steal away and stay away.
Don't join too many gangs. Join few if any.
Join the United States and join the family--
But not much in between unless a college.
Is it a bargain, Shepherd Meliboeus?

Probably, but you're far too fast and strong
For my mind to keep working in your presence
I can tell better after I get home,
Better a month from now when cutting posts
Or mending fence it all comes back to me
What I was thinking when you interrupted
My life-train logic. I agree with you
We're too unseparate. And going home
From company means coming to our senses. 12

Indeed, so necessary were advance and retreat to Frost's
equilibrium that even his most cherished human relationship
became the scene of these maneuvers. When Frost and his
young wife retreated from the larger company of human society
to their circumscribed, shared world, they may not have
realized that their emotional demands would be intensified
by their seclusion and mutual dependence. At least there is
no hint that all would not be idyllic in Eden in the early,
lighthearted verse entitled "In Neglect":

They leave us so to the way we took,
As two in whom they were proved mistaken,
That we sit sometimes in the wayside nook,
With mischievous, vagrant, seraphic look,

12 Ibid., pp. 429-430.
And try if we cannot feel forsaken.\textsuperscript{13}

And many of the love poems are pure affirmations, suggesting none of the ambivalences and puzzles that can be found in other Frost poems dealing with the male-female relationship. The former poems have the subjective tone of total involvement and commitment. A poem like "The Pasture," for example, is a simple, uncomplicated invitation to his beloved to share his joy in simple pleasures:

\begin{verbatim}
I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may)
I sha'n't be gone long.--You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I sha'n't be gone long.--You come too.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{verbatim}

In "A Late Walk," the poet's mood of regret over the withered sadness of fall is mitigated by the simple prospect of presenting the "last remaining aster flower"\textsuperscript{15} to his love. Poems such as "A Prayer in Spring," "Two Look at Two," and "Rose Pogonias," whose obvious theme is pantheistic joy, have as their underlying theme the exaltation of a meaningful experience shared. In a late love poem in which a strangely beautiful, extended simile compares a woman in the ripeness of physical and emotional maturity with a firmly anchored

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 23.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 1.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 11.
silken tent, Frost seems to be making a subjective poetic offering from the fullness of his heart:

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taut
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware. 16

It is interesting to note, before those poems are considered in which the attitudes are more complex, the attempt that Frost made to be objective when he expressed the obverse side of his ambivalence toward the love relationship. Always the emotions pervading his personifications of the female psyche are tempered by his characteristic unwillingness to claim superior insight into the rights and wrongs of human behavior. Always he solicits the reader's empathetic response, even to that which he, himself, cannot adequately explain. In the poems which describe the retreat of one of the partners in a relationship from the other, the two perspectives are somehow sympathetically rendered, even if only one voice is heard. Sometimes the withdrawal described is total, as in "The Impulse," but more often it is temporary

16 Ibid., p. 443.
emotional and physical separation as in "The Thatch," "A Dream Pang," or "Flower-Gathering." Sometimes the retreat is purely emotional, as in "Home Burial," or it can involve the kind of retreat precipitated by unexpected shame that occurs in "The Subverted Flower."

In "The Impulse," which is one of a series of brief poems under the title "Hill Wife," the woman has a shadowy, enigmatic quality. The sudden disappearance into the countryside of his wraithlike wife, who has been silently, broodingly lonely in her rural seclusion, bewilders the husband:

Sudden and swift and light as that
The ties gave,
And he learned of finalities
Besides the grave.  

The finality of which the poet speaks is not to be interpreted as meaning death, but as the total rupture of a once meaningful relationship. The poem may simply be read and appreciated literally; read on a deeper level, however, it seems to suggest that the husband was incapable of grasping the woman's essence. She slipped through his fingers, ephemeral and enigmatic.

"The Thatch" describes another kind of separation, a temporary break in the lovers' relationship. The husband has left the cottage in a stubborn mood of resistance, vowing not to return until the lights "in a certain upper' window" were

\[17\] Ibid., p. 162.
out, even though he suspects that his wife, equally determined, will wait up for him:

    Well, we should see which one would win, 
    We should see which one would be first to yield. 18

But when he realizes that in his precipitous rush from the cottage he has flushed the birds out of their nests in his straw roof, he measures his own predicament, the dissolution of which requires only a small sacrifice of pride, against the plight of the birds:

    . . . It grieved my soul, 
    It started a grief within a grief, 
    To think their case was beyond relief-- 
    They could not go flying about in search 
    Of their nests again, nor find a perch. 
    They must brood where they fell in mulch and mire, 
    Trusting feathers and inward fire 
    Till daylight made it safe for a flyer. 
    My greater grief was by so much reduced 
    As I thought of them without nest or roost. 
    That was how that grief started to melt. 19

"A Dream Pang" poignantly describes another prideful moment of separation, but the ambivalent feelings experienced by the poet occur this time in his unconscious. In his dream he has seen his beloved's approach, but he has not been able to respond. His joy, upon waking, at finding her by his side cancels out the critical moment in which he had failed to make the necessary gesture of reconciliation:

    I had withdrawn in forest, and my song 
    Was swallowed up in leaves that blew alway; 
    And to the forest edge you came one day 
    (This was my dream) and looked and pondered long.

18 Ibid., p. 320.
19 Ibid.
But did not enter, though the wish was strong:
You shook your pensive head as who should say,
"I dare not--too far in his footsteps stray--
He must seek me would he undo the wrong."

Not far, but near, I stood and saw it all
Behind low boughs the trees let down outside;
And the sweet pang it cost me not to call
And tell you that I saw does still abide.
But 'tis not true that thus I dwelt aloof,
For the wood wakes, and you are here for proof. 20

"Flower-Gathering" describes the poet's anxiety about his
wife's response to his return at dusk "gaunt and dusty from
roaming." For all their love, neither husband nor wife is
sure that he understands the motives of the other. He
wonders if her failure to call out a greeting means that she
simply does not recognize him, or if she is rather, as he
fears, upset over his long absence. He intends the flowers
to be both a memento and a peace offering:

Are you dumb because you know me not,
Or dumb because you know?

All for me? And not a question
For the faded flowers gay
That could take me from beside you
For the ages of a day?
They are yours, and be the measure
Of their worth for you to treasure,
The measure of the little while
That I've been long away. 21

In "Home Burial" the emotional barrier that exists be-
tween husband and wife is revealed through dialogue. She
has been clinging to grief, convinced that her husband is.

20 Ibid., p. 22.
21 Ibid., p. 18.
unable to share the depth of her sorrow. He is perplexed by her inability, indeed her unwillingness, to accept the reality of death and sorrow philosophically, with a measure of his own practical resignation. His clumsy attempts to comfort her serve only to strengthen the barricade of uncommunicated pain that separates them. The husband's feeling of futility is movingly conveyed:

My words are nearly always an offense.  
I don't know how to speak of anything  
So as to please you. But I might be taught  
I should suppose. I can't say I see how.  
A man must partly give up being a man  
With women-folk. We could have some arrangement  
By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off  
Anything special you're a-mind to name.  
Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.  
Two that don't love can't live together without them.  
But two that do can't live together with them.  

Let me into your grief. I'm not so much  
Unlike other folks as your standing there  
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.22

Amy does let him into her grief, exploding in a climactic outpouring of grief and resentment. She had been appalled on the day that she watched him energetically dig the little grave for their dead child and heard him speak, when he was finished, of "everyday concerns." He, in turn, is astounded at her words:

I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.  
I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed.23

Amy continues, revealing the accumulated bitterness that has

22Ibid., pp. 70-71.  
23Ibid., p. 72.
become mixed with her sorrow:

I can repeat the very words you were saying.
"Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build."
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had how long it takes a birch to rot
To do with what was in the darkened parlor.
You couldn't care. The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't."

Both are right, and both are wrong.

"The Subverted Flower" stands alone in Frost's poetry
as a revelation of that kind of personal experience to which
his strong passions led him but which his puritan conscience
forbade. The tortuous conflict generated by these antitheti-
cal pulls is here only hinted at, but the ambivalence can be
surmised from the imagery of the poem, in which a crushed
flower is a symbol of physical passion and animal terms pro-
vide the masculine metaphor. Frost describes the girl's
reactions to the young man's overtures:

She looked and saw the shame:
A hand hung like a paw,
An arm worked like a saw
As if to be persuasive,
An ingratiating laugh
That cut the snout in half,
An eye become evasive.
A girl could only see

24 Ibid.
That a flower had marred a man,  
But what she could not see  
Was that the flower might be  
Other than base and fetid:  
That the flower had done but part,  
And what the flower began  
Her own too meager heart  
Had terribly completed.  
She looked and saw the worst.  
And the dog or what it was,  
Obeying bestial laws,  
A coward save at night,  
Turned from the place and ran.  
She heard him stumble first  
And use his hands in flight.  
She heard him bark outright.  

In "Happiness Makes Up in Height What It Lacks in Length," Frost seems to be making a mature statement about his own varied reactions and feelings viewed in retrospect. He recognizes that happiness is not a continuing state but one that comes in flashes that leave enough afterglow to dim the sharp memory of all-too-frequent pain. It is the happiness experienced in a love relationship that has the power to perform this miracle:

Oh, stormy stormy world,  
The days you were not swirled  
Around with mist and cloud,  
Or wrapped as in a shroud,  
And the sun's brilliant ball  
Was not in part or all  
Obscured from mortal view—  
Were days so very few  
I can but wonder whence  
I get the lasting sense  
Of so much warmth and light.  
If my mistrust is right  
It may be altogether  
From one day's perfect weather,.
When starting clear at dawn,
The day swept clearly on
To finish clear at eve.
I verily believe
My fair impression may
Be all from that one day
No shadow crossed but ours
As through its blazing flowers
We went from house to wood
For change of solitude.

If it is true, as Thompson states, that one of the common bonds between Frost and Edward Thomas, in addition to their mutuality of tastes and melancholic natures, was their propensity for torturing themselves by being cruel to their wives, it may also be true, as some of these poems seem to suggest, that the temperamental differences between the male and female responses to life, at least within Frost's ken, seemed to be a sufficient source of mutual pain to make some kind of retreat a necessary, if temporary, strategy. Nevertheless, the poems dealing with the love relationship impart an overall impression of the sharing of a deeply meaningful relationship, troubled more, perhaps, than many less intense unions, by the pain of misunderstanding.

There came a point in Frost's maturity when he could view his tendency to turn his back on the frustrations of reality with the clarity of vision that temporal distance permits; he admitted that "while indeed the world may be scorned by any sensitive person for self-protective reasons,

26 Ibid., p. 445.

27 Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, p. 462.
it cannot be completely forsworn--at least by the living."^{28}

He had elected to remain among the living, refusing escape, and he came to see his retreat from his fellow man, which had been chiefly prompted by his need for emotional reorganization and reinforcement, as a necessary pre-condition for his own growth. Always, Frost made the equally necessary counter movement of advance, and he was able, at times, to eventually draw upon his own emotional resources for the service of others.

^{28}Ibid., p. 397.
CHAPTER V

ROMANTICISM AND REALISM

The central conflict between those aspects of experience which William James described as the real and the ideal seems to be experienced in our society by all but the psychopath; it becomes translated into the conflict between realism and romanticism, however, only when the ideal is imaginatively transfused into the real, that is, when reality is viewed through the tinted glass of wish fulfillment. Frost frequently lapsed into romantic self-delusion and into the corresponding romantic weakness of endowing certain aspects of reality with what Thompson likes to call "mythic values." The resultant romantic strains in Frost's poetry, perhaps more than any other single notable characteristic, were responsible for its broadly-based popular success. His poetry was acclaimed as the product of the singularly original "American" poet of the early twentieth century. Frost's insistence upon the value of individual freedom, his nostalgia for the past, his exaltation of the common man, his use of ordinary language speaking the sound of sense, and his pantheistic praise and personification of nature were romantic characteristics peculiarly congenial to twentieth century democratic man. Yet, for all its authenticity, Frost's
romanticism was tempered by reverse tendencies; indeed, not only would it be a mistake to label Frost a romantic, but it might also be reasonably safe to hypothesize that Frost's artistic reputation would have suffered permanent damage at the hands of serious critics had those elements which served his popularity so well not been reversed sufficiently to make the appropriateness of the romantic label questionable. Frost was by no means a pure romantic; in this regard as in so many others, Frost's ambivalent attitudes are demonstrable in an analysis of representative poems.

Even Frost's most salient characteristic, his romantic insistence upon his own individual freedom in every sphere (of which the aforementioned retreat and advance syndrome was merely one manifestation), was attenuated by qualifying statements. In the poem entitled "Reluctance," in which the poet is prompted to expression by his regret over the autumnal withering of nature, his final question suggests a state of mind that is not only romantically and beautifully melancholic, but that is also romantically rebellious:

Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
To bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season.¹

Assuredly, Frost was not one to go with the drift of things, and his statement makes all the more surprising his later

¹Complete Poems, p. 43.
warning that he would not "be taken as ever having rebelled," even allowing for his previously noted ability to take refuge, when he chose, behind whimsy and irony. However, his poetic assertion in "The Lesson for Today" seems to be an honest expression of his ambivalence in this regard:

I hold your doctrine of Memento Mori.
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.3

This central ambivalence continued to exist for Frost, however benign it became; his romantic concept of individual freedom continued to conflict with his consciousness of group values.

One of the most puzzling and surprising of Frost's inconsistencies arises in regard to what can be surmised from the poetry about his views on the nature of man. His romantic bias in favor of the common man, which is delightfully dramatized in "The Hundred Collars" and "The Self-Seeker," fails to lead to the logical secondary premise that originally inspired the freethinkers on our soil. Frost disavowed the romantic doctrine of progress.

In "The Hundred Collars" Frost contrasts the simple humanity of a common man to the effete formalities of an academician who is a democrat "if not at heart, at least on principle." The professor and Lafe find themselves in the

2"Not Quite Social," ibid., p. 403.
3Ibid., p. 476.
improbable position of having to share a room in a small town hotel for the night:

The doctor looked at Lafe and looked away. A man? A brute. Naked above the waist, He sat there creased and shining in the light, Fumbling the buttons in a well-starched shirt. "I'm moving into a size larger shirt. I've felt mean lately; mean's the name for it. I just found what the matter was tonight: I've been a-choking like a nursery tree When it outgrows the wire band of its name tag. I blamed it on the hot spell we've been having. 'Twas nothing but my foolish hanging back, Not liking to own up I'd grown a size. Number eighteen this is. What size do you wear?"

The doctor caught his throat convulsively. "Oh--ah--fourteen--fourteen."^4

Lafe offers to send the professor all of his long-outgrown collars, "more than a hundred collars, size fourteen," and then urges the professor on into the room:

The doctor made a subdued dash for it And propped himself at bay against a pillow!

"Not that way with your shoes on Kike's white bed. You can't rest that way. Let me pull your shoes off."

"Don't touch me, please--I say, don't touch me please. I'll not be put to bed by you, my man."^5

Lafe's generous offer is not withdrawn, though he is only too aware of the professor's conviction of his own superiority. As the poem ends, Lafe refers again to the collars:

"I don't know who I rather would have have them. They're only turning yellow where they are. But you're the doctor as the saying is.

^4Ibid., p. 63.
^5Ibid., p. 64.
I'll put the light out. Don't you wait for me: I've just begun the night. You get some sleep.6

Frost's dialogue throughout the poem serves to heighten the contrast between the two men: Lafe, the natural, generous, free man and Magoon, the inhibited intellectual. Frost identifies the natural with intuition and the artificial with abstraction—"At least don't use your mind too hard,/ Trust my instinct—I'm a bard."7

Again, in "The Self-Seeker" Frost champions the common man, this time contrasting one unspoiled by the social and financial sophistries of modern civilization with a city-slicker lawyer. The poignancy of the flower-loving injured workman's plight is emphasized by a touch of Frostian irony when the "Broken One," explaining that he has to stay on the good side of the little girl who will do his flower searching now that his feet are useless, apologizes for his "being a great boy to think of number one." The lawyer, whose watch "was cunningly devised to make a noise/ Like a small pistol when he snapped it shut," is pressing for a signature on the paper which will release the insurance company from further liability upon payment of $500. He is impatient with the profitless talk of flowers which is merely "a pretty interlude," interfering with the important business at hand. The paper is duly signed:

6Ibid., p. 67.
7"To a Thinker," ibid., p. 432.
The lawyer gravely capped his fountain pen.
"You're doing the wise thing. You won't regret it. We're very sorry for you."

Willis (the injured man's friend) sneered:

"Who's we?--Some stockholders in Boston?
I'll go outdoors, by gad, and won't come back."

"Willis, bring Anne back with you when you come.
Yes, thanks for caring. Don't mind Will: he's savage. He thinks you ought to pay me for my flowers.
You don't know what I mean about the flowers. Don't stop to try now. You'll miss your train.
Good-by." He flung his arms around his face.8

Frost's view of natural man, while it does not necessarily embrace Rousseau's concept of the noble savage, does reveal a strongly romantic bias that would seem to lead logically to an acceptance of the romantic vision of the fundamental goodness and perfectability of man that had been the legacy of the enlightenment. Yet there are poems which point to a rejection of the ascent of man. The extent to which Frost's immersion in the classics was responsible for the cyclical view of history that he seemed to prefer is conjectural, but whatever its basis in his experience, his total rejection of the romantic idea of progress is clear, for neither social, biological, nor technical progress seemed to him to provide the answers to mankind's problems. Though he had a measure of the romantic's hostility to existing institutions, he had none of that ardent faith that looks forward to a better life as environmental conditions improve.

8Ibid., p. 125.
Perhaps the classical concept of ebb and flow, of eternal flux, was a natural preference for one of Frost's mind set, a choice arising from temperamental bias rather than from induction and analysis. In any case, the cyclical view of history provides a useful rationale for one who deplores reforming zeal. Frost states the case for laissez-faire in its broadest sense in "Build Soil":

> Were I dictator, I'll tell you what I'd do.
> What should you do?
> I'd let things take their course
> And then I'd claim the credit for the outcome.  

But first Frost gives a little sermon in which he unexpectedly puts in a bid for socialism, a unique, Frostian kind of socialism, however, whose chief function would be to curb human ingenuity, for he is against progress for its own sake which "works in the dark as much against as for us." In "Something for Hope," Frost takes easy comfort in the observation of nature's cycles:

> Patience and looking away ahead,
> And leaving some things to take their course.
> Hope may not nourish a cow or horse
> But spes alit agricolam 'tis said.  

And if there be such a thing as progress, as he explains in "How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King When It's in You and in the Situation," it is cyclical in nature. The slave

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9Ibid., p. 425.
10Ibid., p. 518.
ex-king, who is the court cook, gives his prescription for wise rule after scorning the king's faith in caloric intake as the answer to happiness for his people:

"Make them as happy as is good for them. But that's a hard one, for I have to add: Not without consultation to their wishes; Which is the crevice that lets Progress in. If we could only stop the Progress somewhere, At a good point for pliant permanence, Where Madison attempted to arrest it. But no, a woman has to be her age, A nation has to take its natural course Of Progress round and round in circles From King to Mob to King to Mob to King Until the eddy of it eddies out."\(^\text{11}\)

Since there is no progress, he would prefer to avoid altogether the extreme swings that give the illusion of progress. He advocates "semi-revolution" that will "go half-way and stop."\(^\text{12}\)

Because Frost rejects the thesis that materialism can provide permanent solutions to man's central problems, he can refer to the reformers who operate on such a premise in scathing terms:

While greedy good-doers, beneficent beasts of prey, Swarm over their lives enforcing benefits That are calculated to soothe them out of their wits, And by teaching them how to sleep the sleep all day, Destroy their sleeping at night the ancient way.\(^\text{13}\)

He makes an ironic criticism of materialism in "Provide, Provide" and in the late poem entitled "Our Doom to Bloom," in

\(^{11}\) *In the Clearing*, p. 80.


which he employs the symbolic framework of Aeneas' consultation with the prophetess before his descent into Hades:

Cumaean Sibyl, charming Ogress,
What are the simple facts of Progress
That I may trade on with reliance
In consultation with my clients?
The Sibyl said, "Go back to Rome
And tell your clientele at home
That if it's not a mere illusion
All there is to it is diffusion--
Of coats, cats, votes, to all mankind."

Frost's distaste for Darwinian concepts of biological progress is clearly expressed in "The White-Tailed Hornet":

Won't this whole instinct matter bear revision?
Won't almost any theory bear revision?
To err is human, not to, animal.
Or so we pay the compliment to instinct,
Only too liberal of our compliment
That really takes away instead of gives.
Our worship, humor, conscientiousness
Went long since to the dogs under the table.
And served us right for having instituted
Downward comparisons. As long on earth
As our comparisons were stoutly upward
With gods and angels, we were men at least,
But little lower than the gods and angels.
But once comparisons were yielded downward,
Once we began to see our images
Reflected in the mud and even dust,
'Twas disillusion upon disillusion.
We were lost piecemeal to the animals,
Like people thrown out to delay the wolves.

Even though Frost had a considerable amount of the layman's awe and respect toward science, his hostility to the practical benefits of scientific progress is revealed in "The Egg and the Machine." The defiant gesture of the man who

\(^{14}\text{In the Clearing, p. 69.}\)

\(^{15}\text{Complete Poems, pp. 361-362.}\)
resents the invasion into his domain of the roaring, clanking train is intentionally ludicrous. After the "confusion and the roar that drowned the cries/ He raised against the gods in the machine," he chooses a tiny, organic object as the symbolic weapon of his futile defiance and vows that "the next machine that has the power to pass/ Will get the plasm in its goggle glass."16

If it is true that those who think see life as comedy and those who feel see life as tragedy, Frost might truly be said to have had a tragicomic view of life, for he had the capacity to view life from both the romantic perspective that exalts the intuitive response of the heart and from the pragmatic perspective of the realist who emphasizes the limited, the finite, and the demands of practical necessity. The latter view, of course, precluded his being swept away by excesses of feeling into romantic weltschmerz. Though Frost's idealism was indeed a deep and sometimes troubling aspect of his psyche, it lacked the fiery quality found in the pure romantic. For instance, love, in Frost's lexicon, does not connote abstract compassion. Though he clearly values love over thought in "Bond and Free" and "The Death of the Hired Man," he explains in "Build Soil" that it is not love in the abstract that he values, "all the loves when philosophized together into one--/ One sickness of the body

16 Ibid., p. 349.
and the soul." He prefers love in a limiting frame of reference:

... There is no love.
There's only love of men and women, love
Of children, love of friends, of God. 17

This limiting frame can be reduced to the extent that it includes only "a living mite/ With inclinations it could call its own." In the poem entitled "A Considerable Speck," the poet allows this poor microscopic item, the tiny intruder racing across his white paper, to live. Yet, he admits that his action gives rise to a paradox:

I have none of the tenderer-than-thou
Collectivistic regimenting love
With which the modern world is being swept. 18

In "Home Burial," which has been extensively quoted in the previous chapter, Frost juxtaposes an excessive, almost self-indulgent emotional response and its opposite—practical acceptance of the inevitable. Frost doubtless intended to here emphasize the polarity of typically male and female responses to emotional upheaval; yet so perceptive and so compassionate is his insight into both responses that the possibility that this ambivalence was vividly experienced by Frost himself is suggested. Notwithstanding his occasional immersion in romantic subjectivity, Frost could be startlingly practical. Indeed, he is shocked at his own indifference in

17 Ibid., p. 423.
18 Ibid., p. 481.
"The Exposed Nest." After caring enough to painstakingly build a screen for a nest of baby birds that the mower had uncovered, he wonders:

... Why is there then
No more to tell? We turned to other things.
I haven't any memory--have you?
Of ever coming to the place again
To see if the birds lived the first night through,
And so at last to learn to use their wings.\textsuperscript{19}

In "Out, Out--" Frost describes the sudden, unexpected death of a boy whose hand has been cut off as he operated a buzz saw:

No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little--less--nothing!--and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.\textsuperscript{20}

Even if allowance is made for the possibility of an ironic intention, Frost's tone is not condemnatory but bespeaks, rather, resigned acceptance. He seems to be suggesting that this is the way things are and that it is a regrettable, but undeniable, fact that people try to protect themselves from pain by immersion in practical necessities.

The most obvious romantic trends in Frost occur in his nature poetry. Sometimes he is almost Wordsworthian in his pantheism, as in "Rose Pogonias" or "A Prayer in Spring," but more often his romanticism is limited to the personification of nature or to contrasts between natural and artificial.

\textsuperscript{19}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 136-137.
\textsuperscript{20}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 171-172.
"civilized" life. The personification found in the lovely, mournful poem entitled "The Oven Bird" is typically romantic, and the device is employed to convey a typically romantic feeling:

There is a singer everyone has heard, 
Loud, a mid-summer and a 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.21

In "A Brook in the City," personification again occurs, and again the device is used to express a romantic feeling. Frost contrasts the original, natural flow of the brook through the countryside to its present, unnatural suppression under the city streets, and he wonders if the brook, somehow, does not take its revenge:

. . . 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. 
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.22

21 Ibid., p. 150.

22 Ibid., p. 285.
In "The Vantage Point" Frost places trees and mankind in antithesis. He need only view the village from a distance to recover his joy in the natural, a joy which is founded in the concrete, natural fact rather in vague rapture. The poem contains the romantic suggestion that the men enclosed in white villages are little different from the men entombed under white gravestones:

If tired of trees I seek again mankind,
    Well I know where to hie me—in the dawn,
To a slope where the cattle keep the lawn.
There amid lolling juniper reclined,
Myself unseen, I see in white defined
    Far off the homes of men, and farther still,
The graves of men on an opposing hill,
Living or dead, whichever are to mind.
And if by noon I have too much of these,
    I have but to turn on my arm, and lo,
The sun-burned hillside sets my face aglow,
My breathing shakes the bluet like a breeze,
    I smell the earth, I smell the bruised plant,
I look into the crater of the ant.23

Yet for all his delight in measured flights into lyric romanticism, Frost seems to be in control of the feeling expressed; the reverse tendency (the brakes on the emotion, as it were) is implied. Occasionally, however, it is explicit as in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," one of Frost's most nostalgic nature poems which seems to be in its essence counter-romantic:

The house had gone to bring again
To the midnight sky a sunset glow.
Now the chimney was all of the house that stood,
Like a pistil after the petals go.

23 Ibid., p. 24.
The barn opposed across the way,
That would have joined the house in flame
Had it been the will of the wind, was left
To bear forsaken the place's name.

No more it opened with all one end
For teams that came by the stony road
To drum on the floor with scurrying hoofs
And brush the mow with the summer load.

The birds that came to it through the air
At broken windows flew out and in,
Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh
From too much dwelling on what has been.

Yet for them the lilac renewed its leaf,
And the aged elm, though touched with fire;
And the dry pump flung up an awkward arm;
And the fence post carried a strand of wire.

For them there was really nothing sad.
But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
One had to be versed in country things
Not to believe the phoebes wept.\(^\text{24}\)

The poet stops short and reverses the romantic tone with a
convincing denial of sentimentality. Frost, the realist,
takes control of the poem.

Yet another romantic tendency that appears frequently
in Frost's poetry is that kind of nostalgic longing for the
past that occurs in "Ghost House," "The Census Taker," and
"In a Disused Graveyard." In the first poem the romantic
element is signalled by the mood of loneliness, by the
"strangely aching heart" of the poet, who dwells in the
lonely house which has vanished "and left no trace but the
cellar walls."\(^\text{25}\) In the second poem, the census taker is

\(^{24}\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 300.\)
\(^{25}\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 6.\)
similarly depressed by the obvious signs of death and decay as he is forced to take note grimly of the dwindling population and abandoned houses:

The melancholy of having to count souls
Where they grow fewer and fewer every year
Is extreme where they shrink to none at all.
It must be I want life to go on living.  

The poem "In a Disused Graveyard" is rescued from romantic triteness by the familiar Frostian device of paradox. The poet's mood of sadness arises here not from the loneliness of an abandoned, forgotten sanctuary for the dead, but rather from the fact that it has lost its function. He speaks of the "grassy tread" of the living who come to the graveyard, "but never any more the dead." The romanticism is thus relieved, at least in part, by the tinge of realism imparted by the unexpected twist. Then he reverts by personifying the gravestones, making them wonder why they are not getting a reasonable allotment of dead men in their graveyard:

It would be easy to be clever
And tell the stones: Men hate to die
And have stopped dying now forever.
I think they would believe the lie.  

An important late poem of Frost's entitled "Directive" announces the poet's need to retreat from confusion, from "all this now too much for us," and takes him on a journey back through time. But this trip seems to be launched from a

26 Ibid., p. 217.
27 Ibid., p. 269.
different perspective than the pure nostalgia of earlier poems lamenting time past, for, with what might be a hint of bittersweet realism, he realizes that the time he retreats into has been "made simple by the loss/ Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off/ Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather." Yet, the guided trip up the road to the old house, during which he personifies the trees and animals and nostalgically laments those who no longer tread this path is romanticized:

Nor need you mind the serial ordeal
Of being watched from forty cellar holes
As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins.
As for the woods' excitement over you
That sends light rustle rushes to their leaves,
Charge that to upstart inexperience.
Where were they all not twenty years ago?
They think too much of having shaded out
A few old pecker-fretted apple trees.

The essential tone of the poem is not one of lamentation, however, and it becomes clear that the poet's destination was not really the "house that is no more a house/ Upon a farm that is no more a farm" but the brook near the house. When Frost finds the drinking cup that he has hidden away, "a broken drinking goblet like the Grail," he hints that his search was actually for renewal, a renewal to be found not in the past but in the contemplation of the unchanging, eternal flux continuing into the present:

28 Ibid., p. 520.
Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.  

In a lovely poem written in his maturity entitled "To Earthward," Frost describes the manner in which his increasing encounters with reality have changed his apprehension of the nature of happiness; the innocent romantic rapture of his youth has given way to a pressing need, generated by his knowledge of pain and love, to experience life as it truly is. He is gaining the strength to relinquish romantic illusions and to not only accept, but welcome, the burdens and challenges imposed by reality:

Love at the lips was touch
As sweet as I could bear;
And once that seemed too much;
I lived on air

That crossed me from sweet things
The flow of--was it musk
From hidden grapevine springs
Down hill at dusk?

I had the swirl and ache
From sprays of honeysuckle
That when they're gathered shake
Dew on the knuckle.

I craved strong sweets, but those
Seemed strong when I was young;
The petal of the rose
It was that stung.

Now no joy but lacks salt
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain

Of tears, the aftermark
Of almost too much love.

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 521.}
The sweet of bitter bark
And burning clove.

When stiff and sore and scarred
I take away my hand
From leaning on it hard
In grass and sand,

The hurt is not enough:
I long for weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length.30

Though Frost exalted the common man, he had no faith in
the ascent of man; though he chose to respond to the demands
of the heart over those of the head in any honest confronta-
tion, he was as allergic to abstract virtue as he was to
other abstractions, finding in the concrete, the tangible,
abundant metaphor for the expression of universals; though he
praised and found solace in nature, he refused, for the most
part, the temptation to be transported out of this world into
that world romantics find symbolized in nature. Frost the
romantic was ever the realist; therein lies the paradox and
the appeal of his poetry.

30 Ibid., pp. 279-280.
CHAPTER VI

FAITH AND SKEPTICISM

Though Frost's rejection of nineteenth century liberalism prompted his flirtation with reactionary social and political views, it did not thrust him, surprisingly, into the arms of religious orthodoxy. Here again, Frost seems to violate the dictates of logical consistency. His view of the universe as having been created in its potential entirety and his cyclical view of history, when contrasted to the modern concept of an evolving, creative, ever-expanding universe, would seem to lead to orthodoxy. To be sure, Frost, like St. Augustine, perceived the vanity of human wishes, but he was not one to undervalue the temporal world in passionate preference for the perfection of an ideal hereafter. Also, certain by-now-familiar aspects of Frost's temperament militated against his embracing orthodoxy: his anti-institutional bias, which was one facet of his fierce individualism, and his profound romantic distrust of attempts to build edifices to house truth which had been arrived at by over-intellectualizing and abstracting.

But Frost was no Laodicean; he simply had not an ounce of that odium theologicum which insists that its solutions to the problem of finding meaning in a puzzling world be
everyone's solutions. Indeed, Frost seems to have had a superabundance of that quality which Crane Brinton calls "metaphysical anxiety."\(^1\) Perhaps such an overabundance is one of the motivating forces for all great literature, for the creative artist is engaged in the search for meaning, or to use contemporary terms, his ultimate concern is the search for identity. Thus, the great artist is not likely to be numbered among those whom William James describes as the once born, but is rather to be found among the twice born. He is likely to be one who is not only highly gifted but who is also engaged in some kind of heroic struggle. No one was more aware of this function of art than Frost, though he often understated the case when he spoke of poetry's function. "A poem," he said, "ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion."\(^2\)

If poetry was one of the means of clarifying life for Frost, then his poetry should reveal, if only by implication, some of the questions he posed, and it should suggest some of the tentative conclusions he reached concerning the meaning of human existence. He did try to cling to certain assumptions


\(^2\)"The Figure a Poem Makes," Introduction to *The Complete Poems*, p. vi.
throughout his life, but he did not find it impossible to entertain alternative ideas. His ambivalence regarding religious faith is clearly evidenced in his poetry, and it is conceivable that an ardent defender of orthodoxy, an agnostic, and a religious liberal, if each were sufficiently selective, could build a plausible case for Frost's inclusion in his fraternity. Thus, the critical reader seeking "the real Frost" would be well advised to view him from the several angles that, combined, present a total view of a multi-faceted mind.

Though Frost did not embrace orthodoxy, he found certain of its features particularly tempting. For instance, his preoccupation with dualisms of various sorts, which was discussed in Chapter II, made the dualisms which are central to Christianity particularly meaningful. The body versus soul duality, as has already been indicated, was one Christian concept which troubled Frost, and his acceptance of the good versus evil antithesis in Christianity is reflected in certain poems, though it is usually qualified in some way. Essentially, he conceives that "nature within her inmost self divides/ To trouble men with having to take sides."\(^3\) He accepts, seemingly, the justification that Christianity proffers for the existence of evil:

Never have I been sad or glad
That there was such a thing as bad.

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\(^3\)"From Iron," In the Clearing, p. 95.
There had to be, I understood,
For there to have been any good.
It was by having been contrasted
That good and bad so long had lasted.
That's why discrimination reigns.
That's why we need a lot of brains
If only to discriminate
'Twixt what to love and what to hate. 4

Another central dualism in Christianity which concerned
Frost was the free will versus determinism antithesis. The
Puritan strain in Frost found the concept of predestination
an intriguing matter for imaginative speculation, and one of
his most original and beautifully executed vignettes occurs
in the memorable early poem entitled "Trial by Existence," in
which he attempts to reconcile these antithetical, yet
equally defensible, philosophical positions. At the same
time he is able to introduce another answer to the problem of
evil, or human suffering, which he can later develop in his
blank verse drama "A Masque of Reason." In the former poem,
the souls in heaven march forward to be born only after they
have chosen, in all its particulars, the life they will live:

But always God speaks at the end:
"One thought in agony of strife
The bravest would have by for friend,
The memory that he chose the life;
But the pure fate to which you go
Admits no memory of choice,
Or the woe were not earthly woe
To which you give the assenting voice."

And so the choice must be again,
But the last choice is still the same;
And the awe passes wonder then,

4"Quandary," ibid., p. 92.
And a hush falls for all acclaim.  
And God has taken a flower of gold  
And broken it, and used therefrom  
The mystic link to bind and hold  
Spirit to matter till death come.

'Tis of the essence of life here,  
Though we choose greatly, still to lack  
The lasting memory at all clear,  
That life has for us on the wrack  
Nothing but what we somehow chose;  
Thus are we wholly stripped of pride  
In the pain that has but one close,  
Bearing it crushed and mystified.  

The fatalism is clearly sounded, yet there is also the suggestion that man, somehow, cooperates in his own fate.

In "A Masque of Reason," Frost's jocular, undignified God, in a rare serious moment, explains his methodology to Job:

But it was of the essence of the trial  
You shouldn't understand it at the time.  
It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning.  
And it came out all right. I have no doubt  
You realize by now the part you played  
To stultify the Deuteronomist  
And change the tenor of religious thought.  
My thoughts are to you for releasing me  
From moral bondage to the human race.  
The only free will there at first was man's,  
Who could do good or evil as he chose.  
I had no choice but I must follow him  
With forfeits and rewards he understood--  
Unless I liked to suffer loss of worship.  
I had to prosper good and punish evil.  
You changed all that. You set me free to reign.  
You are the Emancipator of your God,  
And as such I promote you to a saint.

Man's will, too, was freed by Job, God might have said. In any case, God proved a point to the devil--man is capable of

\footnote{Complete Poems, pp. 29-30.}
\footnote{Ibid., pp. 589-590.}
disinterested virtue with no guarantee of justice. Job's wife reveals that Job's questions are actually rhetorical, for she knows that he has understood:

    Job says there's no such thing as Earth's becoming
    An easier place for man to save his soul in. 
    Except as a hard place to save his soul in,
    A trial ground where he can try himself
    And find out whether he is any good,
    It would be meaningless. It might as well
    Be Heaven at once and have it over with.7

This is one way of lending dignity to the heroic struggle, and it was a form of justification that seemed to have particular appeal for Frost.

Again in "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers," Frost presents a paradoxical blend of free will and determinism. The Fates plan the woman's destiny, insisting that her pain will result from innocent, and even joyful, choices. Thus pain and joy are inextricably and inscrutably woven into the pattern of every life by the Fates, or by Providence, to use the Christian equivalent for this concept that was so important to the Greeks. Is free will, then, an illusion? Is the trial actually a fraud? Frost, like most of mankind, wavers.

"The Road Not Taken" and "Reluctance" carry the ring of conviction; indeed, in the former poem the consciousness of choice and of the far-reaching consequences of even so small a choice form the poetic statement. Yet, if Frost considered it a treason to go with the drift of things, that is, to

7Ibid., p. 600.
choose by default rather than by conscious decision, he also warns his readers to "let what will be, be."\(^8\)

This ambivalence is doubtless central in human experience. Frost resolved it in a not unusual manner—in theory the balance tips toward determinism, but in practice free will becomes the operating principle. He would, perhaps, agree that "Cassandra is always right—and always wrong."\(^9\)

Another Christian concept seems to undergird the ominous tone in "Once by the Pacific." The gathering storm, which is described in a manner that places it above and beyond nature, suggests divine wrath and retribution:

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before.
The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
The cliff in being backed by continent;
It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage.
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God's last \textit{Put out the Light} was spoken.\(^{10}\)

Frost includes a brief, pragmatic defense of orthodoxy in a nostalgic poem entitled "The Black Cottage." The minister describes to his friend the old lady who had once lived

\(^8\)"Acceptance," \textit{ibid.}, p. 313.


\(^{10}\)\textit{Complete Poems}, p. 314.
in the cottage. Then, as if to justify his greater willingness to serve tradition than progress, he expounds his own conviction about the nature of religious truth:

It was the words "descended into Hades"  
That seemed too pagan to our liberal youth.  
You know they suffered from a general onslaught.  
And well, if they weren't true why keep right on  
Saying them like the heathen? We could drop them.  
Only--there was the bonnet in the pew.  
Such a phrase couldn't have meant much to her.  
But suppose she had missed it from the Creed  
As a child misses the unsaid Good-night,  
And falls asleep with heartache--how should I feel?  
I'm just as glad she made me keep hands off,  
For, dear me, why abandon a belief  
Merely because it ceases to be true,  
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt  
It will turn true again, for so it goes.  
Most of the change we think we see in life  
Is due to truths being in and out of favor.  
As I sit here, and oftentimes, I wish  
I could be monarch of a desert land  
I could devote and dedicate forever  
To the truths we keep coming back and back to.  
So desert it would have to be, so walled  
By mountain ranges half in summer snow  
No one would covet it or think it worth  
The pains of conquering to force change on. 11

Like most of mankind, Frost found affirmations of faith less difficult to make during certain periods in his life than during others. A poem with the almost childlike religious affirmation of "A Prayer in Spring," for instance, seems to be the pure, uncomplicated expression of a joyful mood of thanksgiving, while his periods of skepticism seem to have been prompted by his moods of almost nihilistic despair and disillusionment. In "The Door in the Dark," he

11 Ibid., pp. 76-77.
describes with a typically light touch a moment when, in his naivety, he had failed to adequately protect himself and had a consequent jarring encounter with reality. Blind faith can give way to disillusionment:

In going from room to room in the dark,
I reached out blindly to save my face,
But neglected, however lightly, to lace
My fingers and close my arms in an arc.
A slim door got in past my guard,
And hit me a blow in the head so hard
I had my native simile jarred.
So people and things don't pair any more,
With what they used to pair with before.12

Despite his assertion in another context that "the groundwork of all faith is human woe,"13 it is to Frost's credit that the moods of darkness which are echoed in his poetry were not an impetus toward that whimpering kind of faith that moderns refer to in the vernacular as "foxhole religion." He suffered the pain of serious doubt without damage to his integrity.

In the perfectly formed sonnet entitled "Design," Frost questions the existence of a purposeful, benevolent providence. Why does nature abound with demonstrations of meaningless cruelty?

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white 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--

12Ibid., p. 340.
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. 14

Frost recognizes that man is so constituted that he ceaselessly seeks answers to such questions. In "Neither Out Far nor In Deep," the poet compares man's search with the hypnotic fascination with which man views the ocean's mysteries from his vantage point on shore:

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 the 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? 15

Man seeks truth, but Frost confesses in "For Once, Then, Something" that if, indeed, such knowledge be incorporated into the universe, he, himself, has perceived only the smallest

14 Ibid., p. 396.
15 Ibid., p. 394.
glimmer of it:

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
Deeper down in the well than where the water
Gives me back in a shining surface picture
Me myself in the summer heaven godlike
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths--and then I lost it.
Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shock whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.16

Accordingly, the tenor of his response to those who claim
esoteric knowledge seems to be one of polite forbearance
rather than scoffing denial--it is well to be cautious in
one's assertions:

Wind goes from farm to farm in wave on wave,
But carries no cry of what is hoped to be.
There may be little or much beyond the grave,
But the strong are saying nothing until they see.17

Frost's most convincing statements in matters of faith
are those reflecting a cautious optimism that bears the re-
sidual scars of his battles with doubt. The faith that re-
mained viable for Frost was largely stripped of what William
James called overbeliefs. Though he will admit that "there
are roughly zones of right and wrong" whose laws must be
obeyed,"18 he refuses to embrace any systematic body of truth:

16Ibid., p. 276.
18"There Are Roughly Zones," ibid., p. 401.
Freedom is slavery some poets tell us.
Enslave yourself to the right leader's truth,
Christ's or Karl Marx', and it will set you free.
Don't listen to their play of paradoxes.
The only certain freedom's in departure.\textsuperscript{19}

But Frost, the freethinker, is nonetheless willing to be held accountable for a few basic assumptions that seem to him limited enough to be reasonable. Even though he has questioned the nature of the design in the universe, if indeed there be such, he can discern, on the whole, evidence for believing that something is operating in man's favor:

We may doubt the just proportion of good to ill.
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.\textsuperscript{20}

He is also willing to take the single step beyond which science cannot take man:

Time was we were molten, time was we were vapor.
What set us on fire and what set us revolving
Lucretius the Epicurean might tell us
'Twas something we knew all about to begin with
And needn't have fared into space like his master
To find 'twas the effort, the essay of love.\textsuperscript{21}

This was the mental thrust into the universe, that which gave it life, which is described in the previously quoted "All Revelation." He asserts the existence of a transcendent

\textsuperscript{19}"How Hard It Is To Keep from Being King When It's in You and in the Situation," \textit{In the Clearing}, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{20}"Our Hold on the Planet," \textit{Complete Poems}, p. 469.
\textsuperscript{21}"Too Anxious for Rivers," \textit{ibid.}, p. 522.
spiritual realm which lends dignity to man's search for meaning:

Grant me intention, purpose, and design—
That's near enough for me to the Divine. 22

If God is not just, as "The Masque of Reason" assures us he is not, man can hope that he is merciful; yet he must beware of interpreting mercy as justice:

If you should rise from Nowhere up to Somewhere, 23
From being No one up to being Someone,
Be sure to keep repeating to yourself
You owe it to an arbitrary god
Whose mercy to you rather than to others
Won't bear too critical examination.

This gift from God that man need not necessarily deserve in order to be its recipient is given extended treatment by Frost in "A Masque of Mercy," in which can be heard the answering voice to the queries sounded in "A Masque of Reason." The quixotic, teasing God of the earlier masque, revealing a side of his nature that warns man of the futility of his search for comprehensible reasons for all that confounds him in life, is here placed in apposition to the possibility of a God of benevolence.

Frost announces his subject directly. The modern Jonah, paradoxically, is losing his faith because his Old Testament God seems to be losing his major attribute, his capacity for righteous indignation. Jonah can no longer trust God to be

22 "Accidentally on Purpose," In the Clearing, p. 34.
unmerciful, and further, he cannot see that it can be to God's advantage "to take the punishment out of all failure/
To be . . . Anything we once thought we had to be." Job questioned the justice of so much undeserved punishment, while Jonah questions the justice of so little deserved punishment; both, essentially, are asking the same question. Paul, the soul-doctor, guides Jonah to the heart of the matter:

. . . I recognized you.
You are the universal fugitive,
Escapist as we say, though you are not
Running away from Him you think you are
But from His mercy-justice contradiction.
Mercy and justice are a contradiction.
But here's where your evasion has an end.
I have to tell you something that will spoil
Indulgence in your form of melancholy
Once and for all. I'm going to make you see
How relatively little justice matters.25

Keeper, the secular realist, agrees with the logic of Paul's statement, though for different reasons. The expectation of justice in life, he asserts, is childish:

There's some such thing and no one will deny it--
Enough to bait the trap of the ideal
From which there can be no escape for us
But by our biting off adolescence
And leaving it behind us in the trap.26

But Paul finds evidence for optimism in the realization that "Christ came to introduce a break with logic"; that is, his

24 Ibid., p. 624.
25 Ibid., p. 615.
26 Ibid., p. 627.
example changed the expectation of justice to the hope for mercy:

Strange no one ever thought of it before Him. 'Twas lovely and its origin was love.27

He is forced to the conclusion that because the sermon on the mount is impossible to live up to, "an end you can't by any means achieve/ And yet can't turn your back on or ignore,"28 no one, therefore, is deserving of mercy, but everyone needs it. Keeper cannot accept the orthodoxy, and in any case he has always feared that it would be irreligious to claim that he has been fighting on the side of the angels, but he agrees with Paul that the possibility of God's mercy can assuage the pain of injustice. Paul, in turn, stakes his faith on a modest hope:

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. And that they may be is the only prayer Worth praying. May my sacrifice Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight.29

If Paul and Keeper may be said to speak for the believing and doubting sides of Frost's ambivalence, bespeaking two possible responses to the mercy-justice contradiction, the

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27 Ibid., p. 630.
28 Ibid., p. 632.
29 Ibid., pp. 641-642.
emergent blend suggests Frost's conviction that man needs the courage to act, and that it is his attempt at right action, not his theology, that is important. Beyond that, "nothing can make injustice just but mercy."\(^{30}\) If God cannot promise justice, he can offer the hope of his mercy as an extenuation and as an example for man's life on earth. Clearly, Frost presents this answer as a hopeful possibility, not as a certainty. The strong say nothing until they know, but in the meantime they know enough to act.

These seriocomic dramas contain as explicit theological speculations as Frost could make, and even in these he was careful to provide the balance needed to keep him from being pushed into a religious niche from which he would have difficulty extricating himself. Here, as elsewhere, he would not be pinned down, preferring to tolerate the ambiguities of life without demanding more answers than his own intellectual honesty would permit.

\(^{30}\)Ibid., p. 642.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters an attempt has been made to demonstrate and analyze one of the most salient features of the poetry of Robert Frost, that quality which, in this study, has been termed ambivalence. It was pointed out that the opposite pulls and resultant divided feelings that Frost tolerated in diverse areas of experience were not only thematically developed throughout the body of his work but were also reflected frequently in the characteristic form of his art. It was stressed that more than one voice is heard in Frost's poetry, and that even when the opposing voice does not signal its presence in a poem, it somehow lies behind the poetic statement and can be heard in another poem. Some of the areas in which these opposing voices can be heard have been delineated, and in the explication of representative poems in each of these areas, the specific nature of the ambivalences therein revealed have been suggested.

During much of his life, but particularly during the years of his early maturity, Frost was subject to troubling spells of depression which gave rise to the urge to escape from life. These dark moods and the subsequent need to escape, which are clearly revealed in Frost's work, were
interspersed, however, with high moods of life affirmation which provided the inspiration for some of his most beautiful lyrics. This ambivalence, so central in Frost's work, was perhaps the most potentially destructive set of extremes he endured, and an attempt was made in the chapter dealing with this conflict to indicate its depth and its continuing, though diminishing, importance in Frost's work.

A related but less extreme manifestation of this ambivalence took the form of temporary retreat from his fellow man, even from certain cherished relationships, alternating with wholehearted commitment to the values of human fellowship and love. Retreat seemed to be a necessary strategy for Frost for several reasons, not the least among which was the imperious self-demand to protect and nurture to artistic maturity his high gift for poetry. It was not until he had travelled successfully down this road for some distance that he could relinquish his strategic retreat, and even then he found subtle ways of hiding in the world whenever necessary. Conversely, no one was ever more sensitive to the demands of human fellowship and love than Frost; the emphatic, positive responses he could make to friendship and to love reveal how much the self-protective, withholding side of his nature must have troubled him.

The final chapters consider two aspects of Frost's ambivalence that are less intensely personal, but equally
prominent, conflicting pulls evidenced in Frost's poetry. His strong romantic strain, that which served his popularity so well, found expression in such themes as nostalgic longing for the past, exaltation of the common man, praise and personification of nature, and opposition of the head and the heart in response to life. Frost's romanticism, however, was always counterbalanced by his firm grasp of reality, a grasp that grew more tenacious as he matured. Emphasis was also given in this chapter to certain inconsistencies on an intellectual plane in Frost's romantic philosophy that continued to be apparent in his work.

The search for meaning that gives impetus to serious art took the form in Frost's work of attempts to reconcile his skepticism and his natural proclivity for pluralism with the orthodox religious concepts and ideals that were so strong a part of his early environment. Though the attempt at reconciliation remains apparent in his poetry, it is also apparent that it was never completely successful. Eventually, as he suffered through periods of serious doubt, Frost seemed to arrive at a cautious, limited faith bounded, on the one hand, by his uncertainties, but ever unbounded in its response to truth.

Frost's ambivalences served his poetry, for they are recorded therein, providing his meaning and his metaphor. His poetry, on the other hand, served toward the attainment
of that conflicting harmony that was his unique solution.

Though he remained wary of being too positive about the answers to the big questions, no one ever became more sure of the one thing a man can affirm for himself—the demands of his own nature.
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**Articles**


