NATURE AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE IN THE POETRY
OF ROBERT FROST

THESIS

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This study seeks to demonstrate that nature provided Frost an objective background against which he could measure the validity of human experience and gain a fuller understanding of it. The experiences examined with reference to the poetry include loneliness, anxiety, sorrow, and hope. Attention is given to the influence of Frost's philosophical skepticism upon his poetry.

The study reveals that Frost discovered correspondences between nature and human experience which clarified his perspective of existence. The experiences of loneliness, anxiety, and sorrow were found to relate to Frost's feeling of separation from nature and from the source of existence. The experience of hope was found to relate to Frost's vision of the wholeness and unity of life, a vision which derives from humanity's common source with nature.
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CHAPTER I

PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM: CONTRAST BETWEEN NATURE AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE

One of the most significant clues for the interpretation of Robert Frost's poetry comes from his description of a poem as "a clarification of life." The fact that Frost perceived life as needing clarification suggests something of his questioning outlook. Lawrance Thompson has aptly summed up the forces of existence which molded that outlook: "Accepting the tragic implications of conflict between heart and mind (each yearning for permanence in a world of acknowledged transience), Frost found this conflict to be the bedrock of hard fact to which his incisive and analytical skepticism finally brought him." Frost's epigram "The Secret Sits" playfully captures the searching tone which characterizes much of his poetry: "We dance round in a ring and suppose/ But the Secret sits in the middle and knows." 


When Frost brought his skepticism to bear, however, upon the objective reality of nature through the medium of poetry, insight was the product and "a clarification of life" the result. It is the intent of this study to examine Frost's use of nature as a background against which human experience becomes a little more understandable, a background which serves to refine, as it were, his skepticism into clarification.

That skepticism is Frost's habitual frame of mind is easily substantiated by a consideration of his poems. Such an overview may prove more helpful, however, if prefaced with a definition of skepticism, generally understood to be the philosophical doctrine that absolute knowledge is impossible and that inquiry must be a process of doubting in order to acquire approximate or relative certainty. "The Trial by Existence" expresses Frost's doubting frame of mind in regard to life's meaning:

'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. (p. 21)

In "The Lesson for Today," Frost manifests an even stronger skepticism which borders on fatalism and which is again directed toward the ultimate meaning of life:

But though we all may be inclined to wait
And follow some development of state,
Or see what comes of science and invention,
There is a limit to our time extension.
We all are doomed to broken-off careers,
And so's the nation, so's the total race.
The earth itself is liable to the fate
Of meaninglessly being broken off. (p. 355)

Instead of becoming despondent over the mutability and
ambiguity of life, however, Frost perceives the quest for
meaning itself as the primary value of life, as in "Escapist--
Never":

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

Any who seek him seek in him the seeker.
His life is a pursuit of a pursuit forever. (p. 421)

Frost's concept of man in "Escapist--Never" is much like that
described by Ernst Cassirer: "Man is declared to be that
creature who is constantly in search of himself--a creature
who in every moment of his existence must examine and scru-
tinize the conditions of his existence. In this scrutiny, in
this critical attitude toward human life, consists the real
value of human life." ⁴

Other poems in which Frost's questing attitude is in
evidence include "The Star-Splitter," "A Star in a Stoneboat,"
a farmer has burned his house and used the fire insurance
money to buy a telescope in order "To satisfy a lifelong
curiosity/About our place among the infinities" (p. 177).
After considerable stargazing, however, his only conclusion
is another question:

We've looked and looked, but after all where are we?
Do we know any better where we are,
And how it stands between the night tonight
And a man with a smoky lantern chimney? (p. 179)

"A Star in a Stoneboat" finds the poet watching for
"showers of charted meteors" (p. 173) in his search for "The
one thing palpable besides the soul/To penetrate the air in
which we roll" (p. 172). Longing to restore the fallen stars
to the place of their original landing, he declares,

Some may know what they seek in school and church,
And why they seek it there; for what I search
I must go measuring stone walls, perch on perch. (p. 173)

In "Misgiving" Frost observes the fallen autumn leaves,
which have sought refuge from their wind-blown flight in
"sheltering wall/Or thicket, or hollow place for the night"
(p. 236). The leaves induce the poet to think of the time
when he too will be blown loose from life's moorings, and
he only hopes

that when I am free,
As they are free, to go in quest
Of the knowledge beyond the bounds of life
It may not seem better to me to rest.

Though poetry offers Frost a means of questioning and
searching, it does not necessarily become incapable of affir-
mation. Instead, Frost maintains what Thompson has called an
ability "to control an ingrained skepticism in such a manner
as to deal playfully with the extremes of affirmation and
denial."5 Job, in A Masque of Reason, is overwhelmed by the

5p. 28.
apparent lack of purpose for his great suffering, but the very process of questioning and doubting leads him to a profound wisdom, even as Frost's skepticism does for his poetry. In the midst of his uncertainties, Job arrives at an unavoidable, optimistic truth:

We don't know where we are, or who we are. We don't know one another; don't know You; Don't know what time it is; we don't know, don't we? Who says we don't? Who got up these misgivings? Oh, we know well enough to go ahead with. (p. 483)

Frost's skepticism thus helps him to achieve an all-encompassing grasp of both life's beauty and its tragedy that makes his poetry insightful and practical. Realizing that no theory of life is all-inclusive, Frost pursues a poetic expression based on contrast between opposites as an aid to discovering truth. In "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers," the contrast is between free will and divine predestination. The woman in the poem is allowed to choose her own course of life, but the "Voices" which control her fate assert paradoxically, "Yes, we can let her [choose] and still triumph" (p. 256). A further contrast in the poem emerges from the ironic fact that all the woman's choosing of joy results only in grief.

In "Two Tramps in Mud Time," Frost contrasts his love for the labor of splitting his own wood with two indigent tramps' need for work, and he decides that

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. (p. 277)
"To a Young Wretch" also presents the conflict of opposing interests. A boy desires a Christmas tree at the expense of Frost's woods, but the poet recognizes that

    even where, thus, opposing interests kill,
    They are to be thought of as opposing goods
    Oftener than as conflicting good and ill. (p. 350)

In "Fire and Ice" (p. 220), Frost contrasts desire and hate and concludes ironically that the destructiveness of either is adequate to end the world. The contrast in "Bond and Free" is between love and thought--the first clinging to the earth and "straining in the world's embrace," while the second shakes "his ankles free" and "cleaves the interstellar gloom" (p. 120). "Take Something Like a Star" (p. 403) also relates contemplative thought to the heavens as the poet contrasts the steadfastness of a star with the uncertain flux of the world below.

"To a Thinker" mentions a number of opposites which expose the dialectic character of thinking. Frost declares that the process of thinking is much like the weaving of "a stabled horse":

    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. (pp. 325-26)

Another direct expression of Frost's search for truth as the product of dialectic thought occurs in "Quandary." In this poem he demonstrates his agreement with Plato that
"serious things cannot be understood without laughable things, nor opposites at all without opposites, if a man is really to have intelligence of either."  

Never have I been sad or glad
That there was such a thing as bad.
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. (p. 467)

Frost never takes his critical pursuit of truth too seriously, however. Instead, he balances the sincerity of his approach with a propensity for humor, as in "Boeotian," where he satirizes systematic philosophy:

    I love to toy with the Platonic notion
    That wisdom need not be of Athens Attic,
    But well may be Laconic, even Boeotian.
    At least I will not have it systematic. (p. 362)

In "A Reflex" science is the object of Frost's skeptical humor:

    Hear my rigmarole.
    Science stuck a pole
    Down a likely hole
    And he got it bit.

    . . . . . . . . . .
    "Ah," he said, "Qui vive,
    Who goes there, and what
    ARE we to believe?
    That there is an It?" (p. 468)

Still in a mock-serious tone, Frost also gives religion its turn at being the object of his skepticism in "Not All There":

    I turned to speak to God
    About the world's despair;
    But to make bad matters worse
    I found God wasn't there.

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6Quoted in Thompson, p. 60.
God turned to speak to me
(Don't anybody laugh);
God found I wasn't there--
At least not over half. (p. 309)

Frost's humor thus serves both as a contrast to his
seriousness and as an expression of his skepticism. In "On
Making Certain Anything Has Happened," the poet casts himself
in the role of a

watcher of the void,
Whose part should be to tell
What star if any fell. (p. 383)

With teasing jocularity Frost admits,

I should justly hesitate
To frighten church or state
By announcing a star down
From, say, the Cross or Crown. (p. 384)

Again gazing at the stars, Frost lets his humor become frolic-
some as he observes "the great Overdog" in "Canis Major":

He dances upright
All the way to the west
And never once drops
On his forefeet to rest.

I'm a poor underdog,
But tonight I will bark
With the great Overdog
That romps in the dark. (p. 261)

Though Frost has tried in "A Wish to Comply" to give
serious consideration to what others say he should, his innate
skepticism humorously wins out:

Did I see it go by,
That Millikan mote?
Well, I said that I did.
I made a good try.
But I'm no one to quote.
If I have a defect
It's a wish to comply
And see as I'm bid.
I rather suspect
All I saw was the lid
Going over my eye.
I honestly think
All I saw was a wink. (pp. 391-92)

Frost's mischievous "wink" is again evident in the humor of "For Once, Then, Something," which epitomizes the comic-seriousness of his search for truth. Peering into a well with the hope of seeing beyond his reflection, the poet catches a fleeting glimpse of something uncertain and asks, "What was that whiteness? Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something" (p. 225). Frost treats even the quest for truth itself with characteristic humor, which Thompson has referred to as "the bright weapon of Frost's philosophical skepticism." 7 "Not Quite Social" states the principle well: "The way of understanding is partly mirth" (p. 306).

Frost's skepticism manifests itself not only through his searching and doubting, through the attempt to comprehend opposites, and through humor, but also through introspection. Elizabeth Jennings has observed, "Truthfully, though often indirectly, his poems chart his own inner world, and oddly enough, this poet who appears to be gazing constantly at the natural world, is also very much an inward poet." 8 Frost himself readily admits his introspective inclination; and as

7 p. 140.
8 Frost (New York, 1966), p. 3.
Jennings has indicated, he frequently turns to nature to convey his feeling, as when he addresses the "Tree at My Window":

That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
your head so much concerned with outer,
mine with inner, weather. (p. 252)

Having been perplexed himself over the exigencies of his inner life, Frost is sympathetic with those who doubt the worth of the human struggle. He poses the question "why?" as if it had never been asked before and acknowledges the uncertainty of the answer in "A Question":

A voice said, Look me in the stars
And tell me truly, men of earth,
If all the soul-and-body scars
Were not too much to pay for birth. (p. 362)

Other poems that reflect Frost's introspection include "Now Close the Windows," "A Mood Apart," "Build Soil," and "A Cabin in the Clearing." "Now Close the Windows" expresses Frost's willingness to shut himself off from the world and be concerned only with his own inner life:

Now close the windows and hush all the fields:
If the trees must, let them silently toss;
No bird is singing now, and if there is,
Be it my loss. (p. 25)

In "A Mood Apart" Frost's introspective solitude is valued as something to be cherished and defended. Becoming aware of curious onlookers as he works in his garden, the poet says,

I stopped my song and almost heart,
For any eye is an evil eye
That looks in onto a mood apart. (p. 385)

"Build Soil" reiterates the necessity of introspection as Frost vents his skeptical attitude toward too much
sociability—"We're too unseparate out among each other--/
With goods to sell and notions to impart" (p. 324)—and warns
that the need for introspection cannot be repressed: "We are
too much out, and if we won't draw in/We shall be driven in."
In "A Cabin in the Clearing," Frost relates the need for
introspection to a sense of security and identity by means of
a dialogue between "Mist" and "Smoke":

Mist. I don't believe the sleepers in this house
Know where they are.

Smoke. They've been here long enough
To push the woods back from around the house
And part them in the middle with a path.

Mist. And still I doubt if they know where they are.
And I begin to fear they never will.

Smoke. If the day ever comes when they know who
They are, they may know better where they are. (pp. 413-14)

"On a Tree Fallen Across the Road" picks up the intro-
spective theme in regard to identity and exhibits the same
questioning tone as "A Cabin in the Clearing":

The tree the tempest with a crash of wood
Throws down in front of us is not to bar
Our passage to our journey's end for good,
But just to ask us who we think we are

Insisting always on our own way so. (p. 238)

Frost said of the poem in a note to Elizabeth Sergeant, "The
best line in it, if you ask me is

But just to ask us who we think we are[.]"
Who in Hell are we? That is the question for all over seventy-five..."9

Frost's introspective tendency can be found not only in his poetry, but also in his poetic theories. "A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a home-sickness or a love-sickness," he wrote. "It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment."10 Thompson has related Frost's idea in the following manner: "he begins by finding the initial impetus of the poet to rise out of intensely perceived experiences which are given expression because of the hunger, the need for expression..."11 "the mental recognition of meaning in this emotional experience gradually asserts itself on a new plane of metaphorical reference,"12 a plane which "amounts to a new awareness of self."13

If not balanced by some objective reference point, however, Frost's introspection could have led to an oversubjective, and hence, narrow and unrealistic perspective. Frost's attentiveness to the natural world provided an objective reference point to balance the subjectivity of his feelings. He used the natural world as a foil to the human world, always measuring his subjective experience against the

10Quoted in Thompson, p. 18.
11p. 21.
12p. 25.
13p. 23.
"otherness" of the natural world, not necessarily to determine any universal "ought," but simply to discern more clearly what "is." Frost was not concerned with developing new theories and philosophies by which to mold man's behavior. Instead, he sought correspondences and analogies in nature that would sharpen and clarify his perception of existence, metaphors that would serve as "a momentary stay against confusion."14

Whereas the meaning of the human world in Frost's poetry derives clearly from his own experiences, the meaning of the natural world varies from poem to poem, depending on the immediate focus, and consequently presents a potential difficulty in understanding the relationship between man and nature. Critical opinion on Frost's handling of nature underscores the complexity of the subject matter and the diversity of approach critics have taken toward it. A review of certain major Frost critics serves to distinguish the perspective of the present study.

Reuben Brower says in his The Poetry of Robert Frost, "The 'meaning of Nature' is a beguiling phrase for the humane reader of Frost or of any poet, if he forgets that he is a reader, not a historian of ideas nor an anatomist of meanings. The meanings of nature that matter for him come through the poems as wholes."15 Brower's admonition for dealing with

14 "The Figure a Poem Makes," p. 394.
Frost's nature poetry as a whole is in accord with Thompson's suggestion that "the cumulative expression of a consistent perspective inevitably asserts itself above the inconsistencies during a period of years." Reginald Cook declares in *The Dimensions of Robert Frost* that symmetry in Frost's poetry "comes from the development of . . . [his] ideas during a lifetime of experience. It is a natural symmetry and not a built-in one." The consensus of such criticism is that Frost approaches nature with no preconceived notions of what it should be or do, and therefore, only a composite view of his poems will come near reflecting his overall attitude toward nature.

George Nitchie, in his *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost*, observes that Frost tends to avoid definitive pronouncements about nature and its relationship to man; instead, Frost describes nature as he perceives it to be at the particular moment of poetic experience. Nitchie, however, apparently disturbed over Frost's consequent lack of a philosophically consistent concept of nature, concludes that nature functions for Frost most importantly as a kind of "withdrawal according to plan, a strategic evasion by means of which things are simplified, rendered graspable." Even though Frost's world of nature is no paradise, according to

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16 p. 177. 
17 (New York, 1958), p. 82. 
Nitchie, neither does it contain insoluble problems or dilemmas. Many of Frost's nature poems, asserts Nitchie, demonstrate the "elimination of a certain kind of psychic effort." 19

Nitchie's view of Frost's nature as a "strategic evasion" does injustice to Frost's dauntless and careful observation of both the natural world and man himself; and Nitchie later reveals the basis of his judgment to be Frost's "final refusal either to assert or to deny teleology" 20--the ultimate purpose or design which manifests itself in natural processes or occurrences. But the tentatives Frost offers in the area of teleology are entirely consistent with his skepticism.

Arthur M. Sampley takes Nitchie to task in an essay entitled "The Myth and the Quest: The Stature of Robert Frost." Admitting that many of Frost's weaknesses which Nitchie criticizes are undeniable, Sampley argues that "when Professor Nitchie goes on to declare that Frost is not a major poet because, unlike Yeats and Eliot, he has not constructed a logical view for interpreting life, I must demur." 21 Asserting the validity of Frost's philosophical position, Sampley explains Frost's universe as having a "relation to ourselves we can never fully comprehend. It is realistic,

19 p. 18. 20 p. 37.
21 South Atlantic Quarterly, LXX, Summer (1971), 288.
then, to admit our ignorance and make the best adjustment to uncertainty that we can.\textsuperscript{22}

The fact that Frost's ultimates, which reveal themselves in the context of nature, are at best equivocations and paradoxes directly contradicts Nitchie's assertion that nature simplifies the issues of life for Frost. Far from simplifying, nature instead provides Frost a backdrop for asking some of the most unanswerable questions man must face, which Nitchie himself phrased as follows: "Are our intuitions of order self-generated illusions, valid only in the pragmatic sense that they enable us to get along more comfortably in a world we never made, or are they legitimate revelations of unity and design that exist independently of our awareness of them? We cannot be sure; as in 'Acquainted with the Night' and 'Neither Out Far nor In Deep,' the final statement is equivocal."\textsuperscript{23} In essence, then, Nitchie has admitted the complications that Frost's use of nature presents, and he has correctly included Frost among those poets for whom nature has serious philosophical ramifications.

Two other contributions to an understand of Frost's concept of nature emerge from Nitchie's thesis. First, Nitchie declares that "in the face of such persistent ambiguity of statement, any attempt to reduce Frost's cosmology to diagrammatic accuracy is dangerous."\textsuperscript{24} Nitchie emphasizes that Frost

\textsuperscript{22}p. 289.  \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{23}pp. 48-49.  \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{24}p. 49.
is not partial to any systematic approach to nature and that there is no dogma to which he must conform, according to which he must interpret nature; he is free to take it as he finds it. Second, Nitchie corroborates Frost's use of nature as an objective reference point when he observes that "Frost seldom permits himself the Wordsworthian rapture. On the whole, Frost's nature is impersonal, indifferent, and other."25

In *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*, John F. Lynen interprets Frost's view of nature much as Nitchie does, but Lynen's interpretation is also colored by his basic premise that all of Frost's poetry is shaped by his pastoral perspective. Lynen explains that the essence of pastoral poetry is the contrast between town and country. Though a kind of pastoralism appears in Frost, to say that the bulk of his poetry is motivated by the contrast between town and country is to distort the major thrust of his thought. Frost is far too individualistic, too concerned with his own integrity, and too interested in the ageless plight of humanity to be really caught up in the value struggle of rural vs. urban. A brief passage from Frost's letter to *The Amherst Student* suggests that the abiding concern of his thinking is the plight of the individual human being, whether of rural or urban origins: "One can safely say after from six to thirty thousand years of experience," writes Frost, "that the

25pp. 31-32.
evident design is a situation here in which it will always
be about equally hard to save your soul." 26 "The Lesson for
Today" also illustrates how little the external trappings of
society, urban or rural, really affect the basic problems
confronting mankind; whether it be for the medieval monk or
the contemporary poet, the lesson for today involves

universals, not confined
To any one time, place, or human kind.
We're either nothing or a God's regret.

One age is like another for the soul. (pp. 353-54)

Lynen does, however, mention another contrast which he
says is habitual with Frost, the contrast between the human
world and nature. Though he eventually interprets the con-
trast in terms of his original thesis, Lynen's insights on
Frost's view of nature are relevant to the present study.
His point of departure is a comparison with Wordsworth and
the Romantic tradition: "Whereas Wordsworth sees in nature
a mystical kinship with the human mind, Frost views nature
as essentially alien." 27 Lynen agrees with Nitchie that,
according to Frost, nature is basically indifferent and re-
mote; but he also suggests that "there is a fundamental
ambiguity of feeling in Frost's view of nature. It is to be
feared as man's cruel taskmaster, scorned as insensible,
brutish, unthinking matter; yet it is to be loved, not because

26 "A Letter to The Amherst Student," Robert Frost: Poetry
and Prose, pp. 343-44.

it has any secret sympathy for man . . . but rather because it puts man to the test and thus brings out his true greatness . . .

Lynen indicates something of the paradox that Frost perceives in nature: in spite of its alien otherness, Frost's nature "is really an image of the whole world of circumstances within which man finds himself. It represents what one might call 'the human situation.'"

Frost's deep affinity for contraries and his avid desire for correspondences both find expression in the contrast between the human world and nature; though opposites, they still contain parallels. Lynen contends that Frost's "search for meaning is really a search for something human within the infinite spaces which Pascal viewed with such horror." In "All Revelation" Frost's "search for something human" in nature leads him to understand that

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. (pp. 332-33)

Thompson points to the same kind of search in "West-Running Brook," in which the poet makes a deliberate attempt to discern man's true relationship to nature:

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.

\[28\text{p. 146.} \quad 29\text{p. 162.} \quad 30\text{p. 145.}\]
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. (pp. 259-60)

Though man's place in the scheme of nature is perhaps no less ambiguous than it was before the observations about the brook, at least the search resulted in a correspondence between the poet's existence and the wave riding on a sunken rock: the wave's contrariety to the stream corresponds to Frost's desire for permanence in the midst of transience, and this yearning becomes "the sacred essence of life itself." 31

Nature is replete with such correspondences for Frost. But "just where Wordsworth and Emerson would most surely be expansive in seeing the natural event as symbolic of a higher law," says Brower, "Frost is most reserved." 32 Frost's instinctive skepticism insists that such correspondences are not necessarily intrinsic in nature, but are, as Reginald Cook has put it, "the product of the natural background and the poet interacting at a point of intensity." 33 "Kitty Hawk" expresses Frost's belief that the meaning of nature is whatever man conceives it to be in his interaction with the natural world:

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Nature's never quite
Sure she hasn't erred
In her vague design
Till on some fine night
We two come in flight
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31 Thompson, p. 187. 32 p. 98.

33 p. 84.
Like a king and queen
And by right divine,
Waving scepter-baton,
Undertake to tell her
What in being stellar
She's supposed to mean. (p. 442)

Frost's skepticism thus invests his nature poetry with what Lynen has noted as an "unflinching honesty in the face of facts." \(^{34}\) Brower has compared Frost's honesty with nature to "Thoreau's view of poetry as 'a true account of the actual.'" \(^{35}\) But the "actual" includes more than the visible: "Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another," Frost states, "is the philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter, to make the final unity." \(^{36}\) The fusion of spirit and matter, of meaning and form, was the aim of Frost's poetic endeavor, and its success was the result of his keen, thorough perception of both the outer world and the inner, the natural world and the human. "We have had nature poetry for a hundred years," Frost declares. "Now we must have the human foreground with it." \(^{37}\)

Thus, in the process of introspection, Frost revisits those experiences which are most distinctively human, drawing upon the natural background as the objective reference point capable

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\(^{34}\) p. 151.  
\(^{35}\) p. 84.  
of controlling and clarifying his subjectivity. The human foreground which occupies much of his poetic concern and which constitutes the focus of this study includes the experiences of loneliness, anxiety, sorrow, and hope. The poems considered are those in which Frost draws upon nature to elucidate the mystery of existence as it relates to these experiences. In each poem Frost's philosophical skepticism inclines him to value both his experience and the natural world as indispensable, complementary tools in the process of poetic creation, a process that will perhaps end "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."  

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38 "The Figure a Poem Makes," p. 394.
CHAPTER II

LONELINESS

Frost writes in his essay "The Constant Symbol" that "every poem is an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements."\(^1\) Frost's description conveys his awareness of the essential aloneness of every individual in confronting the forces of life; it expresses his conviction about life as a struggle between himself and "alien entanglements"; and it implies his faith in the value of that conflict and its ability to elicit a clarification of life. For Frost, nature provides numerous correspondences to the entanglements which the individual will must endure. Nature also affords Frost an objective background for expressing and grappling with the subjective experience of loneliness.

In "The Constant Symbol," Frost declares that most importantly poetry is "metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority."\(^2\) In discussing the ulteriority of Frost's poetry, Thompson writes of the "subtle indirection of Frost's dramatic method. So much more is suggested than is stated.

\(^1\) Robert Frost: *Poetry and Prose*, p. 401.
\(^2\) pp. 400-01.
Somehow the thoughts and emotions are embodied in a context of words which suggest not only a physical setting . . . but also a psychological setting. On numerous occasions Frost's use of nature communicates both physical and psychological aloneness. His understanding of loneliness can be illuminated through a study of the metaphors he draws from nature to express and clarify the experience of loneliness.

The term "loneliness" lends itself to some ambiguity and warrants close attention. The dictionary defines loneliness as a state of being solitary or without companions, a state of isolation, and a feeling of dejection due to the awareness of being alone. Though Frost's handling of loneliness touches all of the aspects mentioned in the definition, there is still a deeper dimension to Frost's use of loneliness, which is better understood in light of Charles Frankel's explanation of the concept of the individual: "The concept of the individual, as we have come to know and use it, is the product of a gigantic historical process of social disengagement. In this process . . . it came to be denied that the identity of any man could be fixed, or his rights and responsibilities assigned, simply in terms of his membership in any social group or any congeries of such groups."4

3 p. 48.

That such a concept of the individual lies at the heart of Frost's sense of loneliness is attested by critic George Nitchie, who accuses him of a predilection for "asocial themes." Frost's "Not Quite Social" demonstrates that Nitchie is not without basis for his accusation:

To punish me overcruelly 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. (p. 306)

The concluding lines of "Build Soil" suggest the same idea even more pointedly: "We're too unseparate. And going home/from company means coming to our senses" (p. 325).

Far from debunking the collective values of mankind in these poems, however, Frost is instead affirming, in the words of Frankel, "the ideal of an individual for whom the fundamental and continuing experience of life is the experience of choice, and of personal responsibility for one's choices." The importance of making choices is often reflected in Frost's poetry—in "The Road Not Taken," "Love and a Question," "Come In," and "I Could Give All to Time." The loneliness of life's choices is made especially poignant in "The Trial by Existence":

5 p. 143. 6 pp. 111-12.
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. (p. 21)

Frost's sense of the loneliness of is rooted in the ultimate loneliness of death, in "the pain that has but one close."
The choices of life must be made individually and alone, just as the finality of death must be faced individually and alone.

Two things militate against Frost's using nature to reflect the loneliness of the choice-making individual. First, nature operates according to laws which are inherent in its structure and which control its course. Consequently, nature offers no parallel to man's capacity for choice and offers no clarification of the agony of choosing. Second, man, in relating himself to nature, becomes subject to the same natural laws by which nature functions. Consequently, the range of man's choices in relating to nature is considerably circumscribed by natural laws. Man, however, constantly pushes against the boundaries nature imposes upon him. Nature's restriction of man comprises the theme of "There Are Roughly Zones," in which the "limitless trait in the hearts of men" (p. 305) induces one farmer to try his luck with a peach tree much too far north for it to grow. The poet asks concerning man and the way he relates to the natural world,

Why is his nature forever so hard to teach
That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,
There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed?
Man's ability to choose depends upon his consciousness of different alternatives, as opposed to nature's lack of consciousness and lack of ability to make choices; man's individuality is based on his finite singularity, as opposed to nature's infinite diversity and immensity. Nature's psychological import for man is therefore that of the unconscious and the infinite, to which every man must eventually concede his choice-making individuality. Accordingly, the primary images in nature which Frost does use to emphasize the loneliness of the individual are those which represent an appeal to man to give up his choice-making capacity, in other words, an appeal to surrender to death.

A classic example is "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," in which the woods, so "lovely, dark, and deep" (p. 224), which the poet stops to watch "fill up with snow," clearly have a magnetic power which he must deliberately resist by an act of choice if he is to keep his promises—his responsibilities and obligations in the world. Similarly, in the poem "Come In," the appeal of thrush music in the dark woods is "almost like a call to come in/To the dark and lament" (p. 334). Again by an act of choice, the poet declines the invitation with "But no, I was out for stars." In both poems, the association with death of the woods and their appeal is a common interpretation and not to be discounted. Such a reading recalls Thompson's comment about the physical setting's simultaneously delineating a psychological setting.
Nature again serves as a reminder of man's mortality in "The Sound of Trees," in which the poet sees the trees as "that that talks of going/But never gets away" (p. 156); his empathy with the trees' desire is readily apparent:

My feet tug at the floor
And my head sways to my shoulder
Sometimes when I watch trees sway,

I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice
Some day when they are in voice....

The poet states the result of his "reckless choice" simply in the last lines of the poem: "I shall have less to say,/But I shall be gone." The idea of getting away from life is more explicitly related to trees in "Into My Own," in which the poet wishes

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. (p. 5)

The reference to death is unmistakable in "A Leaf-Treader," in which the poet has heard the leaves "threatening under their breath" all summer long:

And when they came it seemed with a will to carry me with them to death.

They spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were leaf to leaf.
They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to grief.
But it was no reason I had to go because they had to go.
Now up, my knee, to keep on top of another year of snow. (pp. 297-98)
The dying leaves of this poem convey a sense of wistful loneliness which is hardly tempered by the poet's refusal to yield to their urging. His choice to resist the leaves' invitation commits him only to the necessity of more lonely choices, as he must continue to resist the implacable winter snows. The correspondence between nature's mutability and man's mutability is undeniable, but man's choice to forestall the ultimate claims of death implies an affirmation of his individuality and aloneness.

Besides dealing with the loneliness of being a choice-making individual, Frost struggles with another aspect of loneliness—the loneliness of being separated from others, from nature, and from the source of one's life. Theologian Paul Tillich declares that the loneliness of being separated is intrinsic in man's existence. "Man is alone because he is man! . . . Being alive means being in a body—a body separated from all other bodies. And being separated means being alone,"7 Tillich writes in "Loneliness and Solitude." "This is true of every creature, and it is more true of man than of any other creature. He is not only alone; he also knows that he is alone. . . . It is his destiny to be alone and to be aware of it."8 This idea of loneliness is the cosmic sense of loneliness that shapes Frost's understanding of "the

8pp. 15-16.
great predicament" and permeates the nature poetry in which he exploits this theme.

Nature's alien otherness for Frost inevitably increases his sense of separation and loneliness. "Neither Out Far nor In Deep," though not explicitly about the experience of loneliness, nevertheless captures the feeling of man's separation from nature.

The people along the sand
All turn and look one way.
Theirs turn their back on the land.
They look at the sea all day.

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...

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? (p. 301)

In interpreting the meaning of the sea in this poem, Nitchie suggests the validity of the Freudian approach to "the sea as source, as destiny, as the ultimate identity or loss of identity we long for." According to Nitchie's interpretation, the people who watch the sea all day express the loneliness of their separation from the source of their existence. Ultimately, the sea can communicate to them nothing more than itself as a natural fact, which, as Nitchie proposes, is more likely to drown them than to disclose the meaning of life.

9p. 47.
Their inability to penetrate the sea's secret, however, makes their persistent vigil all the more pathetic, or perhaps even heroic.

Another natural symbol which Frost uses to emphasize the loneliness of separation is still more remote from man than the sea, and it seems to have an even greater fascination for Frost. In the poem entitled "Stars," Frost finds that stars communicate nature's utter indifference to man:

How countlessly they congregate
O'er our tumultuous snow,
As if with keenness for our fate,
Our faltering few steps on
And yet with neither love nor hate,
Those stars like some snow-white
Minerva's snow-white marble eyes
Without the gift of sight. (p. 9)

The poet's tone betrays a sense of yearning in gazing at the stars much like that of the people who gazed at the sea. The physical distance and separation that cannot be overcome create a setting of psychological alienation due to nature's evident disregard for man's concerns.

The lonely role into which man is consequently cast is expressed in another poem called "Skeptic," in which the poet addresses a star in his typically whimsical manner:

Far star that tickles for me my sensitive plate
And fries a couple of ebon atoms white,
I don't believe I believe a thing you state,
I put no faith in the seeming facts of light. (p. 389)

His skepticism culminates in an image of morbid isolation:
The universe may or may not be very immense. As a matter of fact there are times when I am apt to feel it close in tight against my sense like a caul in which I was born and still am wrapped. (pp. 389-90)

Ironically, the far-away star in this poem has ultimately led the poet to feel more keenly than ever a claustrophobic sense of his separation from everything.

"Triple Bronze," on the other hand, seems to praise that separateness and to advocate reinforcing it:

The Infinite's being so wide
Is the reason the Powers provide
For inner defense my hide. (p. 348)

For a "next defense," the poet builds himself a sturdy wall, and finally,

a number of us agree
On a national boundary
And that defense makes three
Between too much and me. (pp. 348-49).

Contrasting the ideas of "Skeptic" and "Triple Bronze" exposes Frost's apparent ambivalence toward the loneliness of being separate; in the first poem, separateness is associated with the unpleasant thought of being wrapped tightly in a caul, whereas in the second poem, separateness is valued as necessary for self-defense. Though Frost's separateness is the source of his loneliness, he evidently concluded that separateness must be protected and cherished because it is also what makes him individual and unique.

In "Desert Places" Frost draws supportive imagery not only from stars, but also from woods, snow, and darkness to
convey his feeling of loneliness:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it--it is theirs.  
All animals are smothered in their lairs.  
I am too absent-spirited to count;  
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less--
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars--on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places. (p. 296)

The obliterating snow begins the picture, followed closely by
the darkness of night settling upon the woods and immersing
the "absent-spirited" poet in its landscape of psychological
as well as physical desolation. The starkness of the poet's
loneliness finds a parallel in the blank whiteness of the
snow which has "nothing to express." The last stanza crys-
tallizes the poem's meaning: for all its vast emptiness, the
universe cannot compare with the terrifying "desert places"
the poet must contend with in himself.

As shown in "Desert Places" and as cited in "Stopping by
Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Come In," Frost frequently
finds woods to be a natural reminder of man's loneliness.
The woods of "On Going Unnoticed" declare to the poet the
insignificance of his momentary passing:
As vain to raise a voice as a sigh  
In the tumult of free leaves on high.  
What are you, in the shadow of trees  
Engaged up there with the light and breeze? (p. 247)

The question that the poet asks about himself as compared with the "tumult" of wind-blown trees is answered in the following stanzas:

Less than the coralroot, you know,  
That is content with the daylight low,  
And has no leaves at all of its own;  
Whose spotted flowers hang meanly down.

You grasp the bark by a rugged pleat,  
And look up small from the forest's feet.  
The only leaf it drops goes wide,  
Your name not written on either side.

The self-deprecation of "Less than the coralroot, you know" can only stem from the poet's desire to be accepted and recognized; but in view of nature's objective detachment from human concerns, his feeling of insignificance and loneliness prevails.

Frost discovers, however, that in spite of nature's indifference, he is still able to find a correlative to himself in the little coralroot:

You linger your little hour and are gone,  
And still the woods sweep leafily on,  
Not even missing the coralroot flower  
You took as a trophy of the hour.

Although the poet sees himself as "Less than the coralroot" in the scheme of nature, he knows that the woods will miss both himself and the coralroot equally, even if it misses them not at all. His loneliness is not necessarily mitigated
thereby, but perceiving such a correspondence is part of the clarifying, form-giving process of Frost's poetry.

The woods again bring human experience into relief in "The Wood-Pile," as the poet is "Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day":

The view was all in lines
Straight up and down of tall slim trees
Too much alike to mark or name a place by
So as to say for certain I was here
Or somewhere else: I was just far from home. (p. 101)

The setting gives the poet no clue as to his position; it is without distinction just as the snow in "Desert Places" was without expression. He cannot be sure of his whereabouts; he can only know that he is "far from home." In other words, uncertainty and separation are the central facts of his locality.

The poet's subsequent discovery of the forgotten pile of firewood--the evidence of man's one-time presence and of his present absence, of his labor and of its abandonment--contributes to the lonely imagery of the poem. John Lynen has observed that the woodpile in this poem serves to heighten the contrast between man and nature, showing that nature itself cannot "give the poet's experience meaning. The only meaning one can find in nature is that imposed upon it by the human mind."\textsuperscript{10} Nature's consistent reticence about "meanings" leaves the poet with a sense of having been abandoned to create his

\textsuperscript{10} p. 145.
own meaning; the poet therefore interprets the woodpile as having been left there "To warm the frozen swamp as best it could/With the slow smokeless burning of decay" (p. 102).

The absence of human companionship, implicit in the structure of most of the poems discussed thus far, but hinted at more directly in "The Wood-Pile," is the basis of the poem "Bereft"; but Frost still uses natural imagery to bear the emotional weight of the fearful loneliness that the poem projects. "Where had I heard this wind before/Change like this to a deeper roar?" (p. 251), the poet asks, giving the first clue as to the ominous character of the experience to be described. "Looking downhill to a frothy shore," the poet is again aware of an unpropitious appearance in nature. In accordance with the threats of the wind and sea, "somber clouds in the west were massed." And finally,

Out in the porch's sagging floor
Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
Blindly struck at my knee and missed.

When the wind, the sea, the clouds, and the leaves appear to join forces for a general onslaught upon humanity, nature's supposed indifference verges on malevolence. The poet, however, interprets nature's intimidating gestures as the result of his aloneness:

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.
As in "Bereft," the lack of companionship furnishes the source of loneliness in "Ghost House," but nature's encroachments upon man in this poem are only melancholy instead of frightening. Nature is simply in the process of restoring to itself what man has abandoned, much like in "The Wood-Pile," "Directive," and "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things." The settings of all these poems convey a sense of deep desolation due to their former inhabitancy by man. When the poet says in "Ghost House," "I dwell with a strangely aching heart/In that vanished abode there far apart" (p. 6), he expresses the same yearning for the past which is implied in the birds' "murmur more like the sigh we sigh/From too much dwelling on what has been" (p. 242), in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things."

The setting of "Ghost House" suggests a longing for the time when the farm was inhabited by people; in fact, the poignant loneliness of the poem rests upon the contrast between the farm once inhabited by people and the farm now overrun by nature. All that remains of the house--"the cellar walls,/And a cellar" (p. 5)--has been taken over by wild raspberries, just as the ruined fences, the fields, and the footpath to the well have been reclaimed by grapevines, trees, and grass, respectively.

Toward the end of the poem, Frost discovers that nature has restored even the former human occupants to itself:
It is under the small, dim, summer star.
I know not who these mute folk are
   Who share the unlit place with me--
Those stones out under the low-limbed tree
Doubtless bear names that the mosses mar. (p. 6)

Frost's loneliness in the company of "these mute folk" is intensified because he realizes that in the absence of any resistance, nature tends to extinguish all evidence of individual human identity.

Nature does not manifest any greater respect, however, for the individual elements which comprise the whole of the natural world than for individual human beings. Just as the poet and the coralroot were on a par in "On Going Unnoticed," so are the poet and a moth in "To a Moth Seen in Winter." The poet poses the question to the moth,

   And now pray tell what lured you with false hope
   To make the venture of eternity
   And seek the love of kind in wintertime?
   . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
   Nor will you find love either, nor love you.
   And what I pity in you is something human,
   The old incurable untimeliness,
   Only begetter of all ills that are. (p. 356)

Frost is indulging in his favorite pastime of finding correspondences, and in doing so, discovers in the moth a parallel to man's loneliness; the moth is pitiable because the poet sees "something human" in its search for "the love of kind" at a time when that love is not available. "The old incurable untimeliness," which disregards the boundaries of time, is closely related to that "limitless trait in the hearts of men" (p. 305) in "There Are Roughly Zones," in which
the farmer ignores the boundaries of space. Because of his untimeliness, man is provoked to impatience, to premature actions, and to inopportune timing, which result in the frustration of his search for love and in a deeper sense of isolation. The poet knows that both he and the moth are doomed to the consequences of their own loneliness, and he says to the moth in the final lines of the poem,

Go till you wet your pinions and are quenched.
You must be made more simply wise than I
To know the hand I stretch impulsively
Across the gulf of well-nigh everything
May reach to you, but cannot touch your fate.
I cannot touch your life, much less can save,
Who am tasked to save my own a little while,
(pp. 356-57)

Frost sees other correspondences between animal behavior and human behavior, as in "A Drumlin Woodchuck," "A Cow in Apple Time," and "Departmental." In "The Most of It" Frost uses a large buck to reiterate the theme of loneliness. At the outset of the poem, Frost introduces a solitary man who thought he kept the universe alone;

For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his own
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.(p. 338)

Nature’s only reply is an echo of the man’s own voice; it offers him no answers, no meanings, and no company but what he himself can provide. Not content with such isolation, the man expresses his dissatisfaction:

He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response.
All that ever came of the man's crying out, however, was an "embodiment" that splashed into the water from the opposite cliff; but

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.

Nature's reply seems to mock the man's urgent request for "counter-love," and the parody of his desire only heightens his awareness of being separate and alone. Reuben Brower has asserted, however, that the lively and objective forcefulness of the imagery associated with the buck prevents it from being simply disregarded, even if it is not "human and comforting.
In our commerce with reality," he suggests, "we may get something in the end, though perhaps not what we look for." 11

The man in the poem "The Most of It" might well have remained lonely even if he had found a human companion, for in "The Hill Wife," Frost vindicates the relentless character of loneliness even in love. All of the five sections of the poem utilize natural images--a pine tree, darkness, and woods--that impart a feeling of loneliness to the couple's existence. The first section, entitled simply "Loneliness," captures the situation of the couple in the image of

11 pp. 134-35.
The correspondence between the birds and the couple is readily apparent; and as the fifth section of the poem, "The Impulse," indicates, the simple concerns of "each other and themselves" and their home were not adequate to overcome the pain of loneliness in the wife's heart. "Sudden and swift and light as that/The ties gave" (p. 129), and the wife, disappearing into the woods, taught the husband "of finalities/Besides the grave."

One of those "finalities" in Frost's experience was the fact of loneliness, and he drew metaphors from nature to illustrate and clarify two kinds of loneliness: that of being a choice-making individual and that of being separated from other creatures, from nature, and from the source of his life. He demonstrated a conviction that man must learn to accept loneliness as a basic condition of his existence. In fact, Frost regarded loneliness as an essential ingredient of man's individuality and integrity. He did not intend by such an emphasis to slight social values and collective endeavor, but he knew that security and strength must first be internal and that accepting loneliness is the prerequisite to finding the courage in the heart To overcome the fear within the soul And go ahead to any accomplishment. (p. 521)
CHAPTER III

ANXIETY

Frost valued the experience of anxiety as a vital stimulus to his poetic creativity. His philosophical skepticism, the basis and incentive for much of his poetry, stemmed from his own anxiety about the worth of human effort. In the short poem "The Question," he manifests a skepticism born of the adversity of his existence:

A voice said, Look me in the stars
And tell me truly, men of earth,
If all the soul-and-body scars
Were not too much to pay for birth.(p. 362)

His skepticism is again evident in the two-line epigram, "An Answer":

But Islands of the Blessed, bless you, son,
I never came upon a blessed one.(p. 363)

The attitudes expressed in these two poems show Frost's concern over the cost, the mutability, and the uncertainty of human life. Frost's deliberate lack of resolution in these same two poems and in others including "A Passing Glimpse," "Storm Fear," "Design," and "Once by the Pacific," underscores his belief in the unresolved tensions which characterize human experience and produce anxiety.

In his poetic handling of the experience of anxiety, Frost resists his own subjectivity by relying upon the natural
world as an objective reference point. A study of the images and correspondences he draws from nature to reflect the experience of anxiety reveals his poetic aim to be a clarification of life.

"The Lesson for Today" gives direct expression to Frost's awareness of the mutability of human life, the primary source of his sense of anxiety. In spite of man's instinctive desire for self-preservation, Frost acknowledges that he must ultimately submit to his own dissolution:

But though we all may be inclined to wait
And follow some development of state,
Or see what comes of science and invention,
There is a limit to our time extension.(p. 355)

Frost's anxiety goes beyond the individual level, however, to an awareness of the contingency of all life:

We all are doomed to broken-off careers,
And so's the nation, so's the total race.
The earth itself is liable to the fate
Of meaninglessly being broken off.

The uneasiness of these lines culminates in the word "meaninglessly"; for while man may begrudgingly accept the fact of life's termination, he cannot tolerate a lack of meaning in his existence. A second source of anxiety for Frost, then, is the uncertainty of life's meaning, or rather, of its meaningfulness; Frost's question is not merely what is the meaning of life, but whether or not it has any meaning.

In the face of such anxiety, Frost reacts in characteristic fashion. Having no affinity for morbid emotionalism,
he concludes the distressing lines quoted above by mocking sentimentality:

(And hence so many literary tears
At which my inclination is to scoff.)
I may have wept that any should have died
Or missed their chance, or not have been their best,
Or been their riches, fame, or love denied;
On me as much as any is the jest,
I take my incompleteness with the rest.
God bless himself can no one else be blessed.

Though these lines convey on the surface an acceptance of man's inevitable fate, at the same time they carry an under-tone of irony. The suggestion that human experience with its "incompleteness" is all part of a joke sounds vaguely sinister, and the deprecating implication in reference to God heightens the tension still further. If no one can be "blessed" except God--and even His blessing must be His own doing--then the value of human effort becomes dubious. The superficial acceptance in these lines thus contains an air of rebellion, just as the seriousness of the lines quoted above is balanced by Frost's later inclination to scoff.

Frost maintains and aptly summarizes the tension of the poem in the final stanza:

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.

The paradox of accepting yet resisting the flow of life is captured in the act of simultaneously loving yet quarreling
with the world. The tension thus created is the essence of the anxiety which Frost elucidates in much of his poetry.

The paradox occurs again in "West-Running Brook" in the image of "The black stream, catching on a sunken rock,/Flung backward on itself in one white wave" (p. 258). The stream itself is a paradox to the characters in the poem because it flows west instead of east, as "all the other country brooks" do. The woman of the poem immediately infers,

It must be the brook
Can trust itself to go by contraries
The way I can with you--and you with me--
Because we're--we're--I don't know what we are.
What are we?

The question has been posed for the male speaker to elaborate upon as he relates the identity of the pair to the brook. The wave's resistance to the flow of the stream is what he most readily identifies with.

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, (p. 259)

The man then proceeds to discover an analogy of human existence in the "contrariety" of the stream that "seriously, sadly runs away/To fill the abyss's void with emptiness."
Philosophically he perceives the stream as "time, strength, tone, light, life, and love--/And even substance lapsing unsubstantial." The idea that these positive values of human existence ultimately amount to nothing, or "lapse unsubstantial," is fraught with a sense of despair; yet the idea
is stated in matter-of-fact terms, generating irony and tension, Frost's prime vehicles for conveying anxiety. The irony and tension result from the incongruity between what is stated and the tone in which it is stated: the denotative meaning expresses a serious, unhappy fact, whereas the connotative meaning implies apparent unconcern. Anxiety is implicit in the image because of the ambivalence toward these things which humans ordinarily value—"time, strength, tone . . ."—but which ultimately lapse unsubstantial as if they did not matter in the least.

In the next lines the man expresses the idea in another image with the same unimpassioned, expository tone, but he gives a clue as to the appropriate response to the continual loss. He describes the stream as

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.

The image of the wave riding forever on the sunken rock serves as a correspondence to the speaker's feeling of regret for the transience of life and for the things which flow on down the stream "to nothingness." The wave also represents a kind of resistance to the flow of things, an insistence upon the value of all things that lapse unsubstantial. In the midst of the stream's spending to nothingness, the wave corresponds to the observer's regret for the continual waste of life and his
resistance to the flow of life in the direction of waste. Regret and resistance both are rooted in and give rise to the experience of anxiety.

The man in the poem thus perceives the anxiety of existence when he relates the identity of the pair to the "backward motion" of the wave:

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. (p. 260)

The tension between the flow of the stream and the resistance of the wave expresses the paradox of accepting yet resisting the flow of life. The contrariety of the wave and the stream thus serves as a natural correspondence to the anxiety of man's situation.

Frost finds another metaphor for anxiety in the movement of life away from newness, freshness, and innocence toward age and death. Still dwelling upon the mutability of life, Frost exploits the seasonal changes as particularly conducive to this theme, for example, in "Nothing Gold Can Stay," "Spring Pools," "Oven Bird," and "A Leaf-Treader." Nitchie has associated this theme with the Edenic myth of lost innocence,¹ and "Nothing Gold Can Stay" especially supports such an association with its direct allusion to the garden of Eden. The primary image in the poem is the fading of nature's earliest springtime

¹pp. 68-109.
color into the common green of summer:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold,
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay. (pp. 222-23)

Frost plays on the double meaning of the word gold; for though his first intent is the golden color of spring's earliest budding, the association with the valuable metal is hardly avoidable. Juxtaposition of these two meanings of gold emphasizes the tension between man's proverbial desire for gold and the perennial transience of nature's gold.

The image and the tension are both reinforced by the succeeding images of the poem. Frost plays upon man's intense appreciation of the flower as the most beautiful part of the plant. Since the flower lasts only a brief time, it is valued even more highly, and its "subsiding" into leaf carries a feeling of melancholy because of the loss. Tension has again been created because of the transience of what is valued.

The next image, that of Eden sinking to grief, follows the established pattern. The reference to the garden of Eden as symbolic of a time of idyllic childhood elicits associations of uninitiated blissfulness and youthful vigor. When "Eden sank to grief," however, the innocence and security of the garden gave way to the awareness and anxiety of man's actual fallen condition. The verbs in the last half of the
poem lend additional force to the image of the primeval fall: the flower "subsides," Eden "sank," dawn "goes down." Frost's use of each of these verbs conveys a decline, a sense of loss, and anxiety is implicit in the imagery of loss.

The underlying anxiety of the poem culminates in the paradox of the final image, in which dawn, in spite of its association with the sun's rising, "goes down to day." The freshness and the special aura of the early morning are lost in the full light of day; again, that which is highly prized lasts only a moment. The last line of the poem relates all the images to the initial one; the "gold" that cannot stay includes the flower, Eden, and the dawn, as well as "Nature's first green" and anything else that man cherishes.

Another poem that utilizes seasonal changes to indicate loss and reflect human anxiety is "Spring Pools." In this poem the temporary pools of water left by the melted snow have produced the first blooming of spring flowers, and together the pools and the flowers stand for the newness, freshness, and innocence which Frost values for their promise of continuing life.

These pools that, though in forests, still reflect The total sky almost without defect,
And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,
Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone,
And yet not out by any brook or river,
But up by roots to bring dark foliage on. (p. 245)

The next stanza fully portrays the threat to the pools and the flowers, already suggested in the roots which will
"bring dark foliage on":

The trees that have it in their pent-up buds
To darken nature and be summer woods--
Let them think twice before they use their powers
To blot out and drink up and sweep away
These flowery waters and these watery flowers
From snow that melted only yesterday.

Since the "flowery waters" and the "watery flowers" represent the first assurance that winter's grip has been broken and that profuse greenery is imminent, they acquire significant value in themselves. Frost's admonition to the trees, that they "think twice before they use their powers/To blot out" the pools and flowers, is, of course, a futile warning; but it vents his feeling for their beauty and his empathy with their brevity of life. Their loss reminds him of the progress of the seasons toward winter and of his own life toward death. The "summer woods," which "drink up" the pools and flowers and "darken nature," are comparable to the day which replaces the dawn in "Nothing Gold Can Stay," and the sense of diminution in both cases bespeaks the anxiety which Frost experiences as implicit in the cycle of life.

"The Oven Bird" resumes the observation of seasonal change where "Spring Pools" concludes. The scene occurs in a mid-summer wood where an oven bird's tuneless note is interpreted by the poet as a complaint against the summer's relative dullness as compared with spring's luster:

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. (p. 119)

The undertone of anxiety conveyed by the loss of spring's flowers and by the anticipation of autumn's falling leaves culminates in Frost's interpretation of the bird's unmusical singing: "The question that he frames in all but words/Is what to make of a diminished thing."

The season most replete with natural images of loss is, of course, autumn, when the mutability of nature is most clearly in evidence. The images of loss which Frost takes from autumn readily convey his philosophical skepticism because they reflect the poet's anxiety over the fact of death. "A Leaf-Treader" captures the anxious melancholy that frequently characterizes Frost's attitude toward fall. The first stanza portrays the leaves as a kind of annual milestone in the cycle of the poet's life at which he has arrived again with great effort. The intensity of his treading on the leaves exposes the emotional energy it has cost him to come to this point in life:

I have been treading on leaves all day until I am autumn-tired.
God knows all the color and form of leaves I have trodden on and mired.
Perhaps I have put forth too much strength and been too fierce from fear.
I have safely trodden underfoot the leaves of another year. (p. 297)

The phrase "too fierce from fear" reveals the poet's insecurity and discloses the struggle that comprises his life. The last
line of the stanza, therefore, comes as a reassurance; the poet has "safely trodden underfoot," has endured and overcome with faculties still intact, the difficulties that besieged him during the previous year. Their representation in the autumn leaves, however, suggests that they will return, almost as if the poet's leaf-treading were being done on a treadmill that took him round and round in the same place. The fact that each line of the poem is a complete sentence further reinforces the rhythmic feeling of cycle in which both poet and leaves have a part.

In the second stanza, Frost reflects upon the time when the leaves were "overhead, more lifted up than I." Even during the summer the poet was aware of the approaching fall and felt its inevitability as a reminder of his own pressing mortality. Frost personifies the leaves with the ability to threaten him with their determination to take him with them:

All summer long I thought I heard them threatening under their breath.  
And when they came it seemed with a will to carry me with them to death.

The "threatening" of stanza two is softened to an "invitation" in stanza three as the leaves begin to appeal to the kindred spirit in the poet, though Frost is in actuality empathizing with the leaves:

They spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were leaf to leaf.  
They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to grief.
The anxiety of the poet's identification with the leaves' fate is forestalled momentarily in the next line of the poem: "But it was no reason I had to go because they had to go." The implication of resisting the leaves' invitation, however, comes to fruition in the anxiety of the final line: "Now up, my knee, to keep on top of another year of snow." Resisting the appeal of death means that the treadmill continues, just as the necessity of treading on and overcoming continues, through winter snows instead of autumn leaves.

Another poem that focuses on the seasonal changes of autumn is "After Apple-Picking," in which the inclusion of harvest imagery broadens the picture of the poet's anxiety. Frost's concern in this poem is with "a barrel that I didn't fill" and with "Apples I didn't pick upon some bough" (p. 68). He admits, however, that he is done with apple-picking now.

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    Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
    The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
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The worldly responsibilities that have held his attention by day no longer exercise control over him, though he perceives the influence that the repetition of his tasks will exert on his dreams:

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    What form my dreaming was about to take,
    Magnified apples appear and disappear,
    Stem end and blossom end,
    And every fleck of russet showing clear.
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Though the poem's literal interpretation involves simply the poet's nighttime reflection upon a long day of picking
apples, its larger ramifications include a lifetime of work with which he has become saturated. The sentiment finds expression in these lines:

For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired. (p. 69)

The repeated fruition of the poet's labors somehow has brought only exhaustion instead of fruition to his desires. The care and concern with which the poet regarded each apple--or each poem or any other valued task--remains vividly impressed on his mind:

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.

The lost apples or lost opportunities, deemed "of no worth" because of mishandling, will continue to riddle the poet's sleep with anxiety. Exactly what kind of sleep he is to experience, the poet is unsure, whether it will be like the woodchuck's winter hibernation, "Or just some human sleep."
The doubts engendered by the occasional ineptness of his efforts and by his uncertainty about the approaching sleep reflect Frost's acute sense of responsibility, his awareness of death, and his anxiety, which is the unremitting product.

The orchard provides Frost with another metaphorical approach to anxiety in "October," "Good-by and Keep Cold," and "Peril of Hope." These poems illustrate the precariousness
of man's success in dealing with nature, since his efforts are contingent upon natural phenomena over which he has no control. In "October" Frost beseeches the "hushed October morning mild" to "Begin the hours of this day slow./Make the day seem to us less brief" (p. 27). Time's incorrigible persistence robs man of treasured moments all too quickly, and the poet yearns for this atypical autumn day to "Beguile us in the way you know" and make itself seem longer than it actually will be. "Retard the sun with gentle mist;/Enchant the land with amethyst" (pp. 27-28), he implores. The motive for his desire, however, transcends his own selfish enjoyment of the mild Indian-summer day. His deeper longing is

For the grapes' sake, if they were all,  
Whose leaves already burnt with frost,  
Whose clustered fruit must else be lost--  
For the grapes' sake along the wall. (p. 28)

The tension in the poem is the result of the poet's uncertainty over whether the day's mildness will last, for he knows that the

leaves have ripened to the fall;  
Tomorrow's wind, if it be wild,  
Should waste them all. (p. 27)

Because the poet confronts an uncontrollable and unpredictable power in the autumnal equinox, the poem assumes the form of a prayer to the October morning. Facing the unknown with which he cannot reason, the poet resorts to a prayerlike entreaty, "For the grapes' sake, if they were all." Anxiety is the essence of the experience of dealing with an incalculable
force, and a kind of prayer is perhaps the only rational implement for coping with the irrational.

"Good-by and Keep Cold" expounds a theme similar to that of "October," but in this poem Frost is thinking of all that can happen to harm
An orchard away at the end of the farm
All winter, cut off by a hill from the house. (p. 228)

The harvest time is long past, and he worries about the orchard's condition during winter:

No orchard's the worse for the wintriest storm;
But one thing about it, it mustn't get warm.
"How often already you've had to be told,
Keep cold, young orchard. Good-by and keep cold.
Dread fifty above more than fifty below."

The orchard represents considerable time and energy expended by the poet, but the uncertainty of the weather makes his efforts potentially worthless. Numbed by the cold and by his anxiety for the young orchard, the poet wishes he could promise to lie in the night
And think of an orchard's arboreal plight
When slowly (and nobody comes with a light)
Its heart sinks lower under the sod,
But something has to be left to God.

Though the final line might be seen as a resolution of the poet's anxiety, such an interpretation would be untrue to the emotional thrust of the rest of the poem. Instead, the last line more likely expresses Frost's resignation to or acceptance of the anxiety implicit in all human endeavor.

In "Peril of Hope" Frost's attention is turned to the orchard in early spring when the trees have begun to blossom. The spring weather, like that of fall, is unpredictable and
presents a potential threat to the poet's efforts in regard to the hoped-for harvest.

It is right in there
Betwixt and between
The orchard bare
And the orchard green,

When the boughs are right
In a flowery burst
Of pink and white,
That we fear the worst. (p. 445)

Frost's hope for the flowering trees and his fear for their safety are approximately equal, and he expresses "the worst" that can happen to them in the final stanza as if to anticipate its possibility and moderate its consequent anxiety:

For there's not a clime
But at any cost
Will take that time
For a night of frost.

In the phrase "at any cost," the poet allows for the contingency of losing an entire year's harvest because of one night's freeze. The fear expressed in Frost's acknowledgement is heightened by the insinuation that human enterprise is fragile and that man's existence must be forged out under circumstances over which he has no ultimate control.

Frost's concern over what the irrational forces of nature can do to malign and destroy man's achievements is aggravated by the realization of nature's potential in harming man himself. "Once by the Pacific" and "Storm Fear" disclose moments when the poet felt the intensity of nature's threat to physical existence and when he was reminded of the literal uncertainty
of his own life. In "Once by the Pacific" the poet reflects upon the awesome terror of the ocean when a storm is imminent; his intimidation by the wind and water's fury induces him to attribute human-like motives of destruction to the Pacific:

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. (p. 250)

Frost is nearly overwhelmed by the ocean's immense capacity for destruction; to anchor himself in some sort of solidarity, he anxiously takes inventory of the land's defenses:

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.

The "night of dark intent" which Frost foresees could even prophesy "an age" of darkness resulting from the storm's cataclysmic ruin. In the final lines of the poem, Frost once again captures in metaphor the uncertainty and mutability of life in the face of the uncontrollable forces of nature:

Someone had better be prepared for rage.
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God's last Put out the Light was spoken.

The last line's implicit allusion to Genesis 1:3, where God says, "Let there be light," carries the scope of the poem beyond the moment by the Pacific to an acknowledgement of the destructive possibilities inherent in life itself. If light did indeed have a beginning, then its extinction is a potential reality that could divulge catastrophic consequences.
Furthermore, if the ocean's fierceness is most comprehensible and communicable by investing the storm with human countenance and motive, Frost is perhaps suggesting something of the violent forces within man himself. The anxiety of confronting uncontrollable natural phenomena that may destroy life is dwarfed beside the anxiety of confronting controllable human phenomena that may also destroy life if not properly managed.

In "Storm Fear" Frost gives a more personal view than in "Once by the Pacific" of a moment when physical existence seemed threatened by inclement weather:

When the wind works against us in the dark,
And pelts with snow
The lower-chamber window on the east,
And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
The beast,
"Come out! Come out!"--
It costs no inward struggle not to go,
Ah, no! (pp. 9-10)

As in "Once by the Pacific," the poet tends to personify the storm, hearing and easily resisting its seductive whispers, which unveil its bestial intent to devour. In the poet's mind, the storm thus embodies both human and animal characteristics that represent its ability to annihilate him and his family.

Again as in "Once by the Pacific," Frost takes stock of his defenses--"I count our strength,/Two and a child"--and proceeds to envision the possibility of doom unless help comes from the outside. His feeling of helplessness in this benumbing situation is the greatest incitement to anxiety, for if he
were able to lessen the storm's severity or his human frailty, he could take definite, worthwhile action against the danger. He is instead "subdued to mark"

How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length--
How drifts are piled,
Dooryard and road ungraded,
Till even the comforting barn grows far away,
And my heart owns a doubt
Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
And save ourselves unaided. (p. 10)

Frost's anxiety in "Storm Fear" culminates in the verbalization of his doubt in the last lines of the poem--the kind of doubt that will be explored further in the next chapter on sorrow. For Frost, the experience of doubt engenders an anxiety that "creeps" into human life as surely as the cold of the storm in the poem, and his doubts may pile up like the drifts of snow and cover treasured landmarks, formerly competent sources of comfort, until extrication from obstructive circumstances seems next to impossible.

Frost recognizes that nature is capable of creating imagined, as well as actual, menaces to human existence which are no less productive of anxiety. In "The Oft-Repeated Dream," fourth poem in a series called "The Hill Wife," Frost shows sympathy for the fears of a woman living with her husband in a lonely wood. Though the tree outside the woman's bedroom can do her no real harm, Frost understands how the tree's persistent brushing at the window might cause her to ascribe human motives to it, allowing it to become a source of anxiety:
She had no saying dark enough
For the dark pine that kept
Forever trying the window latch
In the room where they slept.

The tireless but ineffectual hands
That with every futile pass
Made the great tree seem as a little bird
Before the mystery of glass!

It never had been inside the room
And only one of the two
Was afraid in an oft-repeated dream
Of what the tree might do. (p. 128)

The dark pine comprises such a frightful image in the woman's mind that she can find "no saying dark enough" for it—cannot even verbalize the extent of her anxiety over it. Yet the fact that her husband feels no threat from the tree, but at the same time does not alleviate the wife's fears, indicates that her anxiety is actually rooted deep in her own being, augmented perhaps by a deficiency in the marital relationship.

In other poems, Frost discovers in trees an incentive to a different kind of anxiety, not so much a reminder of the uncertainty of existence, but a reminder of the uncertainty of human identity. "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road," "Tree at my Window," and "Beech" present perspectives of trees that metaphorically vent an anxiety in Frost's experience related to the problem of identity. In the first of these three poems, Frost is temporarily halted in his progress through a snow-covered forest by a tree that has fallen across the road. Ready to extract philosophical meaning from the most banal frustration, the poet suggests that
The tree the tempest with a crash of wood
Throws down in front of us is not to bar
Our passage to our journey's end for good,
But just to ask us who we think we are

Insisting always on our own way so,
She likes to halt us in our runner tracks,
And make us get down in a foot of snow
Debating what to do without an ax. (p. 238)

In typical fashion Frost imposes upon the tree human impulses in order to gain a broader grasp of the situation at hand. Looking at the predicament from the tree's perspective, as if the tree were capable of perspective, Frost obtains an objectivity otherwise unavailable. This objectivity in turn discloses for the poet an important aspect of human nature--man's insistence on going where he pleases and doing as he pleases, whatever the cost--which becomes the insight that Frost elaborates in the remainder of the poem:

And yet she knows obstruction is in vain:
We will not be put off the final goal
We have it hidden in us to attain,
Not though we have to seize earth by the pole

And, tired of aimless circling in one place,
Steer straight off after something into space.

The perspective that the tree has afforded Frost suggests an unsettling picture of human resolution and perversity. Since man's drive to have dominion is illimitable, his destructive potential may also be boundless; whatever "We have it hidden in us to attain" will be realized, even if it goes against nature and against human welfare. Though Frost does not literally expect man to abduct the poles of the earth and steer them against the laws of nature, he uses the hyperbolic
metaphor to convey the extent of man's willfulness. Becoming aware of the forces within him and of his consequent responsibility to himself and his world is thus a major milestone in Frost's struggle toward individuality and identity. The tree that fell across the road has nothing literal to say to Frost, but assuming its perspective of human activity causes him to confront the incessant question of "who we think we are" and to experience the kind of anxiety that composes the essence of human existence.

In "Tree at my Window," Frost approaches the problem of identity by drawing a metaphor from a tree's response to the weather. Addressing the tree as though it were an intimate friend, he expresses his deep affinity for it:

Tree at my window, window tree,
My sash is lowered when night comes on;
But let there never be curtain drawn
Between you and me. (p. 251)

Constructing his imagery from the tree's swaying in the wind, Frost depicts a parallel between their situations:

But, tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
And if you have seen me when I slept,
You have seen me when I was taken and swept
And all but lost. (p. 252)

Frost then imposes upon the tree a human-like concern over the variations in weather conditions which parallels his own concern over the vacillation of his state of mind, his "inner weather":

That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
Frost has chosen something as uncertain and as potentially violent as the weather to capture in metaphor the character of his inner life, relating the personal forces that defined much of his identity to the uncontrollable forces of nature. The exigencies of his inner life thus constituted a source of frequent anxiety to Frost, for which he found an empathetic correspondence in the circumstance of the tree at his window.

Another tree that provides Frost a "momentary stay" against the confusion of his identity appears in "Beech." The anxiety of this poem is reflected in the uncertainty of Frost's property limits in a wooded area, except where a few boundary markers have made them clear. The physical setting of the poem suggests a psychological setting in which the boundaries of Frost's identity are similarly indefinite except where certain scars have delineated the extremes of his existence.

Where my imaginary line
Bends square in woods, an iron spine
And pile of real rocks have been founded,
And off this corner in the wild,
Where these are driven in and piled,
One tree, by being deeply wounded,
Has been impressed as Witness Tree
And made commit to memory
My proof of being not unbounded. (p. 331)

The "imaginary line" provides unsubstantial support for Frost's sense of ownership and territorial security, but the line's existence as something more than imagination is proved by the presence of the "iron spine/And pile of real rocks" and
by the "Witness Tree." The tree impressed with the deep wound is not only the poet's landmark, but also a kind of memorial to the fact that he is "not unbounded," that his elusive identity has at least some detectable limits. The philosophical and psychological import of the poem is underscored in the last three lines where the interplay of "truth" and "doubt" summarizes the situation of Frost's identity:

Thus truth's established and borne out,
Though circumstanced with dark and doubt,
Though by a world of doubt surrounded.

The anxiety of the "world of doubt" in which Frost must forge out his identity is at least mitigated somewhat by the truth and the certainty of the wound in the "Witness Tree," or metaphorically, perhaps by the certainty of the wounds of experience that the poet has suffered and endured.

Another poem that touches on the problem of identity is "The Star-Splitter," in which Frost relates the story of a fellow townsman, Bradford McLaughlin:

having failed at hugger-mugger farming
He burned his house down for the fire insurance
And spent the proceeds on a telescope
To satisfy a lifelong curiosity
About our place among the infinities.(p. 177)

Though Frost might not have condoned McLaughlin's method of acquiring the telescope, the poet at least sympathized with the sentiment of wanting to know "our place among the infinities"; so he occasionally indulged in "star-splitting" with McLaughlin's telescope and evidently enjoyed it thoroughly:
We spread our two legs as we spread its three,
Pointed our thoughts the way we pointed it,
And standing at our leisure till the day broke,
Said some of the best things we ever said. (p. 179)

Though the overall tone of "The Star-Splitter" is not
that of anxiety, Frost found enough philosophical inspiration
in the simple pastime of stargazing to conclude the poem by
reflecting upon the uncertainty of man's "place among the
infinities." Using the immeasurable vastness of the sky and
its innumerable stars as his reference point, Frost poses in
the last lines of the poem the unanswerable questions that
resulted from his search for man's locality and identity:

We've looked and looked, but after all where are we?
Do we know any better where we are,
And how it stands between the night tonight
And a man with a smoky lantern chimney?
How different from the way it ever stood?

The last line questions the possibility of solving the immu-
table mystery of man's "place among the infinities" and de-
clares the necessity of living with the anxiety of a search
that has no conclusion.

Still trying to gain his bearings and wrestling with the
problem of identity, Frost uses a dialogue between Mist and
Smoke in "A Cabin in the Clearing" to "appraise/The kindred
spirit of an inner haze" (p. 415) which the man and woman
inside the cabin are experiencing. The familiar metaphor of
woods is employed to represent the world of doubt and un-
certainty in which the couple--and man in general--must make
their clearing and establish their existence. The speakers
in the poem, the Mist and the Smoke, stand for the uncertainty that clouds the couple's understanding of themselves and their place in the world. The Mist initiates the conversation by saying,

I don't believe the sleepers in this house
Know where they are.
Smoke. They've been here long enough
To push the woods back from around the house
And part them in the middle with a path.
Mist. And still I doubt if they know where they are.
And I begin to fear they never will.
All they maintain the path for is the comfort
Of visiting with the equally bewildered.
Nearer in plight their neighbors are than distance.
(pp. 413-14)

Though the Smoke contends that the couple's identity has been affirmed by the clearing and the path, the Mist perceives their efforts more as a negation of the threatening wilderness around them and as a security measure to maintain ties with "the equally bewildered."

The Smoke reveals the fact that the man and woman are an American couple when it says, "They must by now have learned the native tongue./Why don't they ask the Red Man where they are?" (p. 414). The consideration that the poet definitely intended them to be Americans infuses their "locality crisis" with a new dimension; they are the representatives of mankind starting over again in a vast new garden of Eden, but they seem no better off as far as understanding who they are. The Mist assures the Smoke that the couple has questioned not only the native Indians, but also philosophers and theologians about the meaning of their existence. In fact,
They will ask anyone there is to ask—
In the fond faith accumulated fact
Will of itself take fire and light the world up.
Learning has been a part of their religion.

The Smoke is by this time convinced of the Mist's point of view and responds, "If the day ever comes when they know who/They are, they may know better where they are."

The anxiety implicit in the couple's uncertainty and unrest is balanced by the poem's fable-like speakers and playful tone. Consistent in his approach, Frost concludes the poem with the Smoke and the Mist listening to the voices from inside the cabin:

Let us pretend the dewdrops from the eaves
Are you and I eavesdropping on their unrest—
A mist and smoke eavesdropping on a haze—
And see if we can tell the bass from the soprano.
(p. 415)

Frost's concern with the problem of identity reflects his concern with philosophical problems in general and his inveterate skeptical stance. A well-defined personal identity would be a matter of course for Frost if he were able to discover conclusive answers in his quest for truth. For him, however, absolutes are not characteristic of our uncertain world; tentative, pragmatic answers provide the only means for coping with everyday reality.

In "All Revelation" Frost's philosophical speculation leads to an ironic deduction that contains both comfort and anxiety. The primary image of the poem is that of a geode, which is a hollow, usually spheroidal rock with crystals lining
the inside wall. When penetrated by a cathode ray, or a stream of electrons emitted by an electrical discharge tube, the geode glows on the inside. The actual presentation of this image, however, is postponed until the third stanza of the poem when the philosophical overtones of the metaphor have already been set forth.

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'lean 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.(p. 332)

Frost's opening the poem with questions concerning the "Strange apparition of the mind" suggests the extent to which the philosophical considerations of the image are paramount to the meaning of the poem. Prefaced by the depiction of a head thrusting into something uncertain, from somewhere equally uncertain, the geode becomes a symbol of the earth as it is inhabited and probed by the human mind. Frost makes unmistakable the problematic nature of penetrating the geode by describing it as "impervious," implying the parallel difficulty of discerning the core of earthly existence. In an attempt to comprehend the meaning of his brief life on earth, man may
encounter numerous unanswerable questions, as Frost indicates by asking what becomes of man at his death and what he may "take hence or leave behind."

The only answer to all these queries that stands out in Frost's mind lies in the geode's response to the cathode ray, or, metaphorically, the earth's response to man's "mental thrust." In the final stanza of the poem, Frost completes his analogy by suggesting that just as the cathode ray causes the geode's crystalline crust to glow, even so,

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. (pp. 332-33)

The poem culminates in the final ironic statement that in spite of the impermeability of life's secrets, man has received all the revelation available concerning his existence. The anxiety of the poem rests in the ambiguity of that revelation; either man has been presented with an adequate, comforting picture of his situation, or he has been left with unquenchable doubts and uncertainties regarding the meaning of his life. This ambiguity is itself an intentional device on Frost's part for venting his philosophical skepticism. The only revelation man obtains in his quest for truth may seem obtuse and equivocal, says Frost; but he must temper and refine his questioning instinct by looking to the natural world of stars and flowers, for therein lies all the revelation he can expect to receive about his earthly existence.
Frost consistently maintained his own steady gaze on the natural world, and what he saw there tended to reinforce his skeptical predisposition. The anxiety expressed in both "A Passing Glimpse" and "Design" results from Frost's preoccupation with flowers; for though the experiences he describes in the two poems are vastly different, in both instances flowers are part of the natural imagery that Frost finds expressive of his uncertainty about the meaning of human life. Both poems reflect Frost's natural inclination to philosophize, because in both he extracts significant meaning from simple events. The anxiety of the poems also relates to the tension Frost creates by means of the natural imagery.

In "A Passing Glimpse," the tension rises out of Frost's catching a fleeting view of an unfamiliar flower beside a railroad track as his train races through the countryside. He indicates that he is knowledgeable about the flora of the region by mentioning several flowers that it could not have been, and he then speculates that perhaps he has seen an unknown species that no one will ever find.

I often see flowers from a passing car
That are gone before I can tell what they are.

I want to get out of the train and go back
To see what they were beside the track.

I name all the flowers I am sure they weren't:
Not fireweed loving where woods have burnt--
Not bluebells gracing a tunnel mouth--
Not lupine living on sand and drouth.
Was something brushed across my mind
That no one on earth will ever find?

Heaven gives its glimpses only to those
Not in position to look too close. (p. 248).

The playful tone of the poem suggests that Frost is hardly overwrought about the strange flowers he has seen. He simply experiences the tension of not being able to find out for sure what they were. Much as he would like to go back and observe the flowers carefully, there is no practical way for him to do so. By keeping the matter in perspective, Frost ends the poem with a philosophical couplet that expresses a kind of acceptance as well as anxiety. He concludes that heaven—be it the ideal, the supernatural, the achievement of man's highest potential, or whatever else the term may admit—can never be caught and held and examined, but can only be glimpsed by those who are striving toward it as a possibility that may or may not be fulfilled.

In "Design" Frost's speculation takes on a more serious tone; and though the components of the imagery include merely a spider, a flower, and a moth, their juxtaposition and circumstance produce a sinister tension that culminates in the anxiety of the final disturbing lines. Basically following the Petrarchan sonnet form, the poem is divided into two stanzas, the first of which, the octave, presents the picture of what Frost has seen:

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--
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite. (p. 302)

The scene is actually set after the first two lines of the poem and appears relatively innocuous, with the "dimpled spider, fat and white," clutching a moth while resting on a plant reputed to have healing powers. The initial impression, however, contributes to the irony of the perspective that Frost proceeds to establish with his commentary in the next six lines. These otherwise harmless figures are called "assorted characters of death and blight" which seem to have been assembled for participation in a diabolic morning ritual, "like the ingredients of a witches' broth."

In the sestet, Frost explicitly describes the irony of what he has seen by means of unanswerable questions:

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.

Frost's teleological uncertainty is made profoundly clear as he considers the possibility that some malignant "design of darkness" may have engineered the situation of the spider on the heal-all holding the dead moth deliberately "to appall." The anxiety of Frost's contemplation is deepened still further, however, as he suggests that perhaps design has no influence on "a thing so small," with the frightening implication that design may not govern anything at all.
The philosophical anxiety that Frost expresses in "A Passing Glimpse" and "Design" finds at least a kind of resolution in two final poems, "Too Anxious for Rivers" and "Acceptance." In the first of these, quoted below only in part, Frost is playfully involved in the search for ultimate answers and takes his image from the observation of a river:

Look down the long valley and there stands a mountain
That someone has said is the end of the world.
Then what of this river that having arisen
Must find where to pour itself into and empty?
I never saw so much swift water run cloudless.
Oh, I have been often too anxious for rivers
To leave it to them to get out of their valleys.
The truth is the river flows into the canyon
Of Ceasing-to-Question-What-Doesn't-Concern-Us,
As sooner or later we have to cease somewhere,
No place to get lost like too far in the distance.
It may be a mercy the dark closes round us
So broodingly soon in every direction. (p. 379)

The river, whether imaginary or real, represents for Frost the state of a world in motion toward some unknown destiny, toward some elusive fulfillment that lies beyond the grasp of the present. Though anxiety will remain an integral part of Frost's experience, it is made more tolerable by his acceptance of his limitations--"No place to get lost like too far in the distance"--and by his realization that "it may be a mercy" that man sees no further than he does.

"Acceptance" elaborates on the image of darkness closing in as Frost watches birds at sunset preparing for the night:

When the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud
And goes down burning into the gulf below,
No voice in nature is heard to cry aloud
At what has happened. Birds, at least, must know
It is the change to darkness in the sky.
Murmuring something quiet in her breast,  
One bird begins to close a faded eye;  
Or overtaken too far from his nest,  
Hurrying low above the grove, some waif  
Swoops just in time to his remembered tree.  
At most he thinks or twitters softly, "Safe!  
Now let the night be dark for all of me.  
Let the night be too dark for me to see  
Into the future. Let what will be, be." (p. 249)

Frost's acceptance of the darkness and of the unknowable future grows out of his observation of nature's calm acceptance of "the change to darkness in the sky," which "birds, at least" must understand by an inborn natural wisdom. Personifying the "waif" that "Swoops just in time to his remembered tree," Frost attributes to the bird a stoical acceptance of the unavoidable darkness of night and of the future: "Let what will be, be." The act of accepting uncertainty paradoxically brings both calmness and anxiety and is the only practical course of action when the uncertainty cannot be dispelled.

In Frost's search for correspondences between nature and human experience, he found natural images in abundance—from rivers, storms, and seasonal changes to trees, flowers, and birds—that suggested acceptance of life's anxiety and provided for Frost on many occasions a "momentary stay against confusion." In confronting the mutability of life—threats from natural phenomena to human existence and endeavor; and the uncertainty of human identity, of life's meaning, and of the future—Frost maintained his gaze upon the natural world and discovered there the poetic images he needed for transforming his anxiety into clarification and acceptance.
Frost's philosophical skepticism led him to investigate the full range of life's possibilities, even when they carried him to sorrow and despair. His instinctive drive to understand and clarify his own existence resulted in a number of poems that focused on the experience of grief and sadness. Frost phrased his motivating belief in "The Lesson for Today," "The groundwork of all faith is human woe" (p. 352), and in "The Wind and the Rain,"

\begin{verbatim}
It were unworthy of the tongue
To let the half of life alone
And play the good without the ill.(p. 336)
\end{verbatim}

These were the attitudes that inspired Frost to seek nature's aid in discovering and expressing the meaning of despair in human experience, because nature is replete with images not only of joy and beauty, but also of sadness and woe. When the earth underwent the seasonal changes of autumn and winter, or when violent weather exposed the mutability of living things, Frost found in these natural phenomena correspondences to the experiences of sorrow and despair, and he frequently used them in his poetry as agents of clarification. Like the anxiety of his experience, Frost's occasional despair was rooted in his awareness of the mutability of life and of the mortality of
his own being; yet his despondency did not degenerate into a passive sense of futility, but instead gave rise to the courage of acceptance, affirmation, and hope, attitudes which will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

In its mildest form, Frost's grieving over the negative aspects of life is described simply as a "darker mood," as in the final stanza of "Leaves Compared with Flowers":

Leaves and bark, leaves and bark,
To lean against and hear in the dark.
Petals I may have once pursued.
Leaves are all my darker mood.(p. 297)

Frost gives the impression that at one time in his life, perhaps in his youth, his greatest joy was flowers, but years of experience and hardship taught him an appreciation for the less celebrated part of the plant, its leaves. This "darker mood" is expressed in Frost's poetry through such emotions as regret, despair, grief, fear and resentment and by means of nature imagery drawn especially from seasonal changes and weather.

Particularly poignant are the scene and the mood of a late autumn day which Frost describes in "Reluctance." His concern in the poem is with the mutability of nature and, metaphorically, of human affairs and with the inevitable human response to this mutability. The feelings he expresses are those of mingled regret and sorrow over the end of summer, autumn, and another year, but also over something else which remains unstated till the last line of the poem.
The first stanza outlines the experience from which the particulars of the poem emerged, and the second and part of the third stanzas elaborate on what Frost observed occurring in nature during his walk:

Out through the fields and the woods
   And over the walls I have wended;
I have climbed the hills of view
   And looked at the world, and descended;
I have come by the highway home,
   And lo, it is ended.

The leaves are all dead on the ground,
    Save those that the oak is keeping
To ravel them one by one
    And let them go scraping and creeping
Out over the crusted snow,
    When others are sleeping.

And the dead leaves lie huddled and still,
    No longer blown hither and thither;
The last lone aster is gone;
    The flowers of the witch hazel wither.

The beauty of leaves and flowers, which lured Frost to the fields, woods, and hills in the past, has now vanished; but the yearning to visit these old haunts persists, as the last lines of stanza three indicate: "The heart is still aching to seek,/But the feet question, 'Whither?'" The image of bare trees and dead leaves is one of profound melancholy for Frost, made even more so by the implicit contrast with how the scene must have appeared in summer. The aching heart and questioning feet of the poet, however, infuse the image with an element of human conflict that suggests the loss of more than the colorful embellishments of the warmer seasons.
In the final stanza Frost relates the passing of autumn in the natural world to the loss of a love in human experience and indirectly links the emotions evoked by the two. Without revealing specifically what the emotions are, Frost's conclusion is in the form of a question which vents the feeling of his experience and of the poem, yet controls the expression of his sadness in an almost stoical manner:

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,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season? (p. 30)

Purely rational acceptance of "the drift of things," Frost describes as "a treason" to the heart. Man naturally feels regret and even a tinge of despair at the loss of a love or the end of a season, because both are trenchant reminders of the flux and mutability of life and all its cherished accouterments.

Four other poems which focus on the seasonal changes of autumn to reflect upon sorrow, fear, and despair include "My November Guest," "A Leaf-Treader," "November," and part I of "The Wind and the Rain." All four employ similar bleak images such as bare trees, withered leaves, and chilling rain. A melancholy dwelling upon the mutability of nature and the sadness of human existence characterizes each.

Of the four poems, Frost paints the most complete picture of late autumn scenery in "My November Guest." He personifies
his affinity for desolate November landscapes as a female companion whom he calls "my Sorrow":

My Sorrow, when she's here with me,
    Thinks these dark days of autumn rain
Are beautiful as days can be;
She loves the bare, the withered tree;
    She walks the sodden pasture lane.

Her pleasure will not let me stay.
    She talks and I am fain to list;
She's glad the birds are gone away,
    She's glad her simple worsted gray
Is silver now with clinging mist. (pp. 6-7)

In the first two stanzas, Frost introduces an imaginary person to objectify and externalize his own intense feelings of sadness. This companion, who is not always with him, finds the somber tones of autumn beautiful. Frost's identification with the sorrow which autumn seems to express is evident through her appreciation of the rain, the stark trees, and the absence of birds. Clearly, the bleak images are intended to convey parallels in human existence, for which Frost's spokesman is his Sorrow.

In the final stanzas, however, it becomes evident that quite apart from his feelings, or his Sorrow, Frost has gained his own appreciation of November's beauty—both in nature and in human experience:

The desolate, deserted trees,
    The faded earth, the heavy sky,
The beauties she so truly sees,
She thinks I have no eye for these,
    And vexes me for reason why.

Not yesterday I learned to know
    The love of bare November days
Before the coming of the snow,
But it were vain to tell her so,
And they are better for her praise. (p. 7)

Frost's "love of bare November days" is based upon his understanding of the necessity of such days in the cycle of nature, just as sorrow is necessary in the cycle of human life; and the correspondence Frost sees between autumn imagery and the experience of sorrow enables him to find even the desolate scenes of November praiseworthy.

In "A Leaf-Treader" and part I of "The Wind and the Rain," Frost continues his use of autumn imagery and makes direct reference to the appeal of death in his examination of the feelings of despair. In "A Leaf-Treader," already discussed in regard to the experience of anxiety, the emotions of fear and stoic determination fluctuate in Frost's description of treading on autumn leaves: "Perhaps I have put forth too much strength and been to fierce from fear. / I have safely trodden underfoot the leaves of another year" (p. 297). Because he envisions in the cycle of nature a paradigm of human experience, the leaves take on the import of reminders of man's mortality and of the occasional attractiveness of the eventuality of death:

All summer long I thought I heard them threatening under their breath.
And when they came it seemed with a will to carry me with them to death.

They spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were leaf to leaf.
They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to grief.
Frost refers to his empathy for the dying leaves as a "fugitive in my heart," as if a fugitive leaf in Frost's feelings would like to escape with the autumn leaves into death. In spite of their invitation, Frost's determination to persevere resounds in the last lines of the poem, but he realizes that the future will be no easier than the past: "But it was no reason I had to go because they had to go. Now up, my knee, to keep on top of another year of snow."

In "The Wind and the Rain," part I, Frost's attitude toward death wavers between acceptance and resistance and ends in a painful despair that acknowledges the unavoidable fate of all men. Initially in the poem, Frost is willingly carried along by a "deathward" wind which is demarcating the end of autumn:

That far-off day the leaves in flight
Were letting in the colder light,
A season-ending wind there blew
That, as it did the forest strew,
I leaned on with a singing trust
And let it drive me deathward too. (p. 336)

The words that Frost uses to describe his experience with the wind convey the "darker mood" he is frequently fond of, the emotion of despair: the "far-off day," "the leaves in flight," "the colder light," the "season-ending wind" strewing the forest with autumn clutter--these phrases combine to depict a mood of wistful melancholy. Yet Frost's acceptance of the mortality which nature dictates seems complete from his leaning on the "deathward" wind "with a singing trust."
He does make a meager attempt to resist the wind, but proves incapable of altering its force or effect: "With breaking step I stabbed the dust, yet did not much to shorten stride."

In the remainder of the poem, Frost muses upon the ramifications in human experience of the image of the deathward wind. Singing of death, Frost finds in the perennial death of nature a parallel to the psychological "deaths" which denote the cyclical travail of human life:

I sang of death--but had I known
The many deaths one must have died
Before he came to meet his own!
Oh, should a child be left unwarned
That any song in which he mourned
Would be as if he prophesied?
It were unworthy of the tongue
To let the half of life alone
And play the good without the ill.
And yet 'twould seem that what is sung
In happy sadness by the young
Fate has no choice but to fulfill.

The despair which these lines express is moderated only by the implicit worth attributed to awareness and acceptance of the good and the ill that life discloses, including man's inevitable fate.

A final poem in which autumn imagery is utilized to convey despair is "November," in which Frost contemplates the falling leaves and explores the theme of waste. In typical fashion he perceives in the natural phenomenon a correspondence to human experience, using the first half of the poem to describe what he has observed in nature and the second half to expose its philosophical parallels:
We saw leaves go to glory,  
Then almost migratory  
Go part way down the lane,  
And then to end the story  
Get beaten down and pasted  
In one wild day of rain.
We heard "'Tis over" roaring.  
A year of leaves was wasted.  
Oh, we make a boast of storing,  
Of saving and of keeping,  
But only by ignoring  
The waste of moments sleeping,  
The waste of pleasure weeping,  
By denying and ignoring  
The waste of nations warring. (pp. 359-360)

The image of wasted leaves suggests to Frost the immeasurable waste that characterizes human life. The apparent waste of leaves that have fulfilled their life-sustaining function, however, is dwarfed by the actual extensive waste brought to mind by Frost's list of ill-used moments in human experience. "The waste of moments sleeping" suggests the shortness of life and hours squandered in half-awareness. "The waste of pleasure weeping" recalls the anguish that man inflicts upon himself and others to the detriment of his potential for growth and happiness. And "the waste of nations warring" alludes to the greed and hatred that have filled human history with conflict and devastation. From Frost's point of view, then, man's "boast of storing" is a vain self-deception, and the overwhelming evidence of human wastefulness evokes a despairing response.

Frost commemorates winter as well as autumn with poems of emotional pain. "In Winter in the Woods," "There Are Roughly Zones," and "The Thatch" depict various experiences of Frost with nature that are expressive of regret and grief.
Each of these three poems relies upon the harshness and coldness of winter for the creation of a psychological setting. "In Winter in the Woods" is a short poem in which Frost reflects upon an afternoon spent in felling a maple tree. The analogy implied between nature's loss of a tree and the "blows" he must undergo in his own life comprises the central point of interest in regard to Frost's feeling of sorrow.

In winter in the woods alone
Against the trees I go.
I mark a maple for my own
And lay the maple low.

At four o'clock I shoulder ax,
And in the afterglow
I link a line of shadowy tracks
Across the tinted snow.
I see for Nature no defeat
In one tree's overthrow
Or for myself in my retreat
For yet another blow. (p. 470)

Several key phrases in the first two stanzas establish the atmosphere for the correspondence Frost perceives between nature and himself. The first line--"In winter in the woods alone"--sets forth three terse reference points which intimate a scene of isolation and loneliness. The second line--"Against the trees I go"--carries psychological overtones of aggression and defensiveness, supported by the lines in which Frost marks his maple and lays it "low." Stanza two continues the melancholy mood with Frost shouldering his weapon, the ax; and "in the afterglow" of evening, he makes a dim trail of footprints in the snow on his return home.

Against this background Frost makes the comparison explicit in the final stanza. Whatever the blow he anticipates
in his retreat—whether it be that of winter or of some personal conflict—Frost knows that it will not result in ultimate defeat for him, even as the overthrow of a single tree entails no ultimate loss for nature. That such retreats are necessary, however, and that such blows are intrinsic in the scheme of existence constitute a source of restless sorrow for Frost over the hostile quality of life. Underlying his sorrow is, however, an acceptance of life's rhythmic pattern of assertion and withdrawal, expressed in Frost's excursion to fell the maple and his subsequent return homeward, and in the cycle of the seasons, which would compensate for the loss of the tree the following spring.

In "There Are Roughly Zones," Frost philosophizes about his interference with nature's "zones," drawing upon the harshness of winter as the objectification of an internal threat. Having brought a peach tree much farther north than its natural habitat, Frost fears for its safety during a particularly cold winter storm:

We sit indoors and talk of the cold outside.  
And every gust that gathers strength and heaves  
Is a threat to the house. But the house has long been tried.  
We think of the tree. If it never again has leaves,  
We'll know, we say, that this was the night it died.  
It is very far north, we admit, to have brought the peach. (p. 305)

Frost's affinity for perceiving philosophical implications about humankind in everyday events and in natural phenomena is readily evident in this poem. His fear extends
beyond an uneasiness about the welfare of the tree to a regret over the motive that induced him to bring it to such an unfavorable climate: "What comes over a man, is it soul or mind--/That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?" Frost's sorrow over the possible death of the peach tree is thus what gives rise to his regret over the stubborn dullness of man's nature:

You would say his ambition was to extend the reach
Clear to the Arctic of every living kind.
Why is his nature forever so hard to teach
That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,
There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed?

The final lines of the poem succinctly combine Frost's regret over the natural fact--the bare tree, threatened of its life--with his regret over man's inner conflict with his own limitations and finiteness:

The tree has no leaves and may never have them again,
We must wait till some months hence in the spring to know.
But if it is destined never again to grow,
It can blame this limitless trait in the hearts of men.

A third poem that uses winter's malignity to convey one of Frost's "darker moods" is "The Thatch." An intensely personal poem, "The Thatch" describes an experience with nature that ironically evoked one grief and tempered another. From the evidence of the poem, Frost was undergoing considerable conflict with an important person in his life, probably his wife Elinor, and the psychological as well as the physical setting of the poem is accordingly bleak and bitter:
Out alone in the winter rain,
Intent on giving and taking pain.
But never was I far out of sight
Of a certain upper-window light.
The light was what it was all about:
I would not go in till the light went out;
It would not go out till I came in.
Well, we should see which one would win,
We should see which one would be first to yield. (pp. 252-53)

Frost's depiction of the night, the rain, and the wind increases the sense of hostility that characterizes both his inner and outer worlds:

The world was a black invisible field.
The rain by rights was snow for cold.
The wind was another layer of mold.

The stage having been set, Frost next relates the experience of walking by the "thick old thatch" and discovering that birds were passing the winter in the shelter of its straw:

And as I passed along the eaves
So low I brushed the straw with my sleeves,
I flushed birds out of hole after hole,
Into the darkness. 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 nest again, nor find a perch,
They must brood where they fell in mulch and mire,
Till daylight made it safe for a flyer.

Frost's empathetic grief for the birds driven from their nests indicates the sensitivity he feels toward all living things. The intensity of his sorrow over the immedicable woes of the birds, however, proves to be a soothing agent for his earlier grief:

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.
Although the conflict which instigated the experience of the poem is resolved, and its grief perhaps relieved, the image with which Frost concludes is hardly one of peace and restoration. He closes with a picture of the wind-torn cottage where he had lived, perhaps symbolic to him of a stormy period in his life or even indicative of the sense of dissolution which his own numerous griefs had occasionally wrought upon his existence:

They tell me the cottage where we dwelt,
Its wind-torn thatch goes now unmended;
Its life of hundreds of years has ended
By letting the rain I knew outdoors
In onto the upper chamber floors.

A final poem in which winter imagery conveys despair is "Storm Fear," already discussed in regard to the experience of anxiety. Frost's despair derives in this instance from his feeling of fear and helplessness in the face of a monstrous winter storm. Because the storm has reduced Frost to the perspective of a child confronted by a phenomenon over which he has no control, he perceives the storm as an irrational, bestial force intent upon destruction. He feels the belligerence of the wind as a kind of sinister invitation to come out and be devoured by its fury. Since he is unable to take effective action against the threat, he is simply "subdued to mark"

How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length--
How drifts are piled,
Dooryard and road ungraded,
Till even the comforting barn grows far away. . . .

(p. 10)
As the snow increases, obliterating all the distinguishing features of the landscape, the fire on the hearth decreases, with Frost watching the last embers fade and give way to the numbing cold. The cumulative effect of the storm's attack upon Frost's meager stronghold is to induce despair. His situation looks so disastrous that his

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

Expressed in the inimical storm is an archetype of adverse circumstances that evoke a response of helplessness, fear, and despair.

Violent weather is a contingency of other seasons besides winter, and Frost finds it awesome whenever it occurs. In "Lodged," part two of "The Wind and the Rain," and "In Time of Cloudburst," he focuses upon the phenomenon of weather and its potentially violent effects to convey feelings of despair, sorrow, and resentment. In the first of these three poems, Frost empathizes with weather-beaten garden flowers:

The rain to the wind said,  
"You push and I'll pelt."
They so smote the garden bed
That the flowers actually knelt,
And lay lodged—though not dead.
I know how the flowers felt. (p. 250)

In these six short lines, Frost brings to mind a familiar image of flowers bent over in the mud after a rainstorm. He attributes to the rain and wind a human-like capacity for intentional destructiveness and to the flowers a human-like capacity to "feel" the weather's antagonism and the
humiliation it has caused them. Frost's personification of the natural images of the poem lends credence to his claim of understanding "how the flowers felt," for he is in actuality imposing his own emotions on the flowers for poetic purposes, just as he imposed human characteristics on the wind and the rain. Having experienced hostility and humiliation himself at the hands of others, Frost could readily find in the down-trodden flowers an apt correspondence for his own feelings of sorrow and despair.

Frost again contemplates flowers and rain in part II of "The Wind and the Rain" for their value in expressing sadness. His attitude toward the flowers and rain, however, appears diametrically opposed to that of "Lodged." Rather than personifying the natural elements of the poem, he envisions himself as the agent who will provoke torrential rains upon the thirsty, wilted flowers until they are "water-bowed":

Before I thought the wilted to exalt
With water I would see them water-bowed.
I would pick up all ocean less its salt,
And though it were as much as cloud could bear
Would load it onto cloud,
And rolling it inland on roller air,
Would empty it unsparing on the flower
That past its prime lost petals in the flood
(Who cares but for the future of the bud?),
And all the more the mightier the shower
Would run in under it to get my share. (p. 337)

Taking a different approach to the same images as in "Lodged," Frost achieves a different perspective on the same natural event, yet expresses a similar feeling. By contrast with the agony of drought and "desert heat," the heavy rains
are a welcome relief, no matter what outward damage is done to the flowers as long as the bud remains intact to propagate the species. For Frost, "water heavy on the head in all the passion of a broken drought" induces a feeling akin to ecstasy: "As strong is rain without as wine within,/As magical as sunlight on the skin." The full emotional significance of the rain, however, does not become clear until the final stanza:

I have been one no dwelling could contain
Where there was rain;
But I must forth at dusk, my time of day,
To see to the unburdening of skies.
Rain was the tears adopted by my eyes
That have none left to stay.

Frost identifies with the "unburdening of skies," adopting rain as the expression of his sorrow, since his eyes are dry from his own protracted "unburdening" by means of tears. Rain, accordingly, takes on the import of cathartic weeping, a natural correspondence to Frost's feeling of grief. The clue to that grief is found by relating part II of the poem to part I, in which Frost and the "season-ending wind" "sang of death" as man's unavoidable fate.

A final poem in which Frost uses violent weather to vent feelings of regret and resentment is "In Time of Cloudburst." In this poem, assuming a farmer's viewpoint, Frost resents the downpour of rain for depriving him of much-needed topsoil:

Let the downpour roll and toil!
The worst it can do to me
Is carry some garden soil
A little nearer the sea.
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.

The irony of Frost's suggestion lies in the familiar ring that modern archeology gives to his story; for though the poet himself is obviously not the one in the distant future to discover artifacts of his own age, it is plausible that men of civilizations yet to be might eventually unearth and speculate about tools used in Frost's lifetime. His attitude toward that possibility is subtly, but deftly, revealed in the line, "Begin all over to hope," as though hope were the closest man could ever come to actual fulfillment. The feeling underlying Frost's playful tone in the lines quoted above is expressed directly in the last stanza of the poem where it becomes evident that Frost is struggling with what he perceives as man's unhappy lot:

May my application so close
To so endless a repetition
Not to make me tired and morose
And resentful of man's condition. (p. 286)

The natural event—rain washing away garden soil—has thus led Frost to a philosophical diagnosis of existence
that is rather harsh and resentful: the interminable toil to which man's days must be devoted brings diminishing returns and its ultimate debris, such as a discarded plow, will belong to someone else. The only redemption for man's intolerable situation is to accept it without bitterness. Frost discloses his desire to experience that kind of acceptance by phrasing the last stanza as an entreaty or petition.

Though Frost's poems of seasonal change and inclement weather frequently deal with the mutability of life and the certainty of death, "The Rabbit-Hunter" and "Range-Finding" focus on death as the central theme of the poem. In both poems Frost contemplates death as something beyond the mind's comprehension, a mystery that creates the urgency and longing of life. In "The Rabbit Hunter," he builds the images for a cumulative effect that renders the death of the rabbit a somber, dramatic event:

Careless and still
The hunter lurks
With gun depressed,
Facing alone
The alder swamps
Ghastly snow-white.
And his hound works
In the offing there
Like one possessed,
And yelps delight
And sings and romps,
Bringing him on
The shadowy hare
For him to rend
And deal a death
That he nor it
(Nor I) have wit
To comprehend.(p. 360)
Frost creates a sinister impression first of the hunter, who "lurks" amid the "ghastly snow-white" alders, and then of the hound, diabolically intent on the death of his prey, "like one possessed." Finally, he introduces the "shadowy hare," whose ordinary, unspectacular death at the hands of a hunter Frost perceives in a most uncommon way. He sees the rabbit's violent end not as the hunter's need for food or desire for sport nor as an everyday, matter-of-fact occurrence, but as the absolute obliteration of life awaiting every creature, the ultimate phenomenon beyond which no perception can penetrate. As such, the simple death of the rabbit takes on the significance of that sorrowful part of reality that leaves the human mind in darkness and silence.

In "Range-Finding," Frost never directly mentions death, but couches his allusion to it in images of a torn cobweb and a broken flower. The oblique reference to death in the poem suggests that one man has shot another my means of a gun, perhaps under circumstances of war, but the viewpoint from which Frost presents the incident is that of nature:

The battle rent a cobweb diamond-strung
And cut a flower beside a groundbird's nest
Before it stained a single human breast.
The stricken flower bent double and so hung,
And still the bird revisited her young.
A butterfly its fall had dispossessed,
A moment sought in air his flower of rest,
Then lightly stooped to it and fluttering clung.
On the bare upland pasture there had spread
O'ernight 'twixt mullein stalks a wheel of thread
And straining cables wet with silver dew.
A sudden passing bullet shook it dry.
The indwelling spider ran to greet the fly,
But finding nothing, sullenly withdrew. (p. 126)
Frost's ability to relate the event in terms of nature's understanding of and response to it infuses the poem with both a sense of innocence and a sense of tragedy. So preoccupied are the bird, the butterfly, and the spider with their own concerns that they instinctively resume their activities following the brief human interruption. Their innocence is such that it cannot be marred by human destructiveness. By contrast, the human motives that produced the "sudden passing bullet" generate a feeling of gloom and despair which find natural correspondences in the images of the spider "sullenly" withdrawing and the butterfly clinging to the broken flower. The death and destruction which human beings can cause appears more tragic than even when juxtaposed with the simplicity of nature.

Frost's "darker mood" thus encompassed a variety of feelings, the depths of which he readily plumbed in the attempt to clarify his existence. Though sorrow and despair might not have been pleasant aspects of life to consider, Frost could not allow himself to "play the good without the ill" if he sought a comprehensive grasp of reality. Without becoming maudlin and without succumbing to a feeling of futility, Frost confronted the griefs that beset all human life and found natural correspondences for them in the seasonal changes of autumn and winter, in violent weather, and in the mystery of death itself. By discovering images of sadness in nature, Frost was able to externalize
his own sorrow, providing the needed "momentary stay against confusion" and making way for the experience of hope and affirmation.
CHAPTER V

HOPE

Frost's philosophical skepticism did not prevent his experiencing genuine hope. His innate skepticism, in fact, impelled him to search for metaphors for hope because he was continuously searching for a comprehensive understanding of existence. His very definition of poetry as "a clarification of life" was based upon the hope that human existence in its totality was worth clarifying. Because the natural world comprised the environment and the condition in which man had to pursue his existence, Frost sought, in nature, images that would reinforce and substantiate the meaningfulness of life, that would affirm the value of man's struggles, and that would provide reassurance of life's continuation. Frost discovered his metaphors of hope in natural events, such as weather, in streams and animals, in farming activities, and in the heavens.

That Frost closely observed the weather is evident from his search for natural correspondences to the experiences of anxiety and sorrow, but he was also able to perceive weather as a source of optimism. Three poems which revolve around weather imagery--"Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length," "Our Hold on the Planet," and "The Onset"--particularly reveal Frost's desire to view human experience
as a hopeful enterprise. In the first of these, he ponders the fact that though most of his days are stormy and cloudy, he still feels an abiding sense of "warmth and light":

O 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. (p. 333)

In the last half of the poem, Frost muses that perhaps his sense of hopefulness derives from a single day when the weather was clear from beginning to end:

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.

The title of the poem itself—"Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length"—epigrammatically summarizes its meaning: joy may be a momentary, fleeting part of human life, but its intensity compensates for its brevity and makes thousands of less propitious moments worth enduring.

Frost finds hope not only in a rare day when the weather was perfect, but also in a rainy day such as he describes in
"Our Hold on the Planet." In this poem he contemplates a day when the need for rain was met by gentle, well-spaced showers that affirmed his faith in nature's long-range benevolence:

We asked for rain. It didn't flash and roar.  
It didn't lose its temper at our demand  
And blow a gale. It didn't misunderstand  
And give us more than our spokesman bargained for;  
And just because we owned to a wish for rain,  
Send us a flood and bid us be damned and drown.  
It gently threw us a glittering shower down.  
And when we had taken that into the roots of grain,  
It threw us another and then another still,  
Till the spongy soil again was natal wet. (p. 349)

Always ready to scrutinize natural phenomena for their philosophical implications, Frost proceeds in the rest of the poem to portray, albeit with cautious reserve, his hopefulness in regard to man's continued existence on the earth:

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 percent at the very least,  
Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,  
Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased.

In "The Onset" Frost explores his feelings about the beginning of winter weather. He is always overwhelmed by the year's first snowfall and initially experiences the sudden flurry of white flakes as a reminder of death:

Always the same, when on a fated night  
At last the gathered snow lets down as white  
As may be in dark woods, and with a song  
It shall not make again all winter long  
Of hissing on the yet uncovered ground,  
I almost stumble looking up and round,  
As one who overtaken by the end  
Gives up his errand, and lets death descend  
Upon him where he is, with nothing done
To evil, no important triumph won,
More than if life had never been begun. (p. 226)

Recollection of nature's rhythmic cycle, however, enables
Frost to regain his emotional equilibrium and to see through
the drifts of winter snow to the promise of spring.

Yet all the precedent is on my side:
I know that winter death has never tried
The earth but it has failed: the snow may heap
In long storms an undrifted four feet deep
As measured against maple, birch, and oak,
It cannot check the peeper's silver croak;
And I shall see the snow all go downhill
In water of a slender April rill
That flashes tail through last year's withered brake
And dead weeds, like a disappearing snake.
Nothing will be left white but here a birch,
And there a clump of houses with a church.

No depth of snow can destroy Frost's confidence that winter's
whiteness will before long disappear into the life-giving
streams of April when the only whiteness left will be that of
the birch tree and "a clump of houses with a church." Even
winter weather can thus prove a harbinger of hope.

Streams provide the focal point of hope in "Going for
Water" and "Directive." Though these two poems are quite dif-
ferent from one another in style, tone, and narrative, both
involve a journey to a stream of water which is associated
with a sense of restoration and fulfillment. In "Going for
Water," a dry well necessitates a trip by the poet and a com-
panion to the brook to discover if it still flows. Tension
is established in the first stanza of the poem by the uncer-
tainty of the present condition of the brook:
The well was dry beside the door,  
And so we went with pail and can  
Across the fields behind the house  
To seek the brook if still it ran. . . . (p. 18)

The tension, however, remains light and playful because it derives from childlike anticipation:

We ran as if to meet the moon  
That slowly dawned behind the trees,  
The barren boughs without the leaves,  
Without the birds, without the breeze.

But once within the wood, we paused  
Like gnomes that hid us from the moon,  
Ready to run to hiding new  
With laughter when she found us soon.

The hopefulness of the poem becomes fulfillment in the final stanza when the poet and friend are stopped in the woods by the unmistakable sound of the brook. The moment is one of quiet but intense joy as their ears tell them that their need for water will be satisfied:

Each laid on the other a staying hand  
To listen ere we dared to look,  
And in the hush we joined to make  
We heard, we knew we heard the brook.

A note as from a single place,  
A slender tinkling fall that made  
Now drops that floated on the pool  
Like pearls, and now a silver blade.

The trickling brook provides a source of hope not simply because it meets a physical need, but more importantly, because in doing so it affirms human existence and thereby satisfies a paramount psychological need.

"Directive" takes up the theme of restoration and fulfillment in a melancholy reminiscence of a former time and place. Frost invites the reader to join him on an imaginary
trek away from the complexities of modern life to

a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather. . . .
(p. 377)

A major point of interest on the journey is

a house that is no more a house
Upon a farm that is no more a farm
And in a town that is no more a town.

Frost admits that as the guide for this strange visit, he
"only has at heart your getting lost."

The rocky road to the house is surrounded by young woods
that have taken over former orchards and fields:

As for the wood's 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.(p. 378)

The "village cultures" that once tamed this wilderness are now
lost, and nature has restored her dominion over what man has
left uncultivated.

Having brought the reader far from his accustomed urban
civilization, Frost tells him,

if you're lost enough to find yourself
By now, pull in your ladder road behind you
And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.
Then make yourself at home.

In this lonely, deserted setting, Frost then proceeds to draw
attention to those parts of the scene that call for special
contemplation:

First there's the children's house of make-believe,
Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,
The playthings in the playhouse of the children.  
Weep for what little things could make them glad.  
Then for the house that is no more a house,  
But only a belilaced cellar hole,  
Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.  
This was no playhouse but a house in earnest.

Finally, Frost turns to the ultimate purpose of the journey:

Your destination and your destiny's  
A brook that was the water of the house,  
Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,  
Too lofty and original to rage.  
(We know the valley streams that when aroused  
Will leave their tatters hung on barb and thorn.)  
I have kept hidden in the instep arch  
Of an old cedar at the waterside  
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail  
Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,  
So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.  
(I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)  
Here are your waters and your watering place.  
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.  
(pp. 378-79)

Frost's intention in "Directive" is to enable the reader  
and himself to attain a perspective of existence that transcends man's confinement to the present with all the importance attributed to its pressing demands and busy activities. Such a timeless perspective can be achieved only in a setting that expresses the long-range fate both of men and of their societies. The scene which Frost depicts reminds the reader of man's mortality, but it also includes a symbolic source of regeneration. The stream of water that sustained the lives of former inhabitants still flows in the present and can quench thirst as surely as in the past. To arrive and partake of its waters and thereby "find" oneself, Frost insists that one must first become "lost"; in other words, one must get rid of his orientation and attachment to his present-day society.
Frost's excursion into the time and setting of the past and his drinking from its waters suggest his desire to get beyond the artificial, simulated world of urban living and to touch base with the essentials of life as they might have been experienced by those of a former, simpler age. The brook which supplies water in the present as it did in the past suggests a stream of existence running beneath the superficial rise and fall of civilizations which may still be tapped near its source and which may impart a sense of wholeness to whoever will embark upon its quest. That which man seeks is what he has always sought, Frost implies, whether it be salvation, the Holy Grail, or the simplicity and innocence of childhood. That which motivates man's search is imbedded in the depths of human experience: a belief in the possibility of wholeness, for which Frost found a natural symbol in the stream because its waters have held the promise of rejuvenation for all ages. The stream thus represents for Frost his own hope for a comprehensive perspective of existence, a perspective that is "beyond confusion."

Rather than setting out in search of a hopeful perspective, as Frost did in "Directive," his characters in "Two Look at Two" experience it inadvertently through an encounter with two deer during a walk up a mountainside. The simplicity and the uniqueness of the experience combine to produce what the man and woman interpret as a profound affirmation of their love for life and for each other. The event began when the couple
had already climbed about as far as they could for that day
and "were halted by a tumbled wall/With barbed-wire binding":

They stood facing this,
Spending what onward impulse they still had
In one last look the way they must not go,
On up the failing path, where, if a stone
Or earthslide moved at night, it moved itself;
No footstep moved it. "This is all," they sighed,
"Goodnight to woods." But not so; there was more.
A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them
Across the wall, as near the wall as they.
She saw them in their field, they her in hers.

She seemed to think that, two thus, they were safe.
Then, as if they were something that, though strange,
She could not trouble her mind with too long,
She sighed and passed unscared along the wall.
"This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?"
But no, not yet. A snort to bid them wait.
A buck from round the spruce stood looking at them
Across the wall, as near the wall as they.
This was an antlered buck of lusty nostril,
Not the same doe come back into her place.
He viewed them quizzically with jerks of head,

Thus till he had them almost feeling dared
To stretch a proffering hand--and a spell-breaking.
Then he too passed unscared along the wall.
Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
"This must be all." It was all. Still they stood,
A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlocked-for favor
Had made them certain earth returned their love.
(pp. 229-30)

Peering momentarily into the lives of the deer makes the
couple's mountain hike a surprising adventure; but being no-
ticed and observed by the deer makes them see themselves from
a different perspective, as something "strange" but not
frightening, as if they are being wondered at in turn by
nature itself. The wall between the couple and the deer em-
phazises the difference in their perspectives of each other
and represents the barrier between them beyond which they can
only look. In spite of that boundary between human consciousness and animal awareness, however, a kind of link was revealed between man and nature, affirming what they held in common, such as companionship and mating. By making them feel a union with nature, the experience with the deer gave the couple a sense of hope and rightness about their relationship to each other and to the earth.

Frost concerns himself not only with unexpected experiences with nature in a wild, uncivilized setting, as in "Two Look at Two," but also with experiences that arise from man's deliberate interaction with nature, as in cultivating the soil. Poems in which Frost conveys hope through images related to farming include "The Tuft of Flowers" and "Putting in the Seed."

In "The Tuft of Flowers," the poet recalls the task of turning the grass after someone has mowed it in order to let it dry in the sun. On this particular occasion, he looks for the one who cut the grass,

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,  
And I must be, as he had been--alone,

"As all must be," I said within my heart,  
"Whether they work together or apart." (p. 22)

After his initial feeling of loneliness in his work, however, the poet's attention is caught by something that changes his attitude entirely. A passing butterfly leads his gaze to a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,

A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared  
Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.
The flowers, which the butterfly helps Frost to see, had been a source of joy to the mower in the early morning and consequently become a focal point for a sense of cooperation and relatedness which Frost comes to feel toward his fellowman:

   The mower in the dew had loved them thus,
   By leaving them to flourish, not for us,

   Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him,
   But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.

   The butterfly and I had lit upon,
   Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,

   That made me hear the wakening birds around,
   And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,

   And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
   So that henceforth I worked no more alone;

   But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,
   And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;

   And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
   With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

   "Men work together," I told him from the heart,
   "Whether they work together or apart." (p. 23)

Frost feels that a mutual appreciation for the beauty of nature created a kind of "brotherly" bond between himself and the mower, and it gives him an outlook of hope regarding the unity and interdependence of mankind.

In "Putting in the Seed," Frost's appreciation of nature consists in his hope for the promise of life contained in a seed. So absorbed in the hopeful labor of planting seeds is the poet that he suspects he will be unable to heed the call to supper:

   You come to fetch me from my work tonight
   When supper's on the table, and we'll see
If I can leave off burying the white
Soft petals fallen from the apple tree

And go along with you ere you lose sight
Of what you came for and become like me,
Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.

(pp. 123-24)

Frost's "passion for the earth" derives from his wonder over the process of birth and growth and from his empathy with the seed's struggle:

How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
On through the watching for that early birth
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

(p. 124)

The seedling pushing its way through the soil provides a natural correspondence to the experience of hope and affirms Frost's affinity for the enterprise of "Putting in the Seed."

A final category of poems in which Frost seeks images of hope in natural phenomena includes those in which he observes the heavens. In "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations" and "Take Something Like a Star," Frost's celestial contemplation leads him to a sense of security and peace in a world of flux and uncertainty. In the first of these poems, he finds the heavens a source of assurance for the continuation of earthly life; and in the second, he finds the constancy of a star a source of tranquility for his own inner life.

The mysterious spectacle of the heavens occupies Frost's attention in "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations,"
but he sees nothing there to warrant any real alarm:

You'll wait a long, long time for anything much
To happen in heaven beyond the floats of cloud
And the Northern Lights that run like tingling nerves.
The sun and moon get crossed, but they never touch,
Nor strike out fire from each other, nor crash out loud.
The planets seem to interfere in their curves,
But nothing ever happens, no harm is done. (p. 268)

The past behavior of celestial bodies provides enough evidence
of order in the heavens to lower substantially the likelihood
of any imminent crisis. Though a long-range perspective
might predict that chaos would someday destroy the heavenly
calm, Frost nevertheless concludes,

We may as well go patiently on with our life,
And look elsewhere than to stars and moon and sun
For the shocks and changes we need to keep us sane.
It is true the longest drouth will end in rain.
The longest peace in China will end in strife.
Still it wouldn't reward the watcher to stay awake
In hopes of seeing the calm of heaven break
On his particular time and personal sight.
That calm seems certainly safe to last tonight.

The improbability of celestial catastrophe thus affords Frost
at least one source of security and well-being, enabling him
for the present to maintain an outlook of hope.

"Take Something Like a Star" focuses on a particular
celestial body as an immutable point of reference that might
impart stability in an uncertain world. Frost looks to the
star for some idea or truth it might communicate concerning
itself and concerning human existence, but initially he is
frustrated in his quest for the star's meaning by its distance
and austerity:
O Star (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud--
It will not do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed,
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says, "I burn."
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend. (p. 403)

In the end, however, Frost concludes that the star's unyielding "loftiness" is what enables it to be a source of inspiration and steadfastness in the capricious circumstances of human life:

It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may take something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

The height that the star requires of those who would "stay" their minds on it is a perspective that rises above the fluctuation of "praise or blame," a perspective that inspires one to move beyond pettiness and to emulate the "loftiness" of the star. Such a serene and noble perspective as is found in the star thus offers Frost a symbol of hope for constancy and permanence in a world of transience and mutability.

Frost's persistent observation of nature and his longing for a total perspective of human existence enabled him to
discover images of hope in the weather, in streams and animals, in agriculture, and in the stars. These correspondences to the experience of hope that he found in nature affirm the validity of his desire to find meaning and significance in human strivings. The recurrence of nature's patterns and processes promise that conditions favorable to life will most likely continue indefinitely and that the anxieties and doubts of winter will be mitigated by the gladness and hope of spring. Because he found natural images that reassured him of the possibility of fulfillment and worth in human endeavor, he was able to gain a clearer perspective of existence and to experience the reality of the hope expressed in the last lines of "Directive":

Here are your waters and your watering place. Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.
CHAPTER VI

NATURE AS CLARIFICATION
OF EXISTENCE

Philosophical skepticism was more than an intellectual stance for Frost; because it gave rise to his desire for a clarification of life, his skepticism precipitated much of his poetic creativity. The process of doubting as a means to relative knowledge was Frost's habitual approach to any subject matter, and it led him to perceive and study life in terms of contrasts between opposites in order to find the middle ground of reality. When Frost said that "a poem begins with a lump in the throat," he underscored how fundamental his own experiences were to the substance and motivation of his poetry. Yet his skepticism dictated that introspection alone could not suffice to produce the comprehensive understanding of life that he sought.

The subjectivity of his experience with loneliness, anxiety, sorrow, and hope induced him to look for an objective reference point that would help to restore emotional equilibrium and provide some clarification of his experience. He found the objectivity he needed in the "otherness" of nature and in its indifference to the existential plight of mankind. His twin obsessions with the natural world and with
human existence were accordingly permeated by his skeptical frame of mind in a way that led him to contrast the two in his search for truth. Even the seriousness of his searching and the possibility of establishing truth, however, were held suspect by his skepticism with humor providing the balancing contrast.

Though the natural world vs. the human world afforded Frost a visible and consistent contrast for study, his probing disclosed parallels between the two in spite of their opposition. Through an image in nature that struck a familiar note in his experience or through an actual experience with nature that gave expression to basic human longings, Frost discovered correspondences between nature and human existence that suggested a relation between them and pointed to their derivation from a common source of life.

Because he was inclined to discern philosophical meaning in natural phenomena, Frost extracted implications about his own existence from what he observed in the processes of nature. In contemplating the empty spaces of the universe in "Desert Places" and the indifference of nature toward human fate in "Stars," Frost feels the intense pain and inescapable responsibility of his loneliness. At times he thought that nature wanted him to experience his loneliness more keenly than he already did, as in "Bereft," when the sky, the clouds, the sea, and the leaves threaten him with menacing gestures because he is alone. In "The Most of It," nature seems to
mock the poet's cry for companionship with an echo of his own voice and with a huge buck splashing through the water. Even though loneliness could be a healthy, desirable experience for the growth of his integrity and individuality, as in "Triple Bronze" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," in all his poems of loneliness Frost feels the acuteness of his separation from nature, from all other beings, and even from himself.

In seasonal changes Frost discovered correspondences to the experience of anxiety. "Nothing Gold Can Stay," "Oven Bird," and "A Leaf-Treader" depict seasonal images of loss that remind the poet of his own losses and his own mortality. The tension of uncertainty was frequently a theme in Frost's poems of anxiety. The orchards of "Good-by and Keep Cold" and "Peril of Hope" speak to Frost of the uncertainty of human endeavor. The inclement weather of "Once by the Pacific" and "Storm Fear" makes him uncertain about his physical safety. Other images in nature emphasize the uncertainty of human identity, of life's meaning, and of the future. In the poems of anxiety, Frost's feeling of separation persists.

In the autumn imagery of "My November Guest" and "Reluctance," Frost finds correspondences to the experience of sorrow. The "season-ending wind" and the driving rain in "The Wind and the Rain" are for Frost expressions of his grieving over the inevitability of man's fate and the shortness of life. In "Lodged" Frost sees the sadness of his own existence in the flowers beaten down by a violent storm, and
in "November" he watches the waste of another year's leaves and mourns the greater wastefulness of mankind. Like loneliness and anxiety, sorrow is an experience of separation from oneself and loved ones and from nature.

The same natural phenomena that evoked loneliness, anxiety, and sorrow could on other occasions provide Frost with correspondences to the experience of hope. The weather, which often reminds Frost of life's uncertainty and mutability, also supplies him in "Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length" with a sense of "warmth and light." Seasonal changes, a frequent reminder of loss and death, speak to Frost in "The Onset" of the cycle of nature that always includes the return of spring. A stream, which in "West-Running Brook" gives Frost a metaphor of anxiety, is also capable of representing the possibility of wholeness in a fragmented world, as in "Directive." The lone buck in "The Most of It," when joined by a doe in "Two Look at Two," provides Frost an affirmation of human love and companionship. The uncertainty of human endeavor in "Peril of Hope" is compensated for by the joy of participation with nature in "Putting in the Seed." And the stars that leave Frost feeling alone and deserted can also serve in "Take Something Like a Star" as an immutable reference point in a world of transience. The skepticism that drove Frost to search for natural correspondences to hope, in spite of having experienced despair, thus led him to an understanding of the relatedness of man and nature.
In "West-Running Brook" Frost discovered an analogy of existence in the white wave that ran counter to the rest of the brook: "It is this backward motion toward the source,/ Against the stream that most we see ourselves in. . ." (p. 260). This image expresses the paradox of accepting yet resisting the flow of life toward death and metaphorically illustrates Frost's sense of separation from the source of existence. Separation gave rise to the experiences of loneliness, anxiety, and sorrow.

Frost discovered another paradox in nature, however: the possibility of union in spite of separation. By drinking from a stream, by cultivating the soil, by taking "something like a star" as a stillpoint and seeking to emulate its "loftiness," Frost overcame the distance and separation from nature and from the source of his existence and was able to experience hope.

The skepticism that initiated Frost's contrast of nature and human experience thus led him to numerous correspondences between the two that pointed to their roots in a common source and validated for him the worth and significance of human existence. The poetry that issued from Frost's observation of nature and of mankind was thus eminently capable of resulting 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."¹

¹"The Figure a Poem Makes," p. 394.
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