INFORMATION TO USERS

This reproduction was made from a copy of a manuscript sent to us for publication and microfilming. While the most advanced technology has been used to photograph and reproduce this manuscript, the quality of the reproduction is heavily dependent upon the quality of the material submitted. Pages in any manuscript may have indistinct print. In all cases the best available copy has been filmed.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help clarify notations which may appear on this reproduction.

1. Manuscripts may not always be complete. When it is not possible to obtain missing pages, a note appears to indicate this.

2. When copyrighted materials are removed from the manuscript, a note appears to indicate this.

3. Oversize materials (maps, drawings, and charts) are photographed by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each oversize page is also filmed as one exposure and is available, for an additional charge, as a standard 35mm slide or in black and white paper format.*

4. Most photographs reproduce acceptably on positive microfilm or microfiche but lack clarity on xerographic copies made from the microfilm. For an additional charge, all photographs are available in black and white standard 35mm slide format.*

***For more information about black and white slides or enlarged paper reproductions, please contact the Dissertations Customer Services Department.**

Stiller, Walter N.

THE MEASURE OF MEANING: THE CONCEPT OF ORDER IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

City University of New York PH.D. 1986

THE MEASURE OF MEANING:

THE CONCEPT OF ORDER IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

by

WALTER N. STILLER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1986

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

5/7/86
date

Allen Mandelbaum
Chairman of Examining Committee

5/5/86
date

Executive Officer

Professor Irving Howe

Professor Wendell Johnson
Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

Abstract

THE MEASURE OF MEANING:

THE CONCEPT OF ORDER IN ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

by

Walter N. Stiller

Advisor: Professor Allan Mandelbaum

The driving force presented in Robert Frost's poetry is the urge toward self-preservation. Nature, on the other hand, is motivated by an unappeasable urge to destroy man. Consequently, Frost's world-view is both dualistic and agonistic, involving an unremitting battle between man and nature. Ultimately, this battle becomes subsumed under another, more potent one: the battle between man's will to order and nature's pervasive chaos. Though Frost presents order in tangible physical terms as a defined, delimited enclosure, his primary concern is intllectual: to define the nature of order as a condition of the human mind.

One can, in fact, extract from Frost's poetry a coherent and unified theory of order based on the idea of limit and relation. The physical enclosures within Frost's poems represent order's protective efficacy: through order, man fights nature and overcomes its manic urge to destroy him.

Yet, if one can extract from Frost's poetry a detailed and

synthetic theory of order, one can also extract a unified critique of this theory. For, in addition to his urge for self-preservation, man has another urge as profound: the urge to discovery. Though it might, initially, seem that order is an adjunct to knowledge, in fact, order stands between him and a higher, more inclusive perception of Truth. Founded on limit, order necessarily excludes from its province a coherent perception of the Whole.

In the light of the will to knowledge, order undergoes a complete de-valuation. Rather than shelter, order becomes prison, exercising on man a stifling and enervating influence. In addition, the conflict between man and nature, order and chaos, is subsumed under a larger, more inclusive dialectic that becomes Frost's ultimate theme: the conflict between order and Truth.

There are, however, larger metaphysical and epistemological implications to Frost's critique. Enclosure, the image of order, becomes a metaphor for the confinement of consciousness to a limited, spatially derived frame of reference. Conversely, the Infinite, the image of Truth, represents the mind's transcendence of this frame. Insofar as Frost uses a spatial image to convey the idea of transcendence, Frost implicitly demonstrates its unattainability.

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of the late Professor Helaine Newstead and to the living presence of Professor Frederick Goldin -- two formative and most precious influences, and to my parents.

For Allen

who has inspired and nurtured in equal measure

and for Gale

who brought the dawn and took away the night

Acknowledgements

This dissertation grows, in part, out of a love for literature (a strong weakness for the Muse, as Robert Frost says) contracted in the early years of my high school education. Since that time, this interest has been deepened and subtilized by a host of teachers and acquaintances many of whose maxims and insights reverberate, if only indirectly, in the pages of this dissertation. Though I cannot hope to acknowledge all the formative influences whose impact is in some way evident in the writing of this work, I would be remiss if I did not at least mention such teachers as Richard Warren, Robert McCardle, Robert Cullen, and Robert Berman -- all of whose passionate commitment to the teaching and studying of literature early inculcated in me a desire to venture in the realm of idea and image.

Members of the Yale English faculty have broadened my sense of the possibilities of literary analysis, breeding in me a more precise knowledge of the intricacies of critical argumentation. Of these, I would especially like to thank Professor Martin Price whose intense moral consciousness of the seriousness of literary thought was steadied by an equally intense consciousness of the complexities of its discriminations. To

him I owe the awareness that the making of fine distinctions is itself an ethical act.

At the Graduate Center, I have been no less fortunate in my professors. I cannot hope to indicate fully all the debts and influences that have made themselves felt, but I would certainly like to mention the inestimable knowledge of Professor Angus Fletcher, whose erudition has always been matched by a free-wheeling reflectiveness. From him what I remember most is the rhythm of his thoughts, whose expansive modulations continue to linger. Professor George Ridenour inspired me with a respect for the precision of his perceptions and the intuitive delicacy of his understanding. Professor Irving Howe, the depth and keenness of whose insights have often had an almost restorative impact, has provided a model of critical intelligence in the service of moral imagination. Professor Howe was most generous in reading the dissertation on very short notice and providing shrewd and discerning criticism. Professor Wendell Johnson was also very helpful and encouraging in his sensitive reading of my dissertation. Professor Timko, whose presence promoted the relaxed and comfortable atmosphere ideal for a graduate program, has also been a kind and supportive tutelary figure both in and out of the classroom. Mrs. Lynn Kadison has unfailingly offered amiable assistance and advice.

The Graduate Center has proven a congenial place to learn because of the warmth and liveliness of its students. Among the

students with whom I remember having had stimulating and rewarding discussions are Pat King, Ellen Martin, Burt Kimmelman, Wolhee Choe and John Katz. Jody Azzuni's agile and perspicacious mind has aided me in formulating my views more clearly. Sheila Rabin has been an exuberant and supportive presence. Deborah Sinnreich, through the thoughtfulness and alacrity of her personality, has helped to make the travails of graduate school (and word processing) somewhat less forbidding and onerous.

Henry Weinfield, encouraging and sympathetic, generously read and commented on several chapters before completion with assiduous attention to detail and logic. Dan Feldman also read a large portion of the manuscript, bringing to bear upon it a scrupulous critical mind; his subtle engagement with the text was extremely helpful in discovering alternative angles of insight.

The entire Weisfogel family, Jerry, Matonah, Jaret and Amiel have all been exceptionally encouraging and warm. In conversations with them, collectively and individually, I have learned and profited much. To my aunt, Metonah, I am especially grateful for her sympathetic concern and generosity.

My mother, encouraging and supportive, offered assistance and understanding. Her vigorous and lively remarks about art and literature have often introduced unexpected and

unfamilar avenues of thought. My father, too, who did not live to see the completion of this work, has been a persistent and inspiring presence. His impassioned involvement in ideas, his dedicated commitment to the life of the mind, and his unceasing belief in the close and necessary relation between intellectual undertanding and moral compassion have been markers by which I have tried to guide myself in my own intellectual pursuits.

Professor Allen Mandelbaum has been both friend and mentor and has unfailingly provided through his example a model of unerring grace and poised conviction. He has exemplified in his teaching the entwined connection between intellectual rigor, scholarly insight and thoughtful humanity. His uncanny fertility of thought and profound knowledge of Western traditions have combined to make his seminars speculatively daring. He has instructed, admonished and encouraged with generous patience.

Gale Sigal has been the most faithful and steady friend--considerate, kind, compassionate, understanding, and loving. She has at innumerable points during the writing of the dissertation directed and advised with clear, precise, and accurate judgment. She has contributed to it in manifold ways, and her good sense, subtle perception, and probing analysis have helped shape the final product. Her sound values and shrewd reasoning have more than once served to clarify difficult and elusive matters. I have learned much from her that could not

have been taught in the classroom and for which the book is only a symbol.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

i

Frost and the Moderns

Frost is most clearly outside the Modern poetic tradition in his avoidance of certain types of linguistic violence. He does not fracture syntax, unsettle diction, dislodge emotion, or perform any of the other dismembering manuevers of modern poetry. His close relation to the pastoral tradition becomes an index of his distance from the Modern. Frost's voice is fundamentally not what we would consider a typically Modern one: unharried by the excruciations of spirit, it is not an intensely self-conscious voice (or, at least, it does not make us conscious of its self-consciousness), nor is it agonized in its awareness of intellectual ambiguity, psychological ambivalence, and emotional conflict.

Rather, Frost's voice seems to us, fundamentally, a collected and composed one, poised with its own sense of certainty and assurance. It is relaxed rather than frantic, logical rather than "expressive," colloquial rather than idiosyncratic. Moreover, it does not divulge some inner landscape or mythological realm that is inhabited only by the consciousness of the poet; it does not rehearse an extreme alienation or an aggrieved subjectivity. Its rhetoric is relatively uncontorted; it does not strain, the way the voices of Yeats, Hart Crane, and Stevens may be said to, to distill some powerfully private, intensely individualized language.

Frost contents himself with a familiar, even commonplace idiom and makes poetry out of the speech of everyday discourse. If a sense of linguistic crisis (a crisis in -- but also of -- language) is one of the marks of the Modern age, Frost does not fit into it. If another characteristic of the Modern is a sense of crisis in the poet's relation to both self and community, here again Frost does not fit; rather than rejecting community, his poetry assiduously affirms, even consecrates it. Haunted by neither social nor subjective crisis, Frost's poetry articulates an objective and mimetic vision of the world, predicated on the shared nature of human experience.

Yet, there is a sense in which Frost's "objectivity" does betray links with other twentieth century poetry: his objectivity leads into and sometimes, even conveys detachment. In this respect, he shares with Modernism a certain disaffection from Romanticism, one of whose hallmarks is its immediacy of emotion -- the promptness with which emotion manifests itself to us. This immediacy lies not only in the relation of poet to reader, but, more especially, in the relation of poet to language and of language to emotion. The generosity and influence of feeling is a vital aspect of Romanticism and one of the sources of its eloquence. Romantic poetry gives us a sense of sudden and limitless access to the poet's mind, a mind often likened in the poetry to a source: a fount or orb from which flows creative illumination. We sense the fecundity of that mind (of its linguistic as well as emotional resources), and we

freely open ourselves up to its successive waves of revelation and inspiration. That fount seems inexhaustible, and if its illimitability seems, at times, to verge on the licentious, the eloquent profusion of discourse assures us of the logic and law orchestrating its effulgence.

Part of the violence of modern poetry lies in the sudden halting of that immediacy -- in the blockage of emotion and, more importantly, of experience. The social and cultural alienation from his community that the poet undergoes is psychologically paralleled in the alienation he feels from himself and linguistically paralleled in the alienation he experiences from language. The violence inflicted upon language and feeling in modern poetry is, to some extent, occasioned by the poet's inability to get in touch with emotion and represents a last-ditch effort to reclaim feelings that seem to be drifting away from and even disowning the poet.

Hints of this loss of immediacy can be seen in the poetry of the Victorians whose pervasive melancholy of tone can be viewed as a lament for the loss of the transcendent, but alternatively, can be perceived as a lament for the loss of feeling. (One might, for instance, remember T. S. Eliot's dictum on Tennyson -- that he was a massively repressed poet.)[1] One of the differences between the Modern and the Victorian lies in the way each responds to this loss. If the Modern typically responds to it with violent self-torment, the Victorian does so with sadness and regret.

In Frost, too, we sense a distance in his relation to emotion. His first volume is filled with the melancholy of late Romanticism (the liberal use of the words "heart" and "seek" can be seen as an index of that Romanticism); but after that volume, Frost moved decisively into another mode -- one of detachment, indirectness, austerity, and even irony. Rather than proclaiming emotion, Frost merely alludes to it, quietly intimating it. Often the emotion seems strangely withheld from the poem, though the emotion is certainly, in one sense, what the poem is about. The emotion may seem mediated by a great deal of intellective precaution, refracted through ironic inflection, or buried under aloof denial. This can be seen in the often eloquent inarticulateness, the baffled silence and cold reserve, of the characters that speak in North of Boston. Sentiment, although not excised, has been severely constrained. At times, this kind of reserve can be chilling, as in "An Old Man's Winter Night" or "The Figure in the Doorway"(CP, 108; 292);[2] at other times, as in "The Witch of Coos" or "The Witch of Grafton" (CP, 202-07; 207-10), it can be strangely suggestive, even haunting.

In comparison to Romantic poetry, therefore, Frost moves away from a poetry of pronouncement and direct statement, toward one of sly and subtle insinuation. One of the fascinations of Frost's poems is the way they shy away from explicit assertion and retreat from fixed, determinate meaning. Frost's poetry possesses a strange round-aboutness, even evasiveness. Though

never precious or exquisite, Frost develops what could be called a "light" touch, poised on the ephemeral and equivocal. Frost is fully as significant for what he leaves out as for what he puts in. In his own words, "We shall be judged finally by the delicacy of our feeling of where to stop short."[3]

An example of Frost's retience on the lexical level, can be found in his famous poems, "The Oven Bird" (CP, 119-20). Though the poem deals with loss, its approach is somewhat detached and intellectual, and its conclusion puts reins on the influx of feeling: "The question that he frames in all but words/Is what to make of a diminished thing." "Diminished thing" is so abstract and impersonal a formulation that it prevents us from grasping loss as real and immediate, but distances us from the experience, encouraging us to view it as an idea rather than undergo it as an emotion. This curious kind of distancing is appropriate to a poem that implicitly affirms moderateness (and moderation) of expression. Also, it is significant that Frost's opening ("There is a singer everyone has heard") asserts the universality of the experience he is about to describe, for his poems engage the public aspect of experience more aggressively than do those of most Modern poets.

Another term, besides indirectness and reserve, that might be used to characterize Frost's hesitancy and elusiveness, is brevity. Frost's movement toward the inscription mode, toward gnomic simplicity and laconicism, was the natural outcome of a career predicated on brief poetic appearances, sudden poetic

departures, and a generally elusive poetic presence. Frost thrives on the brevity of encounter that a short poem necessarily involves. If the late poetry strikes us as sparse and impoverished, it is not because Frost has chosen the laconic mode, but because he has lost his gift for exploiting it. Frost's art (like Emily Dickinson's whose poetry he disliked and which in other respects his own fails to resemble) is fundamentally one of opening up new perspectives on reality, allowing the reader a brief and sudden survey of the terrain, and, then, just as suddenly, closing off the view. Startled, thrown off balance, the reader experiences the impact of sudden vision without being able to contextualize that vision against the background of ordinary experience. Inscrutability increases interest. The moment of vision obtrudes like a significant experience of mystery and bewilderment.

In "A Passing Glimpse," this brevity of vision is an explicit theme. Even as the poet asserts the salient significance of his glimpse of the flowers, he withholds from us precise knowledge of its character:

> 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. CP, 248

The fleetingness of the glimpse is stylistically and poetically paralleled in the fleetingness of Frost's manner. His use of the word "brushed" in line 9 exemplifies his own lightness of touch. In its quiet, tentative touching on meanings, Frost's style is like a brief peering into formerly undisclosed and suddenly occluded vistas. The very brevity of vision argues its significance; the uncertainty is an alluring temptation to regard this vision as significant. At such moments, the mind surmises a deeper, higher truth, though the very pregnancy of such moments depends on their being somehow evanescent, equivocal, fleeting.

This lightness of touch could be seen as a kind of reticence not unrelated to tact. It involves restraint from total or totalizing expression. In the brevity of his presence, the allusive, elusive momentariness of his "stay,"[4] Frost is outside the Romantic tradition whose mania for rhetorical display and plenitude culminated in the rich, abundant genius of Melville. Frost is not an "expressive" poet in the Romantic sense; he never unleashes emotion or forthrightly proclaims it. We never have in Frost a sense of outcry or outburst, of urgent, uncontrolled emotion absolutely compelling release and finding prolific expression in language as it goes along. We never get that sense of generous unburdening, of ample flow, and to look for it is to radically mistake the very character of his art.

An example of Frost's tact is contained in a couplet from one of his greatest poems, "The Figure in the Doorway": "The miles and miles he lived from anywhere/Were evidently something he could bear" (CP, 292). Frost touches here on a matter of potentially tremendous pain, but manages to avert our glance from the turbulence and turbidity with a graceful and tactful imprecision. While retaining its semantic vagueness, the word "anywhere" manages, nevertheless, to acquire an almost colloquial eloquence. But rather than being told in depth of the man's loneliness, we are left merely to imagine it.

It is the word "evidently," however, that seems like the brilliantly eloquent yet withholding term here. In refusing to divulge the whole story to us, Frost signals his deference to the decorum of appearances, the distance of surfaces, and thus, also, the delicacy of social realities. Tactfully alluding to the truth behind the appearance, Frost conjures up a host of possibilities (some terrifying, some tragic) and then artfully, adeptly, withdraws, excusing himself as though he cannot be held responsible to tell "all." It is not a matter of not delving below the surface: even in deferring to the surface, Frost delves below it. Though there is but a hint, how much more eloquent that hint proves than would a full-fledged, comprehensive report.

The refusal to say "all," to utter the whole, represents an honoring of the limitations of speech and the integrity of feeling. Man refrains from the boisterous and overready

expression of emotion as from a sacrilege of the gravest sort. Certain kinds of impetuous explorations and indulgences of emotion do an injustice to feeling not only because they misreveal emotion, but also because they misdirect it. If poetry is more than simply a transcription of previous emotive experiences, if it is, in part, an attempt at learning how to appropriate emotion in a civilized and decorous way -- then poetry cannot afford to mistate, exaggerate, or distort feeling: to do so is tantamount to a betrayal of the Muse.

It is worth examining in greater detail how restraint contributes to the expressivity of Frost's poetry. Restraint in poetry or language, as in life, need not be a source of enervation; in fact, it can become a source of energy and strength, even of power. This sense of power stems, first, from the continued exertion of the contained force. It is increased by the strength of the container in withholding the contained but augmentative force. There is a symbiotic relationship between these two elements: our sense of the power of the container is, paradoxically, augmented by the power of the force contained; conversely, in being contained, the power of this contained force is also augmented. Though pitted against one another, container and contained depend on one another to generate their sense of mutual power.

Part of the power of Frost's poetry derives precisely from this pent-up, contained, and withheld but also dilating and augmentative force. Especially in its relation to meaning and

language's power to produce meaning, restraint forces us to re-examine some very basic assumptions about the meaning and nature of expressivity, not only in Frost, but in poetry in general.

Usually we think of expressivity as related to disclosure: the more fully a term divulges its meaning, the more fully it reveals itself, the more "expressive" we consider it. Restraint makes us conscious that by refusing to divulge meaning or by or rendering it in indirect, oblique, and controlled ways, language can be even more expressive, arousing meaning and emotion in us the more deeply. It is not necessarily the vitality, generosity, or fullness with which language discloses meaning or emotion that determines how much of it gets across. Frost would seem to imply just the reverse.

An excellent example of augmented expressivity through restraint is Frost's celebrated poem, "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening":

> Whose woods these are I think I know.
> His house is in the village, though;
> He will not see me stopping here
> To watch his woods fill up with snow.
>
> My little horse must think it queer
> To stop without a farmhouse near
> Between the woods and frozen lake
> The darkest evening of the year.
>
> He gives his harness bells a shake
> To ask if there is some mistake.
> The only other sound's the sweep
> Of easy wind and downy flake.
>
> The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep. CP, 224-25

There can be no doubt as to the indescribable charm, beauty, and seductiveness of the woods (and through them of the poem). Yet, even as Frost evokes the woods' attraction, he quietly but strongly resists it. We are conscious of their lure as of a possibility (or, rather, temptation) that has been forsworn. The connection between the woods' mysteriousness and the speaker's resistance of this myseriousness, between the pull toward and the pull away from enchantment, is by no means arbitrary or casual, for the more fully the speaker resists its attraction the more conscious are we of it.

More, we can even say that the voluptuous beauty of the woods emerges precisely <u>from</u> the speaker's intoned resistance of it. Similarly, a sense of the poem's depth of meaning (which could be identified with that of the woods' mysteriousness) emerges from Frost's restraint in evoking it. Paradoxically, the poem's evocativeness is fundamentally a function of its restraint.

If Frost's restraint is a source of augmented expressivity, it is also an indication of a deep-seated ambivalence about expression. Insofar as expression involves disclosure, it also involves exposure. In disclosing meaning, the poet ironically prepares the way for his own dismissal, since what is understood need not be studied or returned to. In resisting his reader's desire for disclosure, Frost paradoxically ensures his reader's perennial return. Having failed once to extract from the poem its salient meaning, the reader returns again and again, in the

delusive hope that one day this meaning shall be made clear to him.

ii

Frost and the Eighteenth Century

In his culivation of tact, reticence, and restraint, Frost is a good deal closer to the Augustan sensibility than to the Romantic. Like the Augustan, at least in its more personal, less official guises (and unlike the Romantic, in its more oracular incarnations), Frost's poetry aims not at an amplification of voice, but at a subtilization of tone. Like the Augustan, too, Frost develops what might be called a reflective rather than an emotive relation to feeling. Frost's poetry promotes many of the same values as neoclassical verse: critical impartiality, minute discrimination, and poised introspection. Moderateness of vision, tact of expression, and balance of judgement are all Frostian norms. We might almost describe Frost's final point of view as one of elegant rationality. The verse decidedly calls into play the reader's own sense of tact and poised perception and never seeks to instigate a sense of riotous or raucous emotionalism.

Frost's use of language is also closer to the eighteenth than to the nineteenth century. He consistently tends toward containment rather than expansion. The internal pressures of Frost's line enforce attention to the subtle tensions and

balances of meanings that obtain between words. The poetry directs us toward a renewed examination of these relationships. In Romantic poetry the words enjoy a centrifugal relationship to the poem, violently moving outward and away from it and one another, propelling us toward the universe outside them -- a universe they try so potently to master. In Frost, as in Augustan poetry, the words enjoy a centripetal relation to the poem, plunging us deeper into the manifold nuances and discriminations suspended in the complex tensions between words. Frost's is a poetry of wit and irony, Romanticism, on the one hand, is a poetry of vision and imagination.

Despite these similarities to Augustan verse, Frost's poetry still deserves to be differentiated from Augustan poetry, especially in regard to its wit and humor. Whereas Augustan wit and irony are peculiarly the effects of a facile manipulation of words, Frost's humor seems more the result of a wry, ironic attitude to the world in general. Whereas there is always something "striking" about Augustan wit that compels both admiration and astonishment, there is always something elusive about Frost's humor that evades analysis and repels attention. One of the sources of our satisfaction in reading Augustan verse is the pleasure we take in observing a complex and disjunctive set of perceptions set into a defined syntactic space or contained within a limited metrical form. But the notable things about this act of containment is that for all its compressive skill, the encapsulization of these perceptions

preserves their delineative contours. Analytically, Augustan verse is a remarkably well-honed instrument of thought that clarifies distinctions rather than elliding them. When we speak of the clarity of Augustan language in general, it is, in part, this analytic fineness that we have in mind.

Frost's language, on the other hand, is not an analytically precise or delineative instrument. We do not think of Frost's poetry as profoundly evocative or suggestive (except at rare moments and in an oblique way), but whatever wealth of association and imaginative power it possesses derives from a language that tends to blur nuances of meaning and elide distinctions rather than define them. Part of the difficulty the reader encounters in Frost is that of a colloquial idiom that does not precisely distinguish between strains of sentiment and levels of response. What might be considered a source of imprecision in more analytic discourse becomes, in Frost, a source of humor, suggestiveness, and irony. In confusing levels of meaning, Frost broadens and enriches them.

It is somewhat paradoxical that though Frost con-fuses levels of meaning and perception and Augustan verse tends to delineate them, Augustan verse calls more pronounced attention to its feats of compression and containment than does Frost's. The colloquial ease of Frost's poetry, its sense of a speaking or spoken intonation, defies sudden or extreme compressions of syntax or diction. Everything in Frost depends on the evenness of the spoken voice -- its essentially continuous and slow-paced

movement. In this respect, Frost's poetry also differs from much Modern poetry which makes extensive use of compressive and disjunctive techniques on metrical, lexical, and syntactic levels. In doing so, Modern poetry tends to produce a language that is markedly charged with signs of stress and strain -- a language that accurately reflects the charged and disordered states of minds of the poets who produce it. Frost's distance from such techniques or effects provides one more instance of his distance from the Modern.

iii

Frost and the Romantics

Frost distances himself not only temperamentally and stylistically, but also intellectually and thematically from the Romantics. Philosophically, Romanticism seeks to affirm the primacy of mind over matter. Its orientation is essentially Idealist and transcendental. In seeking to affirm its own generative power, the mind seeks to affirm itself as the origin of meaning.

In order to do so, it employs diverse strategies. The first and most basic is the withdrawal and dissociation of consciousness from the world. In seeking to affirm its priority to matter, consciousness turns away from the objective, external world and becomes object to itself. This mode of representation finds, perhaps, its most vehement and magnificent incarnation in Virginia Woolf. Even where consciousness seems to be focused on

external objects, these objects serve only as mediations for the movement of consciousness itself. The emphasis is not on the objects themselves, but on their reflection in consciousness.

A related, though somewhat different strategy is the mythopoeic mode in which material representations serve only as an allegory of imaginative, creative process. Yet another mode closely associated with the first is that of abstract discourse. In generating an almost uniformly abstract and imageless discourse, language symbolically rejects the mediations of objective, material reality, becoming the host of its own awareness. It is, perhaps, for this reason -- that abstract discourse allows the mind to dissociate itself from the world and to focus exclusively on itself -- that abstract, conceptual discourse figures so prominently in Romantic writing.

Yet another mode -- one on which Geoffrey Hartman concentrates in his study of Wordsworth[5] -- is that in which the mind seeks to affirm its own generative relation to meaning and power by imposing meaning on nature. In this mode, mind seeks not to be the passive recipient of perception, but the active creator of meaning. Hartman focuses on the struggle for dominance between mind and nature. Imaginative strength consists in being able to preserve an active rather than a passive relation to the world -- in being constituitive rather than representative of meaning. Another metaphor, besides imposition, that we might use for this mode is that of infusion; mind seeks to inject meaning into nature -- to transfuse or

infuse it into the world.

Another mode is the one on which Brower concentrates in contrasting the Romantics to Frost -- one which asserts less resolutely the agonistic relation of mind to world.[6] A metaphor for this mode or relation (and one which Brower consistently uses) is correspondence. Mind perceives in nature a corresponding pattern that mirrors and perfects its own pattern or, alternatively, sees in nature a pattern that corresponds to that of the transcendent. In this latter interpretation, nature becomes a kind of palimpsest through and in which man discerns signs, characters, or glimmerings, of a higher, more intelligible, transcendent world. Often this world "speaks" to man through a language that is imprinted on or impressed in nature. Wordsworth specifically associates the transcendental power of nature as a kind of writing -- a language -- deciphering a revelatory signature in concrete phenomena.

A final mode that Brower documents[7] is a less articulate one in which the natural world becomes a conduit through which the transcendental sphere communicates its power. Here the communication is less "linguistic" than sensory; man is overwhelmed by primordial intimations of the "might" of being that underlies the natural, phenomenal world.

What all these modes have in common is that, in their attempt to affirm the primacy of mind over matter, they also seek to negate the material, phenomenal world. They do this either by denying the existence of this world or by viewing the

world as a projection and creation of the mind, for there is frequently in Romanticism a fundamental animus to "objective reality."

Frost's conception differs radically. Rather than seeing the subjective as generative and the objective as derivative, Frost recognizes the absolute reality of the latter. For Frost, the mind's relationship to this world is not agonistic, but participative, if not cooperative. Mind does not seek to impose meaning on or infuse meaning into nature, but seeks to extract the meaning of nature from nature. The act of finding meaning is an empirical one. Meaning inheres in reality, in the objective relations of things. Mind is most clearly imagined as an instrument for the disinterment of meanings rather than the seed-bed out of which they flourish.

In trying to distinguish between Frost's metaphysical and epistemological precepts and those of Romantic literature, Brower aptly quotes William James:

> For pluralistic pragmatism, truth grows up inside of all the finite experiences. They lean on each other, but the whole of them, if such a whole there be, leans on nothing. All "homes" are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless. Nothing outside the flux secures the issue of it. It can hope salvation only from its own intrinsic promises and potencies.
>
> To rationalists this describes a tramp and vagrant world, adrift in space, with neither elephant nor tortoise to plant the sole of its foot upon. It is a set of stars hurled into heaven without even a centre of gravity to pull against. 8

This inherence of meaning in objective circumstances is one of

Frost's fundamental presuppositions. Hence, for Frost, the "work of knowing," in Poirier's phrase, consists in submitting the human mind to an objective set of facts that cannot be altered by mental fiat. The labor of cognition consists in ferreting out the significance of those events rather than impressing significance upon them. This belief in the objectivity of meaning saves Frost from the solipsistic fate that seized so many Romantics -- the abyss of a self-generated, self-generating world.

One consequence of this belief is that Frost's use of language remains steadfastly representative rather than constitutive. In a fundamental way, Frost's poetry does not consist of a testing and playing out of verbal entelechies or linguistic co-ordinates or, at least, only insofar as these reflect an objective structure -- a cosmic entity. Frost builds a world out of words, but the world he builds is not a world of words; rather, it is a world reflected in language -- mirrored in words.

One more consequence of this inclination is that Frost, less committed to the metaphysical priority of language than are the Romantics, is also less determinedly interested in meaning per se. Rather than meaning, order is Frost's primary intellectual concern. The distinction between meaning and order must, of course, necessarily remain a fine, perhaps even tenuous one, in which each involves elements of the other. But whereas we might regard meaning as a more semantic and contentual

principle, order seems more a spatial and structural one.

As Frost's poetry is reflective rather than "expressive," so it is also empirical rather than subjective (or experiential rather than intellectual). As Brower has pointed out,[9] most of Frost's poems start with some natural fact, an image of natural existence, whose significance they then attempt to divine. In this way, Frost's poems palpably reveal the imprint of things; they are more decisively shaped by reality than are Romantic poems, where the needs to shape reality often results in a profound alteration, or even denial, of it.

In his book, Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing, Poirier attempts to elucidate Frost's thematic concerns and preoccupations by assessing his relation to certain earlier poets, such as Wordsworth and Emerson. For Poirier, as perhaps for Harold Bloom, whose theory of poetic influence he inherits, these relationships manifest themselves primarily through a poet's "troping" of a previous poet's tropes. In declaring the poet's stance, these tropes also indicate the poet's meaning. The trope on which Poirier focuses is that of return -- the truncated or unfulfilled journey, the march "back home" after a preliminary departure. For Poirier, this refusal to commit himself completely to "extra-vagance," this only partial commitment to journey, symbolizes Frost's refusal to commit himself to the visionary mode -- his holding back from it.

Interpreting Frost in terms of his tropes, Poirier makes literary choice the ultimate subject of Frost's poetry. If, in

his poems, Frost had allowed the trope to fulfill itself as journey, would he then be a visionary poet? A visionary poet, in those terms, is simply a poet who affirms his imaginative powers by using the "right" symbolic figure or trope. The poet radically alters his meaning, and intellectual orientation, simply by altering his figures. But what, in this conception does being a visionary poet mean? It means that the poet uses certain types of visionary figures, figures of extravagance. Conversely, if one uses the figure of thwarted or unfulfilled journey, according to this view, one is asserting one's non-visionariness. Thus, for Poirier, as for Bloom, poetry becomes a kind of game -- one we might call "trope manipulation." We are left ultimately with the poet as clever manipulator of tropes.

There are no real consequences to poetic creation in Poirier's view. Had Frost written poems where his characters fail to return, Poirier would undoubtedly have proclaimed Frost's visionary qualities, and therefore would have included him amongst the visionaries. Poirier's failure to explain what is involved in either affirming or not affirming visionariness deprives his interpretation of any substantive value. Literary creation becomes merely a matter of cerebral activity -- of strategy rather than fundamental intellectual or psychological orientation.

Furthermore, Poirier's statement that Frost is not a visionary poet is wholly inadequate since Frost is so clearly

unvisionary. To eliminate distant and improbable possibilities is not to tell us which ones have been realized. Does Frost really derive his poetic identity through his rejection of the visionary? It is true that he is not visionary, but then, we must ask further, what is he?

iv

The Ineluctable Pattern

Nothing so clearly demonstrates Frost's empiricism as his consistently mimetic point of reference. Most of Frost's poems present coherent and cohesive landscapes -- recognizable, realistic scenes. Even though poetry is necessarily a temporally determined mode that unfolds sequentially, Frost presents us with a pictorial surface that is at any one instant completely available for scrutiny. We may move with impunity from one part of the canvas to another, scanning its entire surface, but the entire picture exists for us, at least theoretically, as a synchronous and unitary whole. Consciousness enters the picture, so to speak, in its attempt to elicit from the picture the latter's significance. We never feel that this significance is imposed on the picture; it inheres in the scene or situation, and our task, like the poet's, is to elicit it.

Of course, Frost has not necessarily portrayed real scenes; he may well have invented them, only bestowing on them their air of realism. Still, he has so shaped the scene that it seems to

present, to re-present, some meaning that is immanent in or embodied by it. Frost, at times, suggests the meaning to which the scene points, but he never completely divulges it. Nor does this scene exist as an objective correlative for consciousness or for states of consciousness.

Frost's pictorial realism and scenic wholeness contrast with the method of approach employed by a Romantic or post-Romantic writer, such as as Yeats. Yeats' poems often seem to re-present a movement of consciousness that is temporally successive, spatially diffuse or, at least, linear. As consciousness pursues its course, one image alternates with another in a continuous and steady stream. These images may be derived from perceptions of the external world, but they are not given a synchronous simultaneity of existence on a continuous spatial or pictorial plane. Insofar as each image necessarily displaces the next, the succession of images recapitulates the conflictuality of consciousness itself.

Related to Frost's empirical approach to reality is his resolute use of the middle style. Frost never aspires to a truly exalted or "high" style; much of his humor derives from its ironic subversion of elevated subjects -- their treatment in burlesque or satiric tones. (It is significant that in "My Butterfly," Frost's first published and most "elevated" poem, the butterfly, wandering on high, is said to "totter.")

More than simply a personal disposition, Frost suspicion of the Sublime is a central value in his poetry and part of his

fundamental Americanness. Like Thoreau, to whose concreteness of language Frost's own owes something, Frost re-defines poetic sublimity in decidedly populist, democratic terms, seeking not so much to down-grade the high, as to elevate the humble.

Not only are Frost's poems outwardly mimetic, but they are also situational, focusing on the behavioral, rather than subjective, aspect of human nature. Just as each of Frost's poems tends to present a coherent, recognizable landscape, so it also tends to represent a unified, coherent "action" -- in the Aristotelian sense. Frost's poems seem literally to revolve around such an action. As in the Aristotelian conception of an action, the "action" in Frost's poems is bound together by a strict causal and logical necessity; the poem moves through a series of stages, and each stage seems centrally linked to the next, which leaves us with a sense of completeness -- of finished and resolved activity, of logical and necessary relation.

So completely do Frost's poems mime an "action" that, at times, some even seem to possess the two characteristics of an Aristotelian action -- a peripiteia and an anagnorisis. An example of this reversal is found in "The Thatch" (CP, 252-53), where, having wandered outdoors in the rain and flushed birds out of "hole after hole," the speaker, stunned into self-recognition and imaginative identification by the sight of the birds whose homelessness mirrors his own, announces: "That was how that grief started to melt." The poem literally "resolves"

itself in an image of melting -- in a de-construction or dismantling of the very situation it had assiduously evoked. Another example of such de-construction through ironic reversal appears in "Come In." Having "poetically" likened the song of a thrush to a "call to come in/To the dark and lament," the poet, asserting his refusal to "come in," adds:

> But no, I was out for stars:
> I would not come in.
> I mean not even if asked,
> And I hadn't been. CP, 334

Again, the speaker ends on a note which dismantles the very situation he had so assiduously conjured.

The moment of "discovery" in Frost is frequently fraught with a sense of sudden insight into a hidden pattern of meaning, immanent in the structure of the events or the situation in the poem, but which only now becomes fully discernible. There is at such moments a sense of convergence; meaning seems suddenly determined, even over-determined on multiple levels, and the convergence of these levels seems like a privileged moment in the life of the mind. The suddenness of this recognition, the sense that it has been lurking in the structure of things all along, but only now has it become fully cognized imparts a sense of the uncanny to the poem. Examples of this sudden illumination, are Square Hale's sudden realization of the significance of his behavior in "The Gold Hesperidee" (CP, 283-84) or the moment in "Out, Out" where the boy recognizes the fatality of his accident:

> Then the boy saw all--

Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart--
He saw all spoiled. CP, 136-37

Here the moment of discovery (the recognition of the significance -- thus, the fatality -- of the incident) precisely coincides with the moment of reversal (the descent toward death).

It is the sense of a hidden yet incipiently emergent pattern of meaning that provides the strong sense of integrality and unity we so frequently experience in reading Frost. There is frequently a sense of purposive design. Each poem seems architected according to an overall conception or conceit. There is a brilliant sense of necessary poetic and symbolic logic, of figural and metaphorical necessity. It is in the trop-ical logic, the figural concision, of the poems that their meaning and order seems to inhere. The poem, "Afterflakes," powerfully works out its metaphoric and symbolic movement with such logical concision and necessity:

In the thick of a teeming snowfall
I saw my shadow on snow.
I turned and looked back up at the sky,
Where we still look to ask the why
Of everything below.

If I shed such a darkness,
If the reason was in me,
That shadow of mine should show in form
Against the shapeless shadow of storm,
How swarthy I must be.

I turned and looked back upward.
The whole sky was blue;
And the thick flakes floating at a pause
Were but frost knots on an airy gauze,
With the sun shining through. CP, 303

All movements, logical or physical, predicated in the poem (and there is a sense of the analogousness of logical to physical and metaphorical movement in this and many of Frost's poems) unfold in terms of a systemic or hermetic interconnection of parts. The poem seems to fulfill or even exhaust its logical and metaphoric premises. We have in the poem a sense of an abstract, conceptual code transposed into a realistic mode. Hence, even as the poem works itself out as realistic description, it also seems to be working itself out as code -- as meaning.

Put another way, Frost's poems deploy their materials in the ideal sequential fashion -- in the manner these materials seem implicitly to demand. Frost has arrived at the perfect dispositio for his inventio. The poems have organized their materials so as to realize their thematic potential, unfolding the meanings implicit in their conception. There is, thus, a sense that they have truly fulfilled themselves, realizing their poetic entelechy.

The integral unity of Frost's poems is the source of their sense of closure rather than vice versa. It is not so much that Frost's poems conclude strongly as that their endings bear a strong determinative relation to the rest of the poem. Each element seems logically and metaphorically entailed by the other elements. They, thus, seem bound together by a compelling intellectual scheme. Logic rather than rhetoric is the source of their unity -- a cunning exactitude of meaning and implication.

Put differently, the poems seem to expand to a certain point and, then, artfully, adeptly, to contract and coalesce, recognizing their own limits and never venturing beyond a point they can thematically and stylistically contain. Consequently, there is a sense that nothing is superfluous or adventitious.

This recognition of limits is another aspect of the restraint Frost imposes on himself and on his poems. Frost will stray just as far as he can while still being able to return; the sense of return and recurrence supplies the sense of resolution.

Frequently the pattern of meaning in Frost's poems seems mythical and archetypal. Resonances of austere psychic patterns continually emerge. It is perhaps our recognition of the primacy of these patterns that accounts for the frequent sense of the uncanny we experience in Frost -- the encounter of an inner pattern with the one Frost has outwardly constituted and embodied. Frost himself seems to acknowledge the element of recognition in his essay, "The Figure a Poem Makes," where he asserts that the pleasure of writing consists in discovering something he didn't know he knew.

The cohesiveness of Frost's poems, stemming from the completeness of his action and the metaphorical logic of his poems' structure, sets them apart from most Modern poetry. In many Modern poets, the desire to render the intricacies and complexities of consciousness leads to a fragmentation of reality. In Eliot, this fragmentation of subjective experience

has a correlative in the fragmentation of modern society. Frost, on the other hand, seems to recover a more holistic and ordered sense of the world through the very orderedness of his poems. Life is not in the continuous process of breaking into scattered and discrete perceptions.

The sense of logical unfolding and necessity, of metaphorical concision, is yet another aspect of Frost's "restraint." Each poem is perfectly defined and delimited. In this sense, each poem may be said to constitute an order -- a perfectly realized, autonomous, and sustained structure of meaning. But it is the peculiar freedom with which Frost "inhabits" these orders that is the source of his poetic strength. And here, too, is a characteristic that distinguishes Frost from the Romantic and the Modern.

The distinction between the Romantic and the Classical (or neo-Classical) is not only a distinction between containment and expansiveness, restraint and expression; it is also a distinction between the characteristic modes of response to these elements. Specifically, the Classical denotes a comfortable and relaxed inhabitation of contained structures, the Romantic an uneasy and rebellious one. Whereas the Classical, accepting the limits and structures of form, settles into them, even displaying a poise and repose within them, the Romantic often spends its energy, literally, in shattering such structures and breaking free of them. It is wrong to assume that Romanticism rejects containment and structure altogether;

rather, it retains them in order to display its animus toward them.

The Modern resembles the Romantic (of which it is essentially an extension) in its marked dis-ease with containment. Like the Romantic, the Modern does not express its discomfort with forms of containment and restraint simply by dispensing with them. The Modern suggests an incommensurability between restraint and expansiveness or suggests what we might more accurately call an uneven distribution between these two poles. Whereas the Modern is likely to be expansive on the macro or architectonic level, it is likely to be constrained on the micro or lexical level, or vice versa. This inequal and disproportion distribution of expansiveness and containment is a peculiar mark of the Modern and one more instance of its violence on the level of form and language.

In Frost, however, we sense a truly reconciled and relaxed relation between emotion and form, energy and containment. Frost does not bridle at formal restraints; rather, he accepts and even accommodates himself to them. But just as Frost distinguishes himself from the Romantic and Modern in this respect, so he also distinguishes himself from the Classical and neo-Classical.

In Augustan verse, the relation between form and energy suggests a kind of animation and amplification. The emotion or energy is fitted within and subordinated to the form, but it also invests the form, seeming to imbue it with its own energy.

In Frost, on the other hand, the relation of voice to form, of emotion to structure, is one of repose -- the opposite of both Romantic strain or stress and Augustan animation. There is a true sense of colloquial ease, of linguistic naturalness and comfort. Without being inert or lifeless, the voice is neatly poised. Emotion does not animate form with energy; it resides within form, comfortably and easily. It has achieved such equanimity and equability that it manages, literally, to put our fears of linguistic revolt or semantic insurrection to rest.

It is the disproportion between the strict logical and metaphorical cohesiveness of Frost's poems, and the easy, relaxed poetic voice that generates much of the beauty and fascination of Frost's poetry. On the one hand, the poems seem ruled, even regulated according to a strict logic or design; on the other hand, they seem as casual, as impromptu and easy-going as last night's dinner conversation or this morning's tete-a-tete. The outward appearance of casualness in Frost's poem, "The Lockless Door," fits strangely with the internal dynamics of the metaphoric logic and symbolism:

> It went many years,
> But at last came a knock,
> And I thought of the door
> With no lock to lock.
>
> I blew out the light.
> I tiptoed the floor,
> And raised both hands
> In prayer to the door.
>
> But the knock came again.
> My window was wide;
> I climbed on the sill
> And descended outside.

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

So at a knock
I emptied my cage
To hide in the world
And alter with age. CP, 240-41

The poem possesses in its outward structure the rigor of an abstraction or mathematical equation. We could, for instance, view the poem as brilliantly suspended network of tensions and energies. At the same time that the poem possesses the abstract clarity of outline, it also sustains a colloquial, relaxed and experiential feel. Hence, the poem seems to mark the point at which two discrete levels of of experience merge: on the one hand, the purely literal, quotidian, informal, and realistic; on the other, the austerely symbolic, abstract, subliminal, and hieratic. The result is strangely unsettling. Because the mergence is so pure and unmarked by violence, we experience, as if for a second of brilliant insight and recognition, the lineaments of the symbolic in the real. Ordinary reality seems instinct with an undiluted reality. The hidden pattern of meaning is seen to be continuous with and immanent in phenomenal experience. A sense of the uncanny, of a harrowing recurrence of the primal, haunts the poem like an undertone. The mergence of literal and symbolic might almost be spoken of as a mythical event.

In "The Figure a Poem Makes," the essay that comes closest of all Frost's writings to defining the structure and ethos of

his lyrics, Frost hints that logical necessity and cohesiveness bind his poems together. Speaking of the movement of a poem, Frost writes: "It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood -- and indeed from the very mood." In speaking of the "pre-destined" nature of a poems' outcome, Frost affirms its integral coincidence and cohesiveness: the poem "assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events..." The progression of the poem is integrally connected to its contentual form; this form determines its unfolding. Its structure is a logical entity, the relation of its parts an abstract necessity.

At the end of "The Figure A Poem Makes," Frost uses a "figure" that is itself perfect in its description of the dual-natured aspect of Frost's poetry -- its logical cohesiveness, on the one hand, and its colloquial ease and casualness, on the other: "Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting." The image perfectly captures both aspects. First of all, it accurately images the way in which the poem's logical unfolding is entailed in its initial conception or substance. The melted water (the unfolded content, the realized structure) derives entirely from (is initially contained within) the piece of ice (its conceptual content, its schematic conception). The poem itself, in its realized form, is predicated in its original conception or insight. In this sense, the writing of a poem is simply the unfolding of

possibilities already determined by the concept of the poem. And secondly, the smoothness of the melting accurately captures the smooth dexterity of Frost's voice -- its easy, natural and elegant flow. The formality of logic is reconciled with the informality of expression. The restraint is experienced as a guiding perimeter within which Frost's poems take their predetermined and inevitable "course."

FOOTNOTES

1 T. S. Eliot, "Tennyson: In Memoriam," Robert W. Hill, Jr., ed., Tennyson's Poetry (New York: W. W. Norton and Co, Inc, 1971), p. 616

2 Edward Connery Lathem, ed., The Poetry of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969). All citations of Frost's poems are from this source, abbreviated henceforth as CP.

3 Quoted in William Pritchard, Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 191

4 Robert Frost "The Figure A Poem Makes, " In Selected Prose of Robert Frost, Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem, eds. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), p. 18

5 Geoffrey H. Hartman, Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964)

6 Reuben Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963),pp. 40-74

7 Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost, pp. 50-74

8 Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost, p. 147

9 Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost, p. 75

CHAPTER ONE

THE ARTFUL ENEMY: NATURE AS ANTAGONIST

i

Nature's Animus

The will to live is the essential and driving force presented in Robert Frost's poetry. The tendency of nature, on the other hand, is to resist man's striving for survival -- to disperse and destroy life through slow, steady acts of aggression. Hence, Frost's basic conception of the universe is both dualistic and agonistic -- a deliberate and unremitting battle between man's will to survive and nature's will to destroy him.

In elevating the will to live over all other impulses, Frost distances himself from the Romantics for whom the essential striving is spiritual (salvation) rather than biological (survival). Frost emphasizes not the inviolable sanctity of the human soul, but the implacable tenacity of the human will.

The most manifest indication, in Frost, of nature's depravity is its profound, at times almost diabolical, hostility to human life. Nature, in Frost, intends the absolute extirpation of the human race. At certain points, so great and deliberate is nature's animus to man that the universe seems run by a violent and demonic God. Though such suggestions are indirect and sporadic, they nevertheless offer a vision of

nature that is even more menacing than the more pervasive view in Frost's poetry of nature as anarchic force.

Our most undeflected glimpse of nature's animus appears in "Sand Dunes," where the "drift" of the first two stanzas moves toward the assertion that nature desires to annihilate man:

> Sea waves are green and wet,
> But up from where they die
> Rise others vaster yet,
> And those are brown and dry.
>
> They are the sea made land
> To come at the fisher town
> And bury in solid sand
> The men she could not drown. CP, 260-61

The use of the infinitives ("To come.../...[to] bury") is especially important in establishing intent. The phrase "men she could not drown," even while asserting the failure, clearly implies the wish to extirpate man. And even though the statement in the third stanza, "If by any change of shape/She hopes to cut off mind," is cast in the conditional form, thereby allowing an uncertainty about her intention, the mere introduction of the thought becomes basis for such surmise.

A subtler indication of nature's destructive intent lies in the protean dexterity she employs to extirpate man. As the waves billow toward the shore, they keep assuming more impressive stature, evolving into dunes of ever greater force and bulk. Despite their formal differences, waves and dunes emerge from the same power and are expressive of the same underlying Will. The dunes rise up out of the exhausted remains of the waves, a transformed and augmented version: "Up from

where they die/Rise others vaster yet." Such metamorphic virtuousity argues an extreme resourcefulness. Undeterred, nature seems to resolve that if one hostile guise does not succeed, it will, then, try another. Like the ocean out of which its ire emerges, nature's aptitude for violence seems virtually unlimited.

"A Loose Mountain (Telescopic)" also hints at nature's destructive purpose:

> ...the star shower known as Leonid
> That once a year by hand or apparatus
> Is so mysteriously pelted at us...
> .....
> ... never reaches earth except as ashes
> Of which you feel no least touch on your face
> Nor find in dew the slightest cloudy trace.
> Nevertheless it constitutes a hint
> That the loose mountain lately seen to glint
> In sunlight near us in momentous swing
> Is something in a Balearic sling
> The heartless and enormous Outer Black
> Is still withholding in the Zodiac
> But from irresolution in his back
> About when best to have us in our orbit,
> So we won't simply take it and absorb it.
> CP, 360-61

The "heartless and enormous Outer Black" comes equipped with a "Balearic sling" with which to annihilate man. The sole reason it has not summarily hurled the "loose mountain" at us is that it wishes to make sure that when it finally does so, we will not "simply take it and absorb it," but willbe completely annihilated.

At the end of "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury" (CP, 279-81), Frost returns to an earlier-mentioned storm brewing outside a chicken-coop: "The night is setting in to blow./It scours the

windowpane with snow..." Again, the use of the infinitive establishes intent. Moreover, the verb "setting" suggests a slow but steady marshalling of night's resources in preparation for a prolonged seige. Rather than simply discharging aggression, nature organizes and gathers it together in a more menacing formation, like a military commander deploying his army into regulated line before attacking. The reason that nature does not immediately launch its attack upon impulse is that it wants to annihilate man completely. Its mustering of forces, therefore, bespeaks the cunning and control of an artful enemy.

An ominous determination to discomfit man is seen in one of Frost's most menacing poems, "Once By the Pacific," a poem which also uses the image of imminent storm to suggest the deliberateness of nature's malice. The force of the poem lies in its unmitigated evocation of nature's evil:

> The shattered water made a misty din.
> Great waves looked over others coming in,
> And thought of doing something to the shore
> That water never did to land before.
> The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
> Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
> You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
> The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
> The cliff in being backed by continent;
> It looked as if a night of dark intent
> Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
> Someone had better be prepared for rage.
> There would be more than ocean-water broken
> Before God's last Put out the Light was spoken. CP, 250

Like the lines cited above from "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury," these lines create an all-encompassing sense of overhanging doom. Everything seems poised for imminent catastrophe: in their mad, riotous desire to pummel the shore, each wave towers

over the preceding one, as if, straining to blast man, it can barely be restrained; the clouds hover in the sky, pregnant with precipitation; night waits ominously in the offing, ready to devastate man. There is even a sense of a receding series of hostile threats, both spatial and temporal: behind each wave is another wave; behind the shore is cliff and behind cliff, continent; receding from night is yet another night and behind that, an age. The effect of this recession is to suggest the awesome inscrutability and the gradual augmentation of this evil.

This inscrutability is itself intensified by the various allusions to occluded or obscured vision: "locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes," "You could not tell, and yet it looked as if," and finally, "night of dark intent," which could mean night of sinister, but also of unknown intent. The sense of inscrutability is also heightened by the indefinite conjurings: the waves think of doing "something" to the shore, "someone" had better be prepared for rage, and there will be "more than ocean broken" before the finale.

The inscrutability of nature's evil augments the scope of this evil; despite its ubiquity, man can only perceive a small portion of it. All of nature's power seems to converge on this one moment of history, with man at the vortex. The reference to the shore being "lucky" to be backed by cliff and the cliff by continent increases the sense of helpless exposure and defenselessness, as though whatever bulwark stands behind man is

genuinely fortuitous and therefore, by implication, frail. The apocalyptic allusion at the end of the poem intimates that this monumental fray is the torturous expression of an angry God, whose anthropomorphic physiognomy one might even see dimly shadowed forth in the disembodied mien vaguely discernible in the skies in lines 5 and 6. Taken as a whole, the poem presents a powerful image of the inescapability and ubiquity of natural evil (or divine vengeance).

In "Bereft," Frost again uses the imagery of augmentation to establish the intentionality of evil:

> Where had I heard this wind before
> Change like this to a deeper roar?
> What would it take my standing there for,
> Holding open a restive door,
> Looking downhill to a frothy shore?
> Summer was past and day was past.
> Somber clouds in the west were massed.
> Out in the porch's sagging floor
> Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
> Blindly struck at my knee and missed.
> Something sinister in the tone
> Told me my secret must be known:
> Word I was in the house alone
> Somehow must have gotten abroad,
> Word I was in my life alone,
> Word I had no one left but God. CP, 251

The whole poem is fraught with a sense of gradually accruing violence: the wind is in the process of changing to a "deeper" roar, summer and day are past, and the clouds in the west are beginning to mass. As in "Once By The Pacific," the reader is prepared for an imminent convulsion, and, as in that poem, the gradual accruing of violence is linked to a sense of augmentation: as the forces of nature collect in strength, they

also seem to grow in strength. This sense of magnified evil is subliminally conveyed to the reader by the progression of -er adjectives: "deeper," "somber," "sinister."

This present deepening of threat is also connected to a former one: the wind, changing to a more ferocious roar, echoes a wind heard previously by the speaker. Thus, resonances of sinister intent reach back into indeterminate vistas, and the whole scene is surcharged with a deliberate sense of déjà vu, with this moment standing at the end of a long procession of previous moments, each one, presumably, augmenting the power of the prior. Consequently, there is a sense of purposely orchestrated design in which all of nature's powers of evil converge on this one moment -- the culmination of the entire history of the universe. As in "Once By the Pacific," there is a strong sense of the ubiquity of evil, the inescapability of violence, and the depravity of nature.

The snake imagery ("Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,/Blindly struck at my knee and missed") also insinuates the intentionality of nature's violence. Like the ominous gathering of clouds in the sky and the deepening of the wind's roar, the snake's rousing of itself for an aggressive lunge points to incipient violence. But, unlike the night in "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury" and the loose mountain in that poem, the snake does not exert sufficient mastery over itself to withhold its attack until it can be assured of final victory. Instead, the snake (or leaves) aimlessly cast about, its means of attack

unfocused.

ii

Violence

Nature, in Frost, is divisible into three realms: the biological (the realm of living beings); the geographical (the realm of inanimate -- terrestrial and pelagic -- formations); and the cosmic (the realm of pure and infinite extension). To each of these realms corresponds one of the three basic properties of nature: to the biological realm corresponds that of violence; to the geographic, flux; and to the cosmic, boundlessness. Each of these properties, in turn, constitutes one of the three basic threats to man's survival.

Appetite in Frost's poetry is the most chronic cause of violence in the biological world. In arbitrating all relationships between living creatures, appetite betrays these beings into adversarial positions. Thus, self-interest is ruthlessly antagonistic and exclusive.

Among Frost's most horrifying images of appetitive violence are those of oral aggressivity. Frost conjures the image of teeth, mandibles, and mouth severing their victims into discrete parts. The starkest of these images is found in "Two Tramps in Mudtime" where he speaks of

> the lurking frost in the earth beneath
> That will steal forth after the sun is set
> And show on the water its crystal teeth.
>
> CP, 275-77

Dissociated from a larger body or even face, the crystal teeth here suggest an isolated mouth -- sudden, abrupt, sui generis. This underscores the violent basis of appetite, severing it from the biological process in which it plays a part and which, by providing it with a motive beyond mere destruction, would lend it a somewhat "rational" appearance. It is possible to complete the image of the teeth by tracing in a larger facial pattern, as we may with the incompletely defined features of the face in "Once By The Pacific." The earth becomes a kind of monster, literally devouring its offspring.[1]

Two of Frost's most powerful images of oral aggressivity and severance occur in poems where they are performed, ironically, by inanimate objects. In "The Exposed Nest" (CP, 109-10), the speaker and his friend attempt, by erecting cover for the nest exposed through the action of a lawn mower, to ensure the survival of the young birds within it: "Twas a nest full of young birds on the ground/The cutter bar had just gone champing over/(Miraculously without tasting flesh)." Even though the birds elude the blade of the mower, Frost nevertheless evokes the act of mutilation, and his use of the word "miraculously" implies that the mower's failure to taste flesh is a suspension of natural law. Hence, the tasting of flesh by such inanimate objects as mowers is part of nature's regular course. Violence is so endemic to the universe that even inanimate objects participate in it.

In "Out, Out" (CP, 136-37), a buzz saw leaps out of and

severs a boy's hand. Frost three times repeats the description that the buzz saw "snarled and rattled," as if it were endowed with the aggressive characteristics of a bobcat and rattlesnake. Furthermore, the saw's "leaping" out at the boy's hand is prompted by his sister's utterance of the word, "Supper." The saw leaps out as much from spiteful malice as from actual hunger: Frost says the saw leaped "As if to prove saws knew what supper meant." The saw is less interested in sating an appetite than in establishing, officially, that it has one. The act of violence thereby seems even more pointless and gratuitous.

One of the most striking forms that appetitive violence takes in Frost is that of predation. If the ubiquity of appetite transforms an already menacing, chaotic universe into a scheme of destruction, the calculating and devious nature of the predator represents the final assent of life to that scheme. Under the aegis of the predatory, the struggle for survival refines itself into a skill, even an art.

Frost's most diabolic predators are his spiders, which in their cunning construction of webs and their patient entrapment of prey, reveal a sensibility (if one may speak of it as such) adapted to death. In "Design" (CP, 302), the evil cunning of the spider is a metaphor for the destructive design of the universe. Like the elaborate and harmless-looking web that the spider weaves, the universe may well be cunningly designed in order to entrap its victims. What makes this universe so frightening is that it seems to be run by a massive and complex

intelligence. In its diabolical and overdetermined grid of violence, this universe resembles the Calvinist cosmology of a pre-ordained pattern of damnation.

Frost's other spider poem, "Range-finding," also employs a metaphor of order and design. The title refers to, first, man's attempt to sight his enemy in war and, then, the spider's to pinpoint its prey. Both attempts fail egregiously:

> 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,
> Butfinding nothing, sullenly withdrew.CP, 126

There are in these lines two roughly discontinuous realms -- the human and the natural. The impinging of the human realm on the natural (the renting of a cobweb, the razing of a flower) is seen as a kind of misfiring: man has not yet accurately defined and located his target. This impingement is also an intrusion. Yet even as Frost suggests the discontinuity between the human and natural realms (the object of human aggression is not the object of natural aggression), he draws an implicit analogy between them. More than humanizing the natural, this analogy naturalizes the human. Man's objects of violence are different from those of nature, but the principle of aggression remains constant.

In its naturalistic treatment of its theme, "Range-Finding" evokes a radically impersonal universe where violence is as matter-of-fact as it is ubiquitous. Transposed from its normal usage in a domestic context of affability to a deadly one of predation, the colloquial phrase "ran to greet the fly" carries sinister, even macabre implications. Like the phrase "Neither refused the meeting" in "Out, Out--" in reference to the saw's severing of the boy's hand, this phrase, also used in reference to an act of appetitive violence, connects the social to the destructive in a blatantly ironic manner.[2] Suggesting the spider's almost uncontainable excitement (an excitement that verges on glee), at the prospect of finding a fly, the phrase also reveals the spider's complete lack of awareness of the fly, except as an object of prey. Nothing makes clearer the spider's ego-centrism than its sudden depression at finding no fly.

But violence in Frost is not merely endemic to animals or machines. The pervasiveness of human violence in Frost's poetry is attested to by the large number of poems that either have war as their subject or allude to some aspect of it.[3] These poems present war not only as senseless and wasteful, but, perhaps more importantly, as endemic to human nature.[4]

Human violence also manifests itself, in Frost, as pleasure taken in causing another pain. In "The Grindstone," the speaker confesses his secret exultation at the prospect of wounding the partner with whom he operates the machine:

> Once when the grindstone almost jumped its bearing

It looked as if he might be badly thrown
And wounded on his blade. So far from caring,
I laughed inside, and only cranked the faster
(It ran as if it wasn't greased but glued)...
CP, 188-91

The speaker's fierce joy at the thought of wounding his partner, as does the spider's in "Range-Finding," verges on glee. The speaker revels in his own destructive animus against his partner so completely that any moral misgiving or restraint is suppressed.

In "The Vanishing Red," a miller calculatingly kills an Indian:

He is said to have been the last Red Man
In Acton. And the Miller is said to have laughed--
If you like to call such a sound a laugh.
But he gave no one else a laugher's licence.
CP, 142

The miller invites the Indian to see the wheel pit and takes him down into the bottom of the mill, where the Miller shows the Indian "water in desperate straits like frantic fish. After doing so, the miller

shut down the trap door with a ring in it
That jangled even above the general noise,
And came upstairs alone--and gave that laugh,
And said something to a man with a meal sack
That the man with the meal sack didn't catch--then.

Only in the poem's last line does the true significance of the miller's initial invitation become fully apparent: "Oh, yes, he showed John the wheel pit all right."

"The Code" consists of the unabashed account by a farm-hand of how he once tried to kill a farmer for whom he was working. Once employed

in Salem, at a man's
Named Sanders, with a gang of four or five
Doing the haying... [the farm-hand]
...[is] paired off [with Sanders] in the hayfield
To load the load...
Everything went well till [they] reached the barn
With a big jag to empty in a bay...
[Sanders] seizes his fork in both hands,
And looking up bewhiskered out of the pit,
Shouts like an army captain, 'Let her come!'
... Never you say a thing like that to a man,
Not if he values what he is. God, I'd as soon
Murdered him as left out his middle name...
CP, 69-73

The farm-hand then proceeds to dump "the rackful on [Sanders] in ten lots." Though the farm-hand ends up not killing Sanders, the dialogue at the end of the poem makes clear that he intended to. "`Weren't you relieved to find he wasn't dead?'" asks the farmer to whom he is telling the story. "No," he responds, "and yet I don't know -- it's hard to say./I went about to kill him fair enough." As if to confirm the purposiveness of the farm-hand's attempt to kill Sanders, the poem begins with a startlingly explicit image of murderous intent:

There were three in the meadow by the brook
Gathering up windrows, piling cocks of hay,
With an eye always lifted toward the west
Where an irregular sun-bordered cloud
Darkly advanced with a perpetual dagger
Flickering across its bosom.

Appropriately underhanded and "cloaked," the violence of the scene is literally that of a "cloak and dagger" sort.[5]

In addition to actual violence, human aggression in Frost can also take the form of covert threat. Despite their comic exterior, the two tramps who wander past the speaker splitting wood in his yard and want to "take [his] job for pay," in "Two

Tramps in Mudtime" (CP, 275-77) are somewhat menacing figures. Deprecatory and snide, they deliberately try to undermine the speaker's confidence. The two tramps coax the narrator ("And one of them put me off my aim/By hailing cheerily `Hit them hard!'") in a manner more hostile than helpful. In short, the tramps' subtle interrogation of the speaker leads to his questioning the legitimacy of his right to chop wood. Unlike the "Stranger" in "Love and a Question" (CP, 7-8) whose appeal is based solely on human need, these two tramps make their inquiry through aggressive intimidation.

In their hostile eyeing of the speaker, the two vagrants in "Two Tramps at Mudtime" behave like human predators. In other poems, man assumes the aspect of predator in relation to animals. In "A Drumlin Woodchuck" (CP, 281-82), a rather philosophical woodchuck describes with comic self-possession how he foils the efforts of hunters armed with shotguns to blast it off the face of the earth. Ironically, the woodchuck displays the vaunted "human" characteristics of rational self-control and deliberation while the human, protrayed as the obsessed, even crazed predator, displays the frenzied, irrational violence usually attributed to the "animal." The discrepancy between the composure of the animal and the hysteria of the human is intensified by the fact that it is precisely the woodchuck's rational self-possession and -control that allows it to outwit its predator; and it is man's intense irrational fixation on destroying the creature that subverts the calm judgment that

would allow him to accomplish his task.

The brutality of nature enunciates itself not only in the violence it inflicts, but in the impersonality of its response to the suffering it causes. Nature's indifference can be clearly seen in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" (CP, 241-42), where nature's refusal to participate in man's grief at the destruction it wreaks on man is seen as a new -- and more dignified -- source of grief.

"Departmental," a satire on the efficient coldness with which nature disposes of her dead, reveals this impersonality at its height. Though it is ants who are indifferent to "one of their dead," the poem is clearly intended as a satire on human callousness:

> One crossing with hurried tread
> The body of one of their dead
> Isn't given a moment's arrest--
> Seems not even impressed.
> But he no doubt reports to any
> With whom he crosses antennae,
> And they no doubt report
> To the higher-up at court.
> Then word goes forth in Formic:
> "Death's come to Jerry McCormic,
> Our selfless forager Jerry.
> Will the special Janizary
> Whose office it is to bury
> The dead of the commissary
> Go bring him home to his people. CP, 287-89

The whole process is lent the ironic solemnity of a state function -- with all the bureaucratic efficiency and impersonality that implies. Even the rhetorical tones -- both sentimental and impersonal -- with which the dead are commemorated possess the exaggerated piety of bureaucratese --

exalted insincerity, superficial emotion, and overbearing pomp. Finally, "a solemn mortician" appears

> And taking formal position,
> With feelers calmly atwiddle,
> Seizes the dead by the middle,
> And heaving him high in air,
> Carries him out of there.
> No one stand round to stare.
> It is nobody else's affair.

Frost comments, "It couldn't be called ungentle./But how thoroughly departmental." One might well ask: why couldn't it be called ungentle? After all, the ants disburden themselves of their responsibility to the dead with brisk indifference. But to call the process "ungentle" would itself be an example of ungentleness -- a violation of the delicacy of feeling that requires circumlocution and evasion. The refusal to call the ants' behavior "ungentle" is evidence of Frost's own tact. Even as he pays court to such conventions, however, he implicitly calls attention to their equivocality and fraudulence. He does this, however, in so oblique a fashion as not to offend the sensibilities of those who require such subterfuge.

The coldness apparent in "Departmental," as Pritchard points out, is found in other poems where the capacity to "turn" from death to life becomes for certain characters an argument for the unfeelingness of the living.[6] The wife in "Home Burial" (CP, 51-55) reproaches her husband for his ability to come in to the house after burying their child and, without so much as a pause, proceed to "talk about everyday affairs." Similarly, after the death of the boy whose arm is severed by a buzz saw in

"Out, Out--", the rest of the family is said, "since they/Were not the one dead," to "turn...to their affairs."

If nature seems at times bluntly indifferent to human pain, at other times it cruelly exults in it. This exultation can be seen in the spiteful animus of the buzz saw that severs the boy's hand in "Out, Out," and in the murderous emotion of the speakers in "The Grindstone" and "The Vanishing Red." Nature also exults in the exigent conditions of many of the people in Frost's poems, such as the housewife in "A Servant to Servants" (CP, 62-68), the couple in "The Investment" (CP, 263-64), and the man and wife in "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind" (CP, 290-92). This exultation is seen at its cruelest in the malicious tricks of fortune "life" plays on the couple in "Not to Keep" (CP, 230-31) and the woman in "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers" (CP, 255-57), poems that will be discussed more fully in Chapter Two.

It is a fine point to determine which is the more horrific -- nature's indifference or its involved delight at torturing sentient creatures. Often, the indifference seems not so much the insensibility of inanimate matter, but the deliberate refusal of a conscious, intelligent creature to feel. At such times, nature seems to witness the destruction of human beings with the undisturbed calm of an executioner or judge, and we might well feel nature's indifference to be more sinister than its exultation since the former represents a total discounting of the pain. Exultation at least suggests some kind of awareness

of the significance of man's suffering. Hatred is, after all, a form of involvement while indifference much more emphatically denies the meaning of man's pain, rendering it inconsequential.

There are in Frost moments in which the animality of man or other creatures becomes so intense that it partakes of Dionysian hysteria. The act of violence then becomes a dizzyingly rapturous experience to those who practice it, transporting them into realms of beatific perversity not only incomprehensible but also terrifying to those who stand outside, watching.

"Canis Major" is one of Frost's most "force-filled" poems. The excitement of animal passion verges on the orgiastic and suggests a universe so imbued with, as to be literally drunk on, violence:

> The great Overdog,
> That heavenly beast
> With a star in one eye,
> Gives a leap in the east.
>
> 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 through the dark. CP, 261

The Overdog is an image of exuberant yet excessive freedom. Its actions are sustained with the elan and majestic insensibility to decorum that a child might exhibit in play. In its freedom from inhibition, it possesses some of the inspired elegance and grace of movement that drunken behavior can fitfully attain: the dog is, after all, said to be "danc[ing]." On the other hand,

its actions are somehow too ecstatic and manic to be regarded as sane, and too erratic, too high-spirited and intense, to be regarded as quite convivial. For one thing, they resemble too closely the outward signs of an hysteric. For another, there is in the Overdog's cavortings and the indefatigability of its movements a sense of excess, even riot: the dog dances "all the way" to the east and "never once" drops on its forefeet to rest. Even though we could, therefore, gloss these antics simply as those of inebriation or the insousciant sportiveness of play, we tend to feel somehow more ambivalent about them than such an interpretation allows.

The note of madness is struck early in the poem: the "star in one eye" augurs the gleam not only of one inspired by a more lofty vision, but perhaps also of one deluded, maybe even demented, by too unconstrained and private a vision.[7] One senses that Frost is playing parodically with a certain cliché element, eliciting its hidden resonances: the Overdog is, perhaps, Frost's version of a "mad" dog. All our ambivalence about the harmlessness of the dog's revel is channeled into the word "romps" which suggests, along with a child-like aura of free play, wild rampage. The phrase "heavenly beast" precisely captures this ambiguous nature of the Overdog, suggesting, on the one hand, its gross animality, and on the other, its ethereal sense of freedom from earthly restraint.[8] A carnivalesque image tipping over into the demonic, the Overdog fuses madness with play, celebration with violence, thereby

transmuting innocence into destructiveness and vice versa.

In joining in this Dionysian revel with the Overdog, the speaker merges with the transcendent force of the universe, even if this force is, in the end, unconscionable and evil. For this reason, the resolve of the poem's final lines (to "bark with the great Overdog/That romps through the dark") carries with it not so much a sense of doom as a sense of ecstatic release, even exhilaration. The adjective "great," used twice in reference to the Overdog, conveys, after all, a sense of its transcendent stature as well as its physical size.

"The Rabbit-Hunter" also points to a world orgiastically given over to violence:

> 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. CP, 366

The second sentence is devoted almost exclusively to conjuring up the dog's unrestrainable impatience to tear apart its prey. Like those of the Overdog, its motions as it awaits its prey possess the intense and hysterical excitement of a kind of

madness. As in "Canis Major," the word "romps" focuses all our fears of the outcome of its revel, suggesting an abandon unconstrained by any sense of sobriety. The hound devotes itself to a murderous debauch that is at once carefree and ecstatic with unreflecting simplicity: it fails entirely to comprehend either the significance of its intentions or the consequence of its actions. This madness and the hound's insensibility to the origins of its impulses are finely caught in the word "possessed," which suggests an almost hypnotic supervention of its will by an extrinsic force. Acting under an impulse completely indecipherable to it, the dog participates in a frenzy of violent emotion more powerful than its own will.

In its wedding of infantile innocence to illimitable power, the second stanza of the poem "Riders" also summons up an image of irresponsible force almost as unsettling as that of the Overdog:

> What is this talked-of mystery of birth
> But being mounted bareback on the earth?
> We can just see the infant up astride,
> His small fist buried in the bushy hide. CP, 267-68

The sense of primal force run wild in the image of the infant astride an unopposeable stallion, exulting in the sheer velocity of its movement and blind to its potential danger, points to the destructive abandon of a world where force rules. Although in the third stanza the poet proffers the possibility of hope, this second stanza evokes apocalypse since the outcome of such reckless force can only be catastrophe. It might even recall the myth of Phaeton who, seizing the reins of the horses that

pull the sun, is dragged to violent death.

In "The Peaceful Shepherd," it is the ineffectuality of human institutions that Frost asserts: whether they are abstract symbols or political systems, institutions cannot eradicate man's propensity for violence:

> If heaven were to do again,
> And on the pasture bars
> I leaned to line the figures in
> Between the dotted stars
>
> I should be tempted to forget,
> I fear, the Crown of Rule,
> The Scales of Trade, the Cross of Faith,
> As hardly worth renewal.
>
> For these have governed in our lives,
> And see how men have warred.
> The Cross, the Crown, the Scales may all
> As well have been the Sword. CP, 252

As against the purely abstract authority of the first three signs, the Sword bears a terrible, incontrovertible actuality that is not purely symbolic. Whereas we feel Cross, Crown, and Scales to be only signs, the Sword is much more than just an abstract emblem. The Sword is also the one member of the set not assigned an explanatory epithet: it is an autonomous, self-explicating sign. By contrast, the explanatory epithets of the other signs suggest man's difficulty in recognizing the significance of these signs and therefore imply that the qualities they represent are not firmly implanted in man's own nature.

The ineffectuality of these signs (and their correlative institutions) in ridding man of violence becomes, by

implication, basis for asserting the predominance of violence in man's nature. Were violence an occasional occurence that periodically subsided into inactivity, then one could, perhaps, defend the claim that violent behavior is an aberration -- an irregular, grotesque deviation induced by certain adverse conditions. But violence is so chronic in man's history, that this claim must surely seem more the result of man's wishful desire to avoid such a dire assessment than an impartial evaluation of the evidence. As a dispassionate thinker, Frost cannot resist concluding that man is an inherently violent creature and violence his inescapable destiny. Frost's desire to resist this judgment, the sense that he is borne toward it by an absolute force that he cannot, even if he would, deny, is captured in his comment, "I should be tempted to forget, I fear" the Cross, the Crown, and the Scales. What particularly enforces the sense of its irresistibility is that Frost would <u>like</u> to resist it. It is forced upon him by scruples of honesty more compelling than his own desire to think well of humanity.

"The Flood" develops the idea that the visible manifestations of violence are only the periodic outcroppings of a far more radical and extensive force that courses through the universe like blood through the human body:

> Blood has been harder to dam back than water.
> Just when we think we have it impounded safe
> Behind new barrier walls (and let it chafe!),
> It breaks away in some new kind of slaughter.
> We choose to say it is let loose by the devil;
> But power of blood itself releases blood.
> It goes by might of being such a flood
> Held high at so unnatural a level.

It will have outlet, brave and not so brave.
Weapons of war and implements of peace
Are but the points at which it finds release.
And now it is once more the tidal wave
That when it has swept by, leaves summits stained.
Oh, blood will out. It cannot be contained.
CP, 254-55

The brilliance of the poem lies partly in the subtlety with which it offers its paradox. According to the speaker, we like to view violence as an extrinsic property or as released into the world by an extrinsic force: "We choose to say it is let loose by the devil." Our reason for attributing violence to an extrinsic agent lies in our unwillingness to face the truth about the innateness of violence; our self-esteem and hope for the future demand that we so delude ourselves. But, in fact, violence is an autonomous force, integral to the universe and ineradicable from it: "power of blood itself releases blood." Overturning the human tendency to regard violence as unforeseen, the poem instead sees violence as the norm -- peace, law, and order as the fitful and freakish exceptions. What is "unnatural" is not the unbridled and sanguinary rule of violence, but man's attempts to contain that rule in acts of inconstant and futile heroism.

Frost even intimates that in trying to contain nature's violence, man paradoxically augments it: "It goes by might of being such a flood/Held high at so unnatural a level." These perplexing lines offer at least three different readings. First, violence derives its "might" from its ubiquity -- its flood-like omnipresence. Second, the "might" of violence

derives from its being held back or "high." If allowed to range freely and vent itself unopposed, it would not have achieved so high a level. The very phenomenon of violence, then, is engendered by man's attempt to resist or forestall it. (Clearly, this interpretation begs the genetic fallacy.) Or, in an alternative reading, what is unnatural is the high level of violence produced by man's attempt to stem the tide of violence. This last reading need not prevent us from seeing that, though there is something unnatural about the high level of violence in the world, there is something profoundly violent about this world that cannot be eliminated simply by man's wish not to vent blood.

In "November," Frost again bases his view of the predominance in man's nature of violent over pacific impulses on the persistence of violence in man's history:

> 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. CP, 359-60

The wry remorse of these lines evinces skepticism not only about the efficacy of man's inclinations toward "saving, storing, and keeping," but also about the true seriousness of his professing to do so. Just how deep can this inclination be in light of man's perpetual warring? Man's pacific impulses may be no more than a pretense he indulges in order to assuage his misgivings about his own propensities for violence.

In considering the persistence of violence in the human species, Frost often falls prey to an intense sadness, bringing to his sense of its ineradicability from the human soul a sentiment resembling disgust, but more properly designated as ironic disillusionment. At such moments, Frost confronts the futility of the human project, seeing man's penchant for violence as the determinative feature of his character and, therefore, the well-spring of his tragedy. An instance of this can be found in "The Rabbit-Hunter" where the eagerness of the hound's desire to "deal a death" to the hare is said to be something "That he [the hunter] nor it/(Nor I) have wit/To comprehend," but which, by implication, we all participate in.

In "Pod of the Milkweed," Frost's meditation on the waste of war is occasioned by the commotion of a swarm of butterflies hovering around a milkweed:

> Calling all butterflies of every race
> From source unknown but from no special place
> They ever will return to all their lives,
> Because unlike the bee they have no hives,
> The milkweed brings up to my very door
> The theme of wanton waste in peace and war
> As it has never been to me before. CP, 411-12

Several paradoxes suggest themselves to the poet. First, how could so colorless a flower be the cause of such furor?[9] Second, how could so bitter-tasting a substance inspire such vehemence?[10] Yet, despite its drab appearance and bitter-tasting milk, the weed's effect on the butterflies is unmistakable:

> whatsoever else it may secrete,
> Its flowers' distilled honey is so sweet
> It makes the butterflies' intemperate.
> .....

One knocks another off from where he clings.
They knock the dyestuff off each other's wings--
With thirst on hunger to the point of lust.
They raise in their intemperance a cloud
Of mingled butterfly and flower dust
That hangs perceptibly above the scene.
.....
Many shall come away as struggle-worn
And spent and dusted off of their regalia,
To which at daybreak they were freshly born,
As after one of them's proverbial failure
From having beaten all day long in vain
Against the wrong side of a windowpane.

Viewing their manic behavior, Frost grows sad, as though he detected in their frenzy the violence of his own race.[11] Frost is particularly struck by the animated hysteria of the butterflies and their capacity for destructive behavior. Like the hound in "The Rabbit-Hunter," the butterflies seem drunk on their own impulse to violence. Their appetite for the weed blinds them to their own welfare, which should, presumably, be the basis of their appetite.

Frost's lament over this spectacle reflects his disappointment over the collapse of positivist and enlightenment ideals of progress, rationality, science, and peace. With wistful sadness, Frost says of the commotion after it has passed, "Where have those flowers and butterflies all gone/That science may have staked the future on?" Speaking of one survivor of the struggle, a butterfly who "hangs upside down with talon feet/In an inquisitive position odd/As any Guatemalan parakeet," Frost writes: "Something eludes him. Is it food to eat?/Or some dim secret of the good of waste?" The poet, astounded by the senseless destruction of such violence and the

wanton disproportion of its scale, is left to question the presumed explicability of human behavior.

Frost's final reflection, imputing to the surviving butterfly his own recognition of the irrationality of violence, confronts the fact of man's history with unillusioned candor: "He seems to say the reason why so much/Should come to nothing must be fairly faced." As in "The Ovenbird" (CP, 119-20) or "`Out, Out'--" (CP, 136-37), we are left with an ending of loss and inanition. One sense of waste -- the visible remains of destructive force -- gives rise to another -- a sense of cosmic despair over the habits of human and other species.

In these speculations about the innateness of violence to human nature, and in the lament for man's dogged self-destructiveness, Frost acquires the demeanour of moralist. Even though in his other roles, Frost is never far from such an outward manner, in his reflections on man's aggressivity this guise comes much more clearly to the fore, not undercut by Frost's incessant ironic self-deprecation and ridicule.

The best place to observe Frost's dignity and composure in the role of moralist is in "A Drumlin Woodchuck," as strange and yet as "composed" a love poem as has ever been written. Paying closer attention to the ironic tone of the speaker, we hear a refusal to be swept up into the kind of manic hysteria the human predator displays in trying to exterminate the woodchuck merely because the world around him seems to be plunged into a desperate and internecine riot:

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

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

It will be because, though small
As measured against the All,
I have been so instinctively thorough
About my crevice and burrow. CP, 281-82

In preserving his capacity for disinterested analysis and composed reflection, the woodchuck asserts his own rationality as against the human propensity for irrational violence. Like a dispassionate philosopher, the woodchuck watches, undismayed and with due ironic gravity and wit, the insensate fury of his predator's madness. Beside the woodchuck's poised self-possession, man's crazed impulse to kill seems curiously pointless. Moreover, in writing that the hunt and double-barreled blast "go past...Like war and pestilence/And the loss of common sense," Frost indicates that human aggression is an abortive, fitful interruption of conventional life, as intense as a siege of madness or war, but ultimately as innocuous. Here, significantly, in adopting a moral, philosophical perspective, Frost departs from his usual presentation of violence as ubiquitous, instead asserting its ultimate inconsequence.

The language attributed to the woodchuck in these lines, at once genteel and gracious, affirms humanistic values. The woodchuck displays the characteristic temperedness of Frost's

philosophical stance -- careful qualification of fact and adjustment to contingency ("If I can with confidence"), the lack of egocentric self-referentiality ("though small/As measured against the All"), and the self-restraint of his formulation ("so instinctively thorough/About my crevice and burrow").

Violence in Frost, however, is not only a pervasive characteristic of all living beings; so integral an aspect is violence to nature that Frost elevates it to a governing principle of existence. This can be seen in "Canis Major" and "The Peaceful Shepherd" where Frost sees violence literally "written" in the stars. "The Flood," too, promotes violence to a cosmic level. In these poems, violence becomes so vital a strand in the fabric of the cosmos, that we may even speak of it as part of the ontological essence of things.

iii

Flux

Frost uncovers as the ground of all being a turbid and murky fractiousness. Because its rampant energy is destructive, the universe is constantly in the process of dissolution, reconstitution, and flux. This seething insurgent matrix of energies partakes of the irrational excess and Dionysian violence of Schopenhauer's Will or Kant's Manifold of Intuition. On this level, violence, manifesting itself as frenzy, attains an almost mystical diffuseness. If, at times, Frost's awareness

of this presence seems crowded with vague foreboding, at other times it achieves an almost majestic altitude from which violence appears not only beyond administration but almost sublimely free of the turbulence of human intervention. In such poems as "Canis Major" and "The Flood," Frost's exuberant enunciation of this principle seems to convey the excitement of disclosing an Absolute or transcendent reality.

Flux, nature's second basic property, issues from the geographical realm. Flux may be seen as a gentler, more protracted version of frenzy and, therefore, partakes of some the licentiousness of violence. Flux, like frenzy, demonstrates that the universe is constituted of energy rather than order, of discord rather than structure.

The physical threat of flux makes itself felt on both temporal and spatial levels. Flux asserts itself temporally in the irrepressible movement of natural process, as seasonal alterations, cycles of decay, death, and re-birth. The spatial aspect of flux appears in Frost's poetry as large-scale movements of land: avalanches, landslides, cataclysms, and so on.

As natural process, flux is inherent in the temporal limits of life itself and therefore may be subsumed under the rubric of necessity. The first, fully-defined example of flux as necessary natural process is "In Hardwood Groves," where the repeated use of the verb "must" explicitly underscores the notion of natural necessity:

They must go down past things coming up.
They must go down into the dark decayed.
They must be pierced by flowers and put
Beneath the feet of dancing flowers.
CP, 25-26

"The Onset" also presents the movement of natural process as inexorable:

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 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.

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.
CP, 226

The language of the poem establishes the idea of inexorability: "fated," "at last," "cannot check," "I shall see," "Nothing will be left." The poet confidently predicts the course of events, certain of the alternation of the seasons, which are endowed with the power of deterministic irreversibility.

This inevitabiility is often seen in Frost as unconscionable and cruel. "Spring Pools" presents natural process as irresistible:

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. CP, 245

The verb "will" indicates quiet confidence in the inevitability of natural process. In the second stanza, Frost, associating this irrepressibility with an unconscionable cruelty, makes it the impetus to a desperate plea and injunction:

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.

The poet's appeal to the trees' conscience underscores their lack of conscience since the plea must, of course, go unanswered. And it is interesting to note that the syntactic construction of the last line of the second stanza allows us to experience the temporality of flux directly: in referring to the pools as "snow that melted only yesterday," Frost literally presents the entire process of dissolution in a single instantaneous image. The snow persists in the image of the pools, even though from a strictly factual point of view, it has vanished.

If temporal flux presents itself as physical decay, spatial flux presents itself as geological disaster. Whereas temporal flux points to an internally predicated system of sustenance and decline and is therefore subsumed under the idea of necessity, spatial flux points to outward contingency and may therefore be

subsumed under the rubric of chance.

"On Taking from the Top to Broaden the Base" is the most exuberant of Frost's poems that deal explicitly with geological upheaval:

> Roll stones down on our head!
> You squat old pyramid,
> Your last good avalanche
> Was long since slid.
>
> Your top has sunk to low,
> Your base has spread too wide,
> For you to roll one stone
> Down if you tried.
>
> But even at the word
> A pebble hit the roof,
> Another shot through glass,
> Demanding proof.
>
> Before their panic hands
> Were fighting for the latch,
> The mud came in one cold
> Unleavened batch.
>
> And none was left to prate
> Of an old mountain's case
> That still took from its top
> To broaden its base. CP, 298

This poem, like "The White-tailed Hornet" (CP, 277-79), deals comically with a threat that in other poems is of far greater consequence. Moreover, it may be taken as a poetic allegory of Frost's own poetic technique -- its own sacrifice of height for breadth, of elevation for foundation.

In "One Step Backward Taken," the temporal and spatial levels of physical flux are elided. The temporal scale becomes so vastly extended into geological time that the shift of land formations seems literally to measure centuries:

Not only sands and gravels
Were once more on their travels,
But gulping muddy gallons
Great boulders off their balance
Bumped heads together dully
And started down the gully.
Whole capes caked off in slices.
I felt my standpoint shaken
In the universal crisis.
But with one step backward taken
I saved myself from going.
A world torn loose went by me.
The rain stopped and the blowing
And the sun came out to dry me. CP, 376-77

That flux completely undermines man's sense of certainty and perspective is conveyed in the sentence, "I felt my standpoint shaken/In the universal crisis." Significantly, man can free himself from a world on the verge of collapse only by dissociating from it.

Similarly, in "In Time of Cloudburst," the re-collocation of land masses, the action of centuries, is encapsulated within a temporal sequence of minutes and hours:

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

'Tis the world-old way of the rain
When it comes to a mountain farm
To exact for a present gain
A little of future harm.

And the harm is none to sure,
For when all that was rotted rich
Shall be in the end scoured poor,
When my garden has gone down ditch,

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

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

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

May my application so close
To so endless a repetition
Not make me tired and morose
And resentful of man's condition. CP, 285-86

In this poem, Frost portrays physical flux as an act of natural violence, envisioning geological cataclysm as instantaneously present.

Frost regards flux not only as an intrinsic element of the geological realm, but also as a principle of ontological, even transcendent importance. As ontologically essential, flux appears to man as perpetual dissolution. A striking image of matter in the process of de-composing is the phrase "the shapeless shadow of storm" in "Afterflakes" (CP, 363). The word "shapeless" intensifies the idea of negativity of being suggested by "shadow," diffusing it into a kind of chaos, and the word "storm" underscores the idea of discord. Used in conjunction, the three terms present Frost's view of nature as anarchic, violent, and kinetic.

Frost's most philosophical formulation of the idea of the mutability of all form, the becomingness of all being, is his famous characterization in "West-Running Brook" of "existence" as a stream, a metaphor that stresses its movement, flight, and perpetual declension into nothingness:

Some say existence like a Pirouot
And Pirouette, forever in one place,
Stands still and dances, but it runs away;
It seriously, sadly runs away
To fill the abyss's void with emptiness.
It flows beside us in this water brook,
But it flows over us. It flows between us
To separate us for a panic moment.
It flows between us, over us, and with us.
And it is time, strength, tone, light,
life, and love --
And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;
The universal cataract of death
That spends to nothingness--and unresisted,
Save by some strange resistance in itself,
Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
As if regret were in it and were sacred.
CP, 257-60

At this point, Frost verges on an insight into the immateriality and illusoriness of all matter. Insofar as matter is essentially constituted of energy, it is, in a certain sense, unconstituted. This perception pierces through the veil of form to detect a hidden absence, a ghostly negativity haunting all structure, an "emptiness," as Melville does in Moby-Dick. Insofar as this perception regards all being as participating in a perpetual process of re-assemblage, it calls into question the very stability of our sense of identity.

Frost's most resolute metaphor for nature's flux is flight. Throughout "A Hillside Thaw," the imagery of flight and flow serves as a referent for the transitive nature of being itself:

To think to know the country and not know
The hillside on the day the sun lets go
Ten million silver lizards out of snow!
As often as I've seen it done before
I can't pretend to tell the way it's done.
It looks as if some magic of the sun
Lifted the rug that bred them on the floor
And the light breaking on them made them run.

But if I thought to stop the wet stampede,
And caught one silver lizard by the tail,
And put my foot on one without avail,
And threw myself wet-elbowed and wet-kneed
In front of twenty others' wriggling speed--
In the confusion of them all aglitter,
And birds that joined in the excited fun
By doubling and re-doubling song and twitter--
I have no doubt I'd end by holding none.
CP, 237-38

The confusion evoked in this passage -- the images of decomposition and deliquescence in particular -- reveal Frost's perception of nature as essential energy, as process.

Frost's recurrent term for chaos is "swarm:" "I fancied when I looked at six o'clock/The swarm still ran and scuttled just as fast."[12] Frost lends heightened expression to the idea of the dissolution of form as the basis of natural process in the phrase "in the rush of everything to waste" from "The Master Speed" (CP, 300) which makes explicit that all of being is catapulted down the cataract of dissolution.

On two occasions, Frost rhymes "swarm" with "form," highlighting their antithetical relationship. In the three-line poem, "Pertinax," he makes this contrast with concise force:

Let chaos storm!
Let cloud shapes swarm!
I wait for form! CP, 308

And in his "For John F. Kennedy: His Inauguration" (CP, 308), Frost applies the concept of swarm to humanity itself: "We see how seriously the races swarm/In their attempt at sovereignty and form." Here the "swarm" represents an actual groping toward form, a prelude, perhaps even a premonition.

A related word, less violent and turbid, but equally

dizzying and disorienting, is "swirl" or "swirling." The word, as used in "Happiness Makes Up in Height For What It Lacks in Length," conveys a gyrating vortical movement and thereby the motility of matter and diffusion of form inherent in Frost's concept of flux:

> O stormy, stormy world,
> The days you were not swirled
> Around with mist and cloud... CP, 333

As in the above-cited "Pertinax," Frost portrays flux and dispersion with the imagery of cloud and mist. The gossamer, diaphanous texture of these sprays, unequal mixtures of air and precipitation, captures the diffuse airiness of the immateriality of matter in addition to the dense and garbled chaos that underlies nature. Also related is the "whirl" which Frost uses particularly in reference to the falling of leaves, as in "The Quest of the Purple-fringed" (CP, 342-43). This image, which underscores decay, is especially apt for the depiction of decline.

The images of swarm, swirl, and whirl all indicate that nature is to Frost what the Unconscious was to Freud: a cauldron of murky and motile energies whose circuit through their realm is unballasted by coherent structure or duration. Like "romp" and "yelp," these images suggest the fitful movement of profound, frenetic impulse.

The theme of flux marks the confluence of change and chance in Frost's poetry. It radically divests life of a supporting and stabilizing ground, thereby thwarting the mind's desire for

law and certainty and eliminating the possibility of making universal predications.

iv

Infinity

The third basic characteristic that poses as a threat to human existence is the Infinite. Even where Frost confines himself strictly to earthly imagery, he still, very frequently, deploys the rest of the universe as a backdrop. Through this use of the Infinite, Frost suggests, with almost religious intensity, not only the insignificance and ephemerality of the human, but also, more importantly, the extreme disproportion between the human, in its will to survive, and the overwhelming power of the cosmos to dwarf that will and render it infirm.

Frost conjures the Infinite as lifeless, empty space. In "An Old Man's Winter Night," for example, the man of the title is alone at night in an empty room of a farmhouse surrounded by an impenetrable, unknowable, and, by implication, illimitable darkness:

> All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
> Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
> That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
> What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
> Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.
> What kept him from remembering what it was
> That brought him to that creaking room was age.
> He stood with barrels round him--at a loss.
> And having scared the cellar under him
> In clomping here, he scared it once again
> In clomping off--and scared the outer night,
> Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar

Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
But nothing so like beating on a box.
A light he was to no one but himself
Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
A quiet light, and then not even that.
He consigned to the moon--such as she was,
So late-arising--to the broken moon,
As better than the sun in any case
For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,
His icicles along the wall to keep;
And slept. The log that shifted with a jolt
Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.
One aged man--one man--can't keep a house,
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
It's thus he does it of a winter night. CP,108

The old man seems to have retreated to this lone settlement as a way of keeping at bay the hostile darkness that surrounds him. Even his fitful sleeping seems a way of warding off the night. The terror of the scene derives from the infinitude of the all-encompassing night. The emptiness of the night, its profound interstellar vacancy, finds a correlative in the emptiness of the room; practically the only objects mentioned within it are "barrels" and a box, empty containers. These images ultimately prefigure an essential emptiness within the man himself. Taken together, the room, the night, the barrels, the box, and the man present an image of a vacant domain, devoid of warmth, light, or reassuring shelter.

In "Desert Places," too, the terror of the scene lies not in any turbidity of movement, but in the sheer "emptiness" of the environs:

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. CP, 296

The snow's covering of the ground literally obliterates the outlines of the earth, rendering it mask-like. This mask of snow stifles all signs of vitality. The impassivity of expression (picked up in stanza three) defies any attempt to read the outward physiognomy of the earth or to divine depth from surface. We are left with an expression ("A blanker whiteness") expressing "nothing." The phrase, "no expression, nothing to express" might refer to the absence of appearance of expression, but might also refer to the "expression" of absence, an expressing of nothingness.

Significantly, Frost tends to associate terror more with desolation, emptiness, and waste than he does with overwhelming abundance or force. The emptiness of space augurs the nothingness of being. In both "An Old Man's Winter Night" and "Desert Places," it is the indigence of the landscape, its lack of form or content, that evokes the bleakness of existence.

Frost employs a startlingly simple vocabulary to evoke the incommensurability between the Finite and the Infinite, most frequently employing the term "size." In the last stanza of "All

Revelation," Frost suggests that human vision, which casts a large panoramic scene onto a retinal screen only a few centimeters long, literally "concentrates" the scene:

> 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. CP, 332-33

"A Drumlin Woodchuck" also uses the concept of size in order to evoke awe at the incommensurability of the Finite and the Infinite, and to posit the inherently terrifying nature of physical magnitude:

> One thing has a shelving bank,
> Another thing a rotting plank,
> To give it cozier skies,
> And make up for its lack of size. CP, 281-82

Despite the fact that "A Drumlin Woodchuck" casts the incommensurability between the Finite and the Infinite into a comic mode, suggesting the inherently ludicrous consequences of a woodchuck's attempt to "make up for lack of size," the poem nevertheless acknowledges the human desire for physical finitude and earthly scale.

There is something scientifically and mathematically naive, not to say primitive, about referring to the disproportion between the cosmic and the human as a discrepancy in "size." Such a perspective steadfastly refuses to conceptualize the difference between them, converting the incommensurability into an additive one instead of viewing it as a fundamental disproportion. The difference between the Finite and the

Infinite, in this view, is not one of kind, but of degree: there is simply more of the Infinite. This perspective does not even attempt to conceptualize the Infinite and thus reflects the same inability to deal with the Infinite that the poet dramatizes.

The decision to encounter the problem of the Infinite on a sensory level as size instead of on a conceptual level as incommensurability (or measurelessness) reflects Frost's demotic affiliations. Nevertheless, Frost recaptures some of man's "primitive" and original terror at contemplating the vastness of the heavens. To approach the Infinite from a sensory perspective as "size" is to surrender oneself up to the immediacy of its impact. Even if the conceptualization of the Infinite comes closer to a true encounter with its essence, such a conceptualization ironically "distances" the Infinite by consigning it to the realm of idea.

Frost's tendency to quantify the difference between the Infinite and the Finite instead of viewing them as absolutely and unnegotiably incommensurate, results, on occasion, in a complete collapse of human reason: the mind, overwhelmed by the universe's "size," surrenders its attempt to reconnoiter space. In "The Exposed Nest," the speaker tells a friend who is trying to erect newly-cut hay around a nest of young birds that had been exposed by a mower:

> You wanted to restore them to their right
> Of something interposed between their sight
> And too much world at once--could means be found.
> CP, 109-10

The magnitude of the universe impinges on human consciousness as

a unitary, instantaneous whole; because of the instantaneity of the Infinite, man is robbed of the sense of sequence that would allow him to register space in an ordered and logical fashion. The Infinite rushes in on the human mind, overrunning it with a sense of awe.

The mind's act of surrender to the Infinite when faced with its sheer excess can be seen in "Triple Bronze," where Frost uses the same concept of physical quantity:

> The Infinite's being so wide
> Is the reason the Powers provide
> For inner defense my hide.
> For next defense outside
>
> I make myself this time
> Of wood or granite or lime
> A wall too hard for crime
> Either to breach or climb.
>
> Then a number of us agree
> On a national boundary
> And that defense makes three
> Between too much and me. CP, 348-49

The deliberate vagueness of the phrase "too much" effectively conveys the mind's response to the Infinite in Frost: the loss of its powers of estimation and measure. Surrendering its sense of scale to overwhelming magnitude, the mind cannot even attempt to calculate the degree by which the Infinite exceeds its own measures.

In "The Most of It," where the encounter with a limited and specific natural event, a landslide, seems to become a conduit through which the substance of the entire universe is channeled, the Infinite impinges on human consciousness without mediation

or transition:

> And nothing ever came of what he cried
> Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
> In the cliff's talus on the other side,
> And then in the far-distant water splashed,
> But after a time allowed for it to swim,
> Instead of proving human when it neared
> And someone else additional to him,
> As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
> Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
> And landed pouring like a waterfall,
> And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
> And forced the underbrush--and that was all.
> CP, 338

At such moments, the Infinite so towers over the finitude of human consciousness that the latter seems eclipsed by it. The Infinite poses to human consciousness the threat of utter annihilation. Man is so irremediably dwarfed by the Infinite that he seems to lose his identity.

The mind can only preserve its sense of proportion and scale amidst such immensity by completely excluding the Infinite. This strategy is manifest in "The Exposed Nest," "Triple Bronze," and "A Drumlin Woodchuck." Using the woodchuck as surrogate for man, Frost shows that human survival depends on man's capacity to avert the Infinite, to close it off and repel its visual and intellectual assault. These lines also indicate that the man's realization of the incommensurability between the human and the cosmic is sufficient to destroy him. Only by obverting the influx of the Infinite into his domain, can man hope to survive "another day."

Though the "measure" taken against the Infinite in "A Drumlin Woodchuck" is effective, in most of Frost's poems the

immeasurability of the Infinite so completely deprives man of a sense of relation that he is left entirely dumbfounded, deprived of the means of making "sense." "Lost in Heaven" clearly depicts the disorienting effects of Infinite space on man:

> The clouds, the source of rain, one stormy night
> Offered an opening to the source of dew;
> Which I accepted with impatient sight,
> Looking for my old sky marks in the blue.
>
> But stars were scarce in that part of the sky,
> And no two were of the same constellation--
> No one was bright enough to identify;
> So 'twas with not ungrateful consternation,
>
> Seeing myself well lost once more, I sighed,
> "Where, where in Heaven am I? But don't tell me!
> Oh, opening clouds, by opening on me wide.
> Let's let my heavenly lostness overwhelm me."
> CP, 295-96

The speaker, overwhelmed by infinite space, is deprived of "sky-marks" by which to orient himself in relation to the cosmic, and so becomes "lost." Though on this occasion, Frost seems to embrace the Infinite, its power to dissolve man's sense of scale and relation is nevertheless clearly revealed.

The Infinite not only deprives man of the means of determining significance in the universe, but, more radically, robs him of a sense of his own significance. This humiliating depreciation of human pride by the Infinite is powerfully caught in "The Lesson for Today," where, comparing medieval theology with modern science, Frost arrives at an analogy between the incommensurability of man and God in the Middle Ages, and of man and space in the modern era:

> Space ails us moderns: we are sick with space.
> Its contemplation makes us out as small

As a brief epidemic of microbes
That in a good glass may be seen to crawl
The patina of this the least of globes.
But have we there the advantage after all?
You were belittled into vilest worms
God hardly tolerated with his feet;
Which comes to the same thing in different terms.
We both are the belittled human race,
One as compared with God and one with space.
I had thought ours the more profound disgrace;
But doubtless this was only my conceit.
The cloister and the observatory saint
Take comfort in about the same complaint.
So science and religion really meet. CP, 350-55

Man is "belittled" by the Infinite. Despite Frost's interrogation of his own "conceit" in supposing the modern humiliation more serious than the medieval one, it is still possible to say that whereas the earlier tradition allows a redeeming, humanistic belief in the centrality of the human, modern science, in expounding the idea of the infinite extension of the universe, deprives man of such belief.

Though violence and flux attack man on more immediately physical levels than does the Infinite, the latter has an impact just as destructive. Violence destroys man physically, flux psychologically; the Infinite attacks man intellectually by dissolving his sense of relation. Amidst its indeterminate vastness, man has no means of gathering the frames of reference he requires for a sense of coherence and structure. Faced with nature's violence, flux, and boundlessness, man finds his own instinct for survival radically thwarted.

FOOTNOTES

1 The poems "Blueberries" (CP, 59-62) and "The Subverted Flower" (CP, 339-41) are also pervaded by images of oral aggressivity.

2 William Pritchard notes the "pretense" inherent in describing a "destructive `meeting' of animate and inanimate as if it were a social matter, a politeness not to be refused" in Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

3 The poems that have war as their subject include: "Range-Finding" (CP, 126), "Not to Keep" (CP, 230-31), "A Soldier" (CP, 261-62), "The Courage To Be New" (CP, 387), "No Holy Wars For Them (CP, 398), "Bursting Rapture" (CP, 398), "U.S. 1946 King's X" (CP, 399), "From Iron" (CP, 468). The poems that allude to war include: "The Trial By Existence (CP, 19-21), "The Black Cottage" (CP, 55-59), "I Will Sing You One-O" (CP, 217-20), "To E.T." (CP, 222), "The Peaceful Shepherd" (CP, 252), "The Flood" (CP, 254-55), "The Gift Outright (CP, 348), "Our Hold on the Planet" (CP, 349), "To a Young Wretch" (CP, 349-50), "Time Out" (CP, 355-56). In addition, there are many poems where violence, while not achieving the overtness of war, verges on war in the extent of its destructiveness.

4 Poems that seem argue the inevitability of war are: "The Peaceful Shepherd" (CP, 252), "The Flood" (CP, 254-55), and "Pod of the Milkweed" (CP, 411-12).

5 The figure Lafe in "A Hundred Collars" (CP, 44-51) also provides an example of a somewhat threatening character.

6 William Pritchard, Robert Frost, pp. 153-55

7 The "star in one eye" recalls "the gleam of eyes" in "Once By The Pacific" (CP, 250), as it may also recall Polyphemus' eye of menace.

8 The Overdog's benightedness is intimated in the phrase "through the dark," which, on a colloquial level, implies its wayward confusion, its blind groping without direction or aim.

9
> The countless wings that from the Infinite
> Make such a noiseless tumult over it
> Do not doubt with their color compensate
> For what the drab weed lacks of the ornate.
> For drab it is its fondest must admit.

10 ...although it is a flower that flows
With milk and honey, it is bitter milk
As anyone who ever broke its stem
And dared to taste the wound a little knows.

11 In its effect on Frost, this episode of viewing the aggressive behavior of butterflies can be compared to an episode in Walden, in which Thoreau, observing a battle between red and black ants, is similarly "harrowed" and unnerved. In Bradley, Beatty, and Long, The American Tradition in Literature (3rd ed., New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Inc., 1967), the passage I am referring to appears in volume I, 1393-95.

CHAPTER TWO

STAYING THE NIGHT

i

Symbolism

In representing the struggle between man and nature, Frost makes use of certain symbols, the most prevalent of which are darkness and light, night and day. Each of these symbols works on two levels. First, darkness, in its privation of positive, fecundating force, becomes a symbol for the benightedness of nature, while in its clear illumination, light symbolizes the enlightenment of the human enterprise. Second, in their inherent cancellation of one another, light and dark represent the exclusive opposition of man and nature. As darkness seeks to eclipse light, so light struggles to "maintain" itself against the aggressive infiltrations of night.

Frost frequently indicates the antagonism of man and nature by counterposing night against man, as in "An Old Man's Winter Night":

> All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
> Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
> That gathers on the panes in empty rooms. CP, 168

Seen here as an enveloping presence, night is literally "All." The world consists of man and night (the "out-of-doors") and they stand against one another as starkly as two opposing armies.

In the opening of "The Star-Splitter," Frost employs a very similar image:

You know Orion always comes up sideways.
Throwing a leg up over our fence of mountains,
And rising on his hands, he looks in on me
Busy outdoors by lantern-light with something
I should have done by daylight, and indeed,
After the ground is frozen, I should have done
Before it froze...

CP, 176-79

Once again, night is opposed to man. Frost uses here the same visual metaphor that he used in "An Old Man's Winter Night": the night (or Orion) "looks in" on Brad McLaughlin as it looked "darkly in" at the old man. At the end of the poem, Frost enlarges this conception of night as opposing agent to even greater dimensions:

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 preposition "between," which has the force of an "against," calls attention to the clash of "night" and "man." The passage also implies the long-standing duration of their battle. Moreover, the phrase "night tonight" underscores that each particular night is only a finite manifestation of "the night" which is far more extensive.

The image of night as a symbol of nature's antagonism to man is also employed in "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury." Readjusting to its accustomed station in the pen after its acclamation at a show, a pullet reveals the same spunk that, presumably, won it the award, refusing to curtail its feeding, despite the onset of night:

Here common with the flock again,
At home in her abiding pen,
She lingers feeding at the trough,
The last to let night drive her off. CP, 279-81

Night attempts to bully the bird into retirement. In the following stanza, the keeper's unwillingness to allow the night to harry him "off" from his late-night chores is linked to the bird's:

The one who gave her ankle-band,
Her keeper, empty pail in hand,
He lingers too, averse to slight
His chores for all the wintry night.

Night figures here not only as a forbidding antagonist, but once again, as an "all." The analogy between bird and man is especially underscored by the parallel construction of the third and fourth lines of the two stanzas ("She lingers.../He lingers"). The use of the word "lingers" indicates that although man's struggle against nature may result in a prolongation of life, it cannot forestall night's ascendancy.

In fact, later, night acts as scourge, "scour[ing] the windowpane with snow." Both man and bird refuse to be driven into submissive withdrawal; their defiance of night's force constitutes a microcosmic analogue to man's struggle with nature. In both "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury" and "The Star-Splitter," the protagonist attempts to carry out last-minute, late-night chores in the face of night's opposition. In both poems, such human labor is an essential aspect of man's struggle against nature.

"On The Heart's Beginning to Cloud The Mind" presents

night's hostility as a symbol of the darkness invading the characters' lives:

> Something I saw or thought I saw
> In the desert at night in Utah,
> Looking out of my lower berth
> At moonlit sky and moonlit earth.
> The sky had here and there a star;
> The earth had a single light afar,
> A flickering, human pathetic light,
> That was maintained against the night,
> It seemed to me, by the people there,
> With a Godforsaken brute despair.
> It would flutter and fall in half an hour
> Like the last petal off a flower.
> But my heart was beginning to cloud my mind.
> I knew a tale of a better kind.
> That far light flickers because of trees.
> The people can burn it as long as they please;
> And when their interests in it end,
> They can leave it to someone else to tend.
> Come back that way a summer hence,
> I should find it no more no less intense.
> I pass, but scarcely pass no doubt,
> When one will say, "Let us put it out."
> The other without demur agrees.
> They can keep it burning as long as they please;
> They can put it out whenever they please.
> One looks out last from the darkened room
> At the shiny desert with spots of gloom
> That might be people, are but cedar,
> Have no purpose, have no leader,
> Have never made the first move to assemble,
> And so are nothing to make her tremble.
> She can think of places that are not thus
> Without indulging a "Not for us!"
> Life is not so sinister-grave.
> Matter of fact has made them brave.
> He is husband, she is wife.
> She fears not him, they fear not life.
> They know where another light has been,
> And more than one, to theirs akin,
> But earlier out for bed tonight,
> So lost on me in my surface flight.
>
> This I saw when waking late,
> Going by at a railroad rate,
> Looking through wreaths of engine smoke
> Far into the lives of other folk. CP, 291-92

Night's hostility is especially revealed in the phrase

"maintained against the night," which can be glossed in two ways. It could mean that the light is maintained against the night's attempts to extinguish it. In this case, night is seen as the aggressor. Alternatively, the phrase could mean that the light is actively asserted against the night in an attempt to erode night's hegemony within the world. In this case, the light is the aggressor.

The overwhelming extensiveness of the dark in contrast to the meagerness of the light highlights the inequality of the battle. As Frost's imagery frequently suggests, nature's endless wilderness spreads around man on all sides. Though the light -- which represents man's will toward self-preservation -- is scant and negligible, it nonetheless refuses to be put out, and this refusal becomes a symbol of the resilience of the human spirit.

Frost frequently conveys both meanings through the image of a lamp or lantern. His characters often carry lanterns around with them, emblems of their will toward perseverance. Sometimes, these lanterns suggest weapons: man arms himself with the brilliance of his own will. The restricted range of the lantern's light, its contraction to a mere dot in the night, signifies the restricted extent of human will. As an image of concentration, however, the lantern also represents the compression of that will -- its consolidation into strength.

The representation of the first meaning (the limitation of the human will) appears in the opening lines of "On The Heart's

Beginning to Cloud The Mind" (quoted above, p. 90): "The earth had a single light afar,/A flickering, human pathetic light." Against "the night," an abstract, metaphysical presence that invests the entire universe, stands "a light"--"single" "flickering," "human," and "pathetic." (The use of the qualifying adjective "human" in reference to the light dispels any doubt that man is set face-to-face against nature.) The light punctuates the night like a brief, isolated, and purely provisional notation and is "maintained" against the night "With a Godforsaken brute despair" -- as if the odds of its successful opposition to darkness were so pathetically meager as to be insignificant. (The word "brute" insinuates the severity of that despair, as if it were so oppressive as to be almost pre-articulate.) At the same time, despite its overwhelming opposition by night, the light steadfastly struggles against the darkness, determined not to be eclipsed.

In "Brown's Descent," the potential heroism of Brown's refusal to concede defeat to the forces that drag him down, albeit in comic vein, is symbolized by the tenacity of his grip upon the lantern; refusing to let go of the lantern, he also manages to prevent the light from being extinguished. The lantern, Brown's steadfast support of it, and its failure to be extinguished are recurrent motifs in the poem:

> Brown lived at such a lofty farm
> That everyone for mile could see
> His lantern when he did his chores
> In winter after half-past three.

And many must have seen him make
  His wild descent from there one night,
`Cross lots, 'cross walls, 'cross everything,
  Describing rings of lantern light.

Between the house and barn the gale
  Got him by something he had on
And blew him out on the icy crust
  That cased the world and he was gone!

Walls were all buried, trees were few:
  He saw no stay unless he stove
A hole in somewhere with his heel.
  But though repeatedly he strove

And stamped and said things to himself,
  And sometimes something seemed to yield,
He gained no foothold, but pursued
  His journey down from field to field.

Sometimes he came with arms outspread
  Like wings, revolving in the scene
Upon his longer axis, and
  With no small dignity of mien.

Faster or slower as he chanced,
  Sitting or standing as he chose,
According as he feared to risk
  His neck, or thought to spare his clothes.

He never let the lantern drop.
  And some exclaimed who saw afar
The figures he described with it,
  "I wonder what those signals are

Brown makes at such an hour of night!
  He's celebrating something strange.
I wonder if he's sold his farm,
  Or been made Master of the Grange."

He reeled, he lurched, he bobbed, he checked;
  He fell and made the lantern rattle
(But saved the light from going out).
  So halfway down he fought the battle,

Incredulous of his own bad luck.
  And then becoming reconciled
To everything, he gave it up
  And came down like a coasting child.

"Well--I--be" that was all he said,
  As standing in the river road

He looked back up the slippery slope
  (Two miles it was) to his abode.

Sometimes as an authority
  On motorcars, I'm asked if I
Should say our stock was petered out,
  And this is my sincere reply:

Yankees are what they always were.
  Don't think Brown ever gave up hope
Of getting home again because
  He couldn't climb that slippery slope;

Or even thought of standing there
  Until the January thaw
Should take the polish off the crust.
  He bowed with grace to natural law,

And then went round it on his feet,
  After the manner of our stock;
Not much concerned for those to whom,
  At that particular time o'clock,

It must have looked as if the course
  He steered was really straight away
From that which he was headed for--
  Not much concerned for them, I say;

No more so than became a man--
  And politician at odd seasons.
I've kept Brown standing in the cold
  While I invested him with reasons;

But now he snapped his eyes three times;
  Then shook his lantern, saying "Ile's
'Bout out!" and took the long way home
  By road, a matter of several miles. CP, 137-140

Brown's perseverance in the face of defeat underscores the resolve of Yankee character whose praise is the occasion of the poem. The resoluteness of the human will to struggle against defeat becomes the sole criterion of heroism.

Yet, if the lantern itself is a symbol of the will's determination, its dimness is a symbol of that will's feebleness in the face of nature's enmity. In several of the poems where

lanterns appear, they are either out, in the process of going out, faint, or obscured by external impediment. Indeed, in most of these poems, lanterns fail to provide clear or powerful illumination.

In "The Draft Horse" (CP, 443-44), Frost sets the scene for the nefarious stabbing of a horse in the night by equipping the couple in the buggy he is pulling "With a lantern that wouldn't burn." The lantern's malfunction is one of a series of disorders that beset the couple: the buggy is said to be "too frail" and the horse that pulls them through "a pitch-dark limitless grove" "too heavy." These references emphasize the sense of disproportion -- a motif that pervades the poem and creates its surreal ambience.

At the end of "The Fear," a woman venturing into the darkness beyond her house in order to face an intruder (whom she suspects to be a former lover come back for revenge), drops her lantern:

> The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground,
> It touched, it struck, it clattered and went out.
> CP, 89-92

The extinction of its light sounds an ominous note of doom, darkening the couple's lives with fear.

In "The Star-Splitter," Frost calls up the image of the lantern in order to indicate the powerlessness of the human vis-a-vis the natural:

> "You know Orion always comes up sideways.
> Throwing a leg up over our fence of mountains,
> And rising on his hands, he looks in on me
> Busy outdoors by lantern-light with something

I should have done by daylight, and indeed,
After the ground is frozen, I should have done
Before it froze, and a gust flings a handful
Of waste leaves at my smoky lantern chimney
To make fun of my way of doing things,
Or else fun of Orion's having caught me.
Has a man, I should like to ask, no rights
These forces are obliged to pay respect to?" CP, 176-79

The speaker's labor outdoors in the night, which signifies man's entire effort at survival, is aided by lantern-light. Nature's opposition to man is indicated by the fact that a "gust flings a handful/Of waste leaves at [his] smoky lantern chimney" in order "to make fun of [his] way of doing things,/Or else fun of Orion's having caught [him]." The adjective "smoky" emphasizes the inadequacy of the human enterprise, which is marred and obscured by nature.

At the end of the poem, Frost, philosophically disheartened, returns to the image of the lantern-chimney, reflecting:

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 lantern chimney becomes the efficient metaphor for the human -- its champion and symbol.

ii

The Will to Perseverance: Tragic Gleanings

Nothing more clearly indicates Frost's conception of existence as struggle than his use of some form of the word

"win" on four separate occasions. In "The Bonfire," a mother tells her children how she once struggled to keep a fire within bounds:

> I trusted the brook barrier, but feared
> The road would fail; and on that side the fire
> Died not without a noise of crackling wood--
> Of something more than tinder-grass and weed--
> That brought me back to my feet to hold it back
> By leaning back myself, as if the reins
> Were round my neck and I was at the plow.
> I won! CP, 129-33

The exclamation "I won!" expresses her sense of triumph. As if to confirm the fact that her struggle to control the fire is a battle, she says that she feared the road would "fail." Prior to that, she instructs: "Fight such a fire by rubbing not by beating./A board is the best weapon if you have it." Both "fight" and "weapon" emphasize her battle against the licentiousness of natural force.

The language of a passage in "The Onset" illustrates Frost's vision of life as a struggle almost Manichean in its intensity; the battle is as much between good and evil as between man and nature. Life is conceived of as a kind of "errand" -- in the sense of both journey and task. It is man's purpose to do "something" to evil, to win an "important triumph" against it by reducing or reversing its forces.

In "Not To Keep" (CP, 230-31), a different kind of victory is scored. A wife is informed by letter that her husband will be returning home from the army. Suspicious that something is wrong, she has to "look and ask" to make sure there is not some "hidden ill/Under the formal writing." When he arrives home,

she allows herself to think, momentarily, that all is well. Conveying her relief, the narrator tells us, "Everything seemed won,/And all the rest permissible ease." These lines are striking since victory here consists not in defeating the enemy, but in escaping the fatality to which one is exposed in war. The realization that her husband has returned home simply to recuperate so that he may "go again," establishes the prevailing sense of fatalistic despair. The very word "seemed," through its implicit distinction between appearance and reality, prepares us for the inevitable irony.

And in "The Thatch," the speaker recalls an episode, apparently from youth, when, having had some kind of argument with those close tc him, he rushes out alone into the winter rain where he stays, waiting for those inside the house to give up and put out the light:

> 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.
> CP, 252-53

The poem presents a struggle of wills, in which the speaker is locked in an unrelenting battle with those indoors.

"The Grindstone" also presents a struggle of wills between men, the "Father-Time-like man" and the speaker who, as a boy, operated the grindstone with him:

I gave it the preliminary spin,
And poured on water (tears it might have been);
And when it almost gaily jumped and flowed,
A Father-Time-like man got on and rode,
Armed with a scythe and spectacles that glowed.
He turned on will-power to increase the load
And slow me down--and I abruptly slowed,
Like coming to a sudden railroad station.
I changed from hand to hand in desperation.
I wondered what machine of ages gone
This represented an improvement on.
For all I knew it may have sharpened spears
And arrowheads itself. Much use for years
Had gradually worn it an oblate
Spheroid that kicked and struggled in its gait,
Appearing to return me hate for hate
(But I forgive it now as easily
As any other boyhood enemy
Whose pride has failed to get him anywhere).
CP, 188-91

Once again, two individuals are locked in a determined, death-like struggle not to be "first to yield." Eventually, the struggle becomes hate-filled, as the speaker fantasizes about killing the Father-Time-like man by wounding him on the blade the latter is sharpening. The words "struggle," "failed," and "armed" establish the life-and-death nature of their battle of wills.

In "The Lost Follower," where Frost laments the fate of a young, idealistic poet who has given up poetry in order to pursue social reform, he uses the word "failed" twice. In the sixth stanza, he mentions the sorrow the former poet feels at being unable to save humanity. Frost also evokes the speaker's own sorrow at the lapsed poet's diversion by idle, unfulfilling fantasies:

The Muse mourns one who went to his retreat
Long since in some abysmal city street,
The bride who shared the crust he broke to eat,

As grave as he about the world's defeat.
CP, 358-59

Both former poet and narrator look at the world in terms of victory and defeat, though their assessments of where these come into play differ strongly. The former poet believes that not being able to realize one's dreams of perfection is a form of failure whereas the speaker believes that not being able to accept the inevitability of such failure is the true defeat. The speaker views the former poet's determination to pursue his vision of social justice as misguided, even self-destructive. The pathos that emerges at the end of the poem is reminiscent of Don Quixote: a noble nature is maliciously entrapped by the very desires that engender its nobility. As in Don Quixote, we are moved by a passion that clings so steadfastly to so hopeless a vision, at the same time that we are not a little discomfitted by this passion.[1]

Another example of Frost's conception of existence as struggle appears in his use of the word "battle" in "Brown's Descent," when describing Brown's headlong plunge down the mountain slope:

He reeled, he lurched, he bobbed, he checked;
He fell and made the lantern rattle
(But saved the light from going out).
So halfway down he fought the battle,

Incredulous of his own bad luck. CP, 137-40

Though Brown's fall down the side of the mountain is comic, it constitutes, nevertheless, a battle with the elements.

"To a Young Wretch (Boethian)" also presents existence in

terms of struggle. The poem records the speaker's protest against the annual invasion of his woods by a "young wretch" who cuts down some trees:

> It is your Christmases against my woods.
> But even where, thus, opposing interests kill,
> They are to be thought of as opposing goods
> Oftener than as conflicting good and ill;
> Which makes the war god seem no special dunce
> For always fighting on both sides at once.
> CP, 349-50

Seen here as a universal principle of being, struggle transcends the agents enlisted in its service, the war god "always fighting on both sides at once."

In all these poems, Frost tends to see struggle not only as a characteristic of man's relationship to nature, but as a transcendent characteristic of all being. The struggle, repeated in poem after poem, is between man and fate. Fate intends to extract from man a recognition of his own subservience and helplessness; man is determined never to confer this recognition. The struggle centers explicitly on human dignity and pride: can a man insist steadfastly on the pre-eminence and prowess of his being when nature, Fate, or God so fiercely demonstrates its power to prostrate him "in the mud and even dust?"[2]

The attempt of nature or fate (what one calls it matters less than the recognition of its dominance) to reduce man to helplessness and poverty, to defeat him in spirit and in body, is apparent in several poems that center on the decline of a wealthy, successful, or proud individual, usually a woman. The

most exigent of these, "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers," has been said to be about Frost's mother.[3] The dialogue between the Voice and the Voices in the poem is eerily fateful: in their disembodied state, the Voices are a modern recreation of the Eumenides. (The Voices are instruments of the Voice's will, executing its behests.) In return for what the Voice regards as a flouting of fortune and, therefore, a defiance of fate -- a woman who refuses love "safe with wealth and honor" -- the Voice instructs the Voices to exact a terrible vengeance. The Voices are to lead her by her own choices so as to "Leave her always blameless," from hope, prosperity, pride, success, social prominence, and happiness to a wretched and abasing existence. In this way, her pride (what seemingly led her to reject a "good" offer of marriage for the less promising one) is savagely, even systematically broken. The process of abasement occurs (or is to occur) through a ruthless blend of disappointments and joy -- frustrations that nevertheless, through their redeeming leniency, provide their own consolatory compensation, thereby allowing her to reconcile herself, slowly, almost unconsiously, to a fate that occurs gradually, almost undetectably.

The woman falls from being a cynosure whose glamour and beauty are perceived as indicies of her fineness to such complete obscurity that even to the humblest she appears "less than they are." "Hopeless of being known for what she has been,/Failing of being loved for what she is," she is given for

her sixth "joy"

> ...the comfort...of knowing
> She fails from strangeness to a way of life
> She came to from too high too late to learn.
> CP, 255-57

The destruction of her hopes is so absolute and tyrannic, that one has the sense of a small bird being gradually strangled in a suffocating grasp. Her descent through the class structure is invested with the pathos of a tragic decline. She is so utterly crushed that one has the sense of ritualistic defilement, even dismemberment.

The poem is Frost's most painful and pessimistic, especially in the way it conveys the treachery of existence -- the ironic yet ruthless betrayal of hope through the sadistic, remorseless destruction of desire. In its wideness of sweep, its inclusive, unrelenting honesty, the poem possesses the dimensions of a realistic novel. The way in which nature (or Fate) deliberately intends man's defeat is seen when the Voice asks, "`You can let her choose?'" and the Voices answer, "`Yes, we can let her and still triumph.'"

Because of his concern with falls, Frost seems exceptionally conscious of the precariousness of height. In "Brown's Descent," for example, Brown lives at "a lofty farm." The recluse in "The Figure in the Doorway" seems purposely poised for some debacle:

> His great, gaunt figure filled his cabin door
> And had he fallen inward on the floor
> He must have measured to the further wall. CP, 292

Similarly, the "withered hag" in "Provide, Provide," who comes

to wash the steps "with pail and rag" is said to have once been "the beauty Abishag,/The picture pride of Hollywood." The reader is, therefore, admonished:

> Too many fall from great and good
> For you to doubt the likelihood. CP, 307

In "The Pauper Witch of Grafton," a woman, once renowned for her powers as a witch, but now fallen on hard times, describes the headstrong rebelliousness of her youth. Even now, she says, the "temptation to do right/When I can hurt someone by doing it...is too much for me." Among her pranks was that of having her husband gather for her "wet snowberries/On slippery rocks beside a waterfall...in the dark." "And," she adds, with relish, "he liked everything I made him do," revealing her erotic attraction to danger. Now, at the end of her life, she doubts the advisability of her independence of spirit, and wonders whether, if she had known what was to be the outcome, she would have had the willfulness to persevere in such behavior:

> All is, if I'd a-known when I was young
> And full of it, that this would be the end,
> It doesn't seem as if I'd had the courage
> To make so free and kick up in folks' faces.
> I might have, but it doesn't seem as if.
> CP, 207-10

She even says of her husband:

> I hope if he is where he sees me now
> He's so far off he can't see what I've come to.
> You can come down from everything to nothing.

The theme of failure converges with that of diminution into nothingness. As in "The Ovenbird," or, even more emphatically,

"Out, Out," there is a sense of wasting away, of utter inanition and decay. Life has conquered even this rebellious creature, leaving her broken in both spirit and pride.

This sense of the way life defeats people and breaks their spirit is seen also in "The Death of the Hired Man." A woman tells her husband how she has found the hired man "`fast asleep...Huddled against the barn door,/A miserable sight, and frightening, too...'" Sympathizing with his plight, she says that he has

> "Nothing to look backward to with pride,
> And nothing to look forward to with hope,
> So now and never any different." CP, 34-40

As if to call attention to the way in which fate defeats man, the woman says to her husband, incredulous that the hired man "`has come home to die,'" "`You'll be surprised at him -- how much he's broken.'" Returning to his wife's side after checking on the hired man, the husband

> Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.
> `Warren?' she questioned. `Dead,' was all he answered.

Once again, we are left with a sense of loss that is emphatic, unmitigated, and absolute.

There is frequently a sense in Frost that Fate plays a cat and mouse game with man. What T.S. Eliot says of history in "Gerontion" may be applied to fate in Frost. It

> Gives with such supple confusions
> That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late
> What's not believed in, or is still believed
> In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon
> Into weak hands, what's thought thought can be dispensed
> with

Till the refusal propagates a fear.[4]

Fate's treachery lies in its malicious manipulation of human emotion through the ironic allotment of experience and circumstance, its destructive disappointment of human hopes (hopes that it propagates and excites), and in its tortured divestment of human pride. Man is placed upon the wrack, tortured through an exquisite series of humiliations, losses, and ironies. Fate (or nature) seems to take gratification in human pain. The universe, consequently, often seems run by a psychopathic personality -- a malignant deity.

Frost also uses the words "crushed" and "stripped" to convey nature's merciless prostration of man's will. In "The Trial By Existence," men who have died and gone to heaven -- now angels -- volunteer to undergo incarnation as human beings; however, they are given one condition: they must renounce all memory of their existence as angels during their tenure as humans. Thus, the trials they endure on earth and the frightening prospect of extinction are unrelieved by knowledge that they shall revert to their angelic forms after "death." In the last stanza, Frost writes of this "trial by existence" that we call life:

> Thus are we wholly stripped of pride
> In the pain that has but one close,
> Bearing it crushed and mystified. CP, 19-21

By depriving us of the knowledge "That life has for us on the wrack,/Nothing but what we somehow chose," life strips us of the very pride of knowing that our suffering is chosen and heroic --

the provisional ordeal whereby our spirits prove themselves. We are pulverized by our pains, "mystified" by the seeming pointlessness of our suffering, and deprived of the knowledge that might lend our pains a semblance of dignity.

One reason Frost's poetry is so powerful is its merciless contemplation of human pain. The sadistic exultation in human pain, the destruction of human pride and hope, and the unflinching confrontation with both this pain and its source, can all be seen in "Not To Keep," a poem that, like "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers," deals with the tragic extinguishing of emotion. Having returned home from a war that in all probability should have claimed his life, the soldier must tell his wife that his return is only temporary. Noticing something in his manner, she asks, "`What is it, dear?'" To which he answers:

> "Enough,
> Yet not enough. A bullet through and through,
> High in the breast. Nothing but what good care
> And medicine and rest, and you a week,
> Can cure me of to go again." CP, 230-31

Once again, we are left with a sense of the treacherousness and unpredictability of fate. The denouement of the poem seems even more chilling:

> The same
> Grim giving to do over for them both.
> She dared no more than ask him with her eyes
> How was it with him for a second trial.
> And with his eyes he asked her not to ask.
> They had given him back, but not to keep.

Though the characters in the poem avert their vision from the pain of human life, we are conscious that they are doing so as

they do so, and through our awareness of their deflected vision, we are indirectly conscious of their pain. We see more intensely for their refusal to look.

As these poems demonstrate, man can be defeated not only physically, but also morally and spiritually. Although nature or Fate can literally "break" man, man can just as adamantly refuse to be broken. Though it is inaccurate to see this refusal as Promethean, there is in its defiance an element of steadfast and heroic determination.

This defiance can be seen in mankind's refusal in "Sand Dunes" (CP, 260-61) to be "cut off" by nature; or in the speaker's father in "The Birthplace" who

> further up the mountain slope
> Than there was ever any hope,
> ...built, enclosed a spring,
> Strung chains of wall round everything,
> Subdued the growth of earth to grass,
> And brought our various lives to pass[;] CP, 264-65

or in Brad McLaughlin in "The Star-Splitter" who

> burned his house down for the fire insurance
> And spent the proceeds on a telescope
> To satisfy a lifelong curiousity
> About our place among the infinities[;] CP, 176-79

or in the couple in "The Investment" (CP, 263-64), who try "Not to sink under being man and wife,/But get some color and music out of life" by painting their house and buying a piano; and in "the strong" in "The Strong Are Saying Nothing" (CP, 299-300) who resist the tendency to predict the future "until they see." Merely not to succumb to nature, to refuse to let one's spirit be broken--that in itself is a kind of heroism.

In "Assurance," a ship's porthole is described as a defiance of nature since it thwarts the sea's intent to rush in on man and destroy him:

> The danger not an inch outside
> Behind the porthole's slab of glass
> And double ring of fitted brass
> I trust feels properly defied. CP, 363

This defiance can also be seen in early response of the woman in "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers:"

> Invisible hands crowded on her shoulders
> In readiness to weigh upon her.
> But she stood straight still,
> In broad round earrings, gold and jet with pearls,
> And broad round suchlike brooch,
> Her cheeks high-colored,
> Proud and the pride of friends. CP, 255-57

The words "proud" and "pride" make clear what the Voices are trying to destroy: the woman's sense of self, autonomy, and self-respect.

The most moving evocation of resistance occurs in "The Trial By Existence":

> Nor is there wanting in the press
> Some spirit to stand simply forth,
> Heroic in its nakedness,
> Against the uttermost of earth. CP, 19-21

Starkly and gravely, Frost presents an heroic contest between man and Fate: man's "spirit," "naked," proceeds unbuffered in its encounter with the "uttermost" of earth. Earth tries with all its might to break man's spirit; man struggles heroically not to be broken.

Man can display his defiance of Fate simply by refusing to be psychologically affected by it -- by demonstrating his

imperviousness. In part, this imperviousness represents an attempt to flaunt the serene imperturbability of the human spirit and, more importantly, its insusceptibility to pain. Since nature delights in human suffering and helplessness, seeking essentially affirmation of its own power, to deprive it of the gratification of seeing man grovel on the ground or appeal for mercy is, according to this line of thought, to rob it of victory.

This imperviousness involves on man's part a ruthless extermination of desire and expectation, since, where they flourish, man will not be able to reconcile himself to his fate. Man must accept the most abject torture without protest or complaint.[5]

Man's refusal to bow down under the weight of life's tortures can best be seen in "They Were Welcome To Their Belief":

> Grief may have thought it was grief.
> Care may have thought it was care.
> They were welcome to their belief,
> The overimportant pair.
>
> No, it took all the snows that clung
> To the low roof over his bed,
> Beginning when he was young,
> To induce the one snow on his head.
>
> But whenever the roof came white
> The head in the dark below
> Was a shade less the color of night,
> A shade more the color of snow.
>
> Grief may have thought it was grief.
> Care may have thought it was care.
> But neither one was the thief
> Of his raven color of hair. CP, 299

To be sure, man is defeated by nature: his hair is turned white with age. Time is portrayed as a thief, divesting man of his pride. But the important thing to note is not the fact that the speaker is ultimately thwarted by Time ("snows"), but that he is stubbornly resistant to being defeated by anything less than "all the snows" (my emphasis).

Frequently, Frost emphasizes not man's success at defeating nature, but his desire not to be defeated. This intent can be seen when Brown refuses to "let" the lantern drop or go out and never gives up "hope/Of getting home again because/He couldn't climb that slippery slope," in "Brown's Descent." In "The Thatch," man pits himself against the Other with implacable determination, refusing to be "[the] first to yield." Both pullet and keeper in "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury" refuse to be driven off by night.

Man's determination not to yield to nature is apparent also in "On A Tree Fallen Across The Road":

> 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. CP, 238

Nature here deliberately attempts to intimidate man, eroding his confidence, interrogating his sense of perogative, and imputing arrogance to his self-assurance. Nature also attempts to convince the travellers that their intent to forge ahead is

headstrong, even impetuous -- a kind of liberty taken. The travellers' determination, however, is proof against nature's attempt to block and undermine them:

> 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...

The lines are intriguingly ambiguous. They could refer to the fact either that man has within him the resources necessary to achieve his goal, or that the goal lies within him. In any case, nature has clearly miscalculated, underestimating man's resolve. This is one of the few moments in Frost where nature is revealed as inefficacious, a vainglorious villain--rather than a malefic intelligence--that resorts to these machinations because of its powerlessness.

In "Willful Homing" (CP, 341-42), the protagonist's strong homing instinct is clearly manifest in the line, "Since he means to come to a door he will come to a door." The determination to accomplish a task becomes argument for its accomplishment, as though intention were fiat. And the sadness of the end of "The Lost Follower" derives in large part from the lost follower's determination to pursue social equality and perfection:

> But there is in the sadness of his eye
> Something about a kingdom in the sky
> (As yet unbrought to earth) he means to try. CP, 358-59

As in "Willful Homing," the word "means" establishes apodictically the intense determination of will.

iii

The Inner Struggle

There are two agons in Frost. The first, the agon between man and nature, has already been discussed. The second agon--between man's will to perseverance and his will to surrender, is the subject of this section.

Man's struggle also occurs within the self--against his own despair. Death is not the only form of defeat; defeat can also be man's loss of the will to live. Paradoxically, one can be destroyed by nature while not being defeated by it. Conversely, physical survival is not the only form of victory; victory is also the refusal to allow the unutterable odds against one to become cause for despair. One resists, in that case, not only nature and death, but first something in oneself that cedes victory to them.

The presentation of the struggle, first, as moral and physical and, then, as one that occurs within the self, can be seen in the first stanza of "The Onset" (CP, 226). A clear emphasis is placed on the imperativeness of activity. A fortiori, one is ultimately defeated because one is going to die. However, the battle is often re-defined by Frost in terms of the energy and resolve of one's resistance to death. Not to win an "important triumph" against evil, to give up one's errand and "let" death descend is itself a defeat worse than death. To be defeated in this way annihilates the significance of one's existence, as if "life had never been begun." Re-defined as a

battle between one's tendency to give up and despair, and one's ability to persevere despite death's inevitable trump, this struggle is continuous with the one between man and nature, yet also distinct from it.

Nature can be defeated merely by man's refusal to surrender. One need not win the war to win the battle. To resist nature's hegemony may not result in a profound or sudden suspension of its laws (i.e., in immortality or reincarnation), but it does establish the importance of one's existence. The vital thing is to resist regarding one's own efforts as futile. The speaker, rallying from his passivity, says in the second (and final) stanza of "The Onset": "I know that winter death has never tried/The earth but it has failed." The war between man and nature can be ceded on either side.

Frost's use of the word "lets" in line 8 of "The Onset" allows us to see still more clearly the delineation between the external and internal levels of struggle and how the latter--man's dogged determination not to succumb to despair--can determine the outcome of the former. In the long list of metaphorical actions at the end of the first stanza, Frost says:

> 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.

The word "lets" suggests not only the "natural" inclination of death to descend, but also, more importantly, the way in which

its descent requires man's acquiescence. It is man's own "natural" tendency to passivity and despair that must be resisted as much as the external adversary.[6]

Frost frequently implies that man's will to resist defeat is an ethical responsibility. In "Reluctance," one of Frost's most beautiful lyrics, the narrator asks:

> 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? CP, 29-30

To surrender to natural law constitutes a kind of treason--a betrayal of the strictures of the heart. The appeal "to the heart" suggests, on the one hand, that from the heart's point of view, this surrender is treason; yet it also suggests that this surrender is treasonous to the heart. Man owes the heart a certain allegiance: to refuse to assent to the slow but inevitable destruction of the objects of its love. The battle is inevitably a losing one. Yet, there is not a little heroism involved in man's defiance of nature's force. Ironically, as these lines suggest, man's resistance of nature and Fate is "unreasonable": reason seems to dictate that one yield "with a grace." Given such overwhelming odds, surely it is madness or, at least, inattentiveness that tries to effect a change in the nature of things.

If Frost insists on the need to resist nature, he also, on occasion, views this struggle pragmatically: where man struggles uselessly (as, for instance, in "The Lost Follower"), his

struggle is meaningless. Although surrender in Frost is generally a sign of moral weakness, a certain kind of temporary acquiescence can, paradoxically, indicate prudence and shrewdness. Such an acceptance of the inevitable can be seen in "Brown's Descent." Careening at breakneck speed, Brown struggles manfully to resist the downward momentum of his fall, yet, finally, perceiving the irresistibility of his plight, he decides to remit the struggle temporarily:

> So halfway down he fought the battle,
>
> Incredulous of his own bad luck.
> And then becoming reconciled
> To everything, he gave it up
> And came down like a coasting child.
> CP, 137-40

This act of temporary surrender is viewed not as defeat, but as a just, perhaps wise acceptance of the inevitable. Nor is this prudent acceptance incommensurate with the dignity which Brown, if only parodically, possesses: though Brown "gave it up," we are instructed by the poet not to

> think Brown ever gave up hope
> Of getting home again because
> He couldn't climb that slippery slope;
>
> Or even thought of standing there
> Until the January thaw
> Should take the polish off the crust.
> He bowed with grace to natural law
>
> And then went round it on his feet,
> After the manner of our stock.

He also displays a jaunty self-confidence, what Frost, in "For John F. Kennedy: His Inauguration," calls "a healthy independence of the throng," since he goes about his business

without "much concern" for those who might see him take this practical, if round-about solution to the problem. Brown's shaking of the lantern, at the end of the poem, reaffirms his committment to human initiative, at the same time demonstrating that this determination has been qualified by an intelligent ability to adapt to adverse circumstance.

Frost's double use in "Brown's Descent" of the phrase "gave up" allows us to discriminate between types of surrender--a surrender that is defeat (despair) and a surrender that is prudent (acceptance)--and also to see that Brown's prudent, temporary acceptance of defeat need not be interpreted as total surrender. The first instance ("he gave it up/And came down like a coasting child") conveys Brown's discretion and intelligence; in the second instance ("Don't think Brown ever gave up hope") castigates surrender.

Despite the occasional note of possibility, more often than not there is in Frost's poems a strong sense of hopelessness. If Frost is so insistent on the need to resist despair, it is because often a major effort at hope is required simply to survive. For example, "The Birthplace" opens: "Here further up the mountain slope/Than there was ever any hope" (CP, 264-65). The census-taker, in the poem of that name, comes to a desolate landscape and deserted house to count the people

> with some hope, but not much
> After hours' overlooking from the cliffs
> An emptiness flayed to the very stone.
> CP, 174-76

The hired man is said to have "Nothing to look backward to with pride,/Nothing to look forward to with hope,/So now and never any different." In "The Bear" (CP, 268-69), Frost refers to two poles of man's scientific awareness of space, the telescope and the microscope, as "Two instruments of nearly equal hope,/And in conjunction giving quite a spread." Although in isolation, these lines offer a great range of hope, the satiric tone pervading the poem undercuts this overt reading, implying the equal inefficacy of either instrument to help man fathom the mysteries of the universe. And in "The Gum-Gatherer," referring to a desolate domain

> higher up in the pass
> Where the grist of the new-beginning brooks
> Is blocks split off the mountain mass CP, 140-41

Frost evokes his sense of the bleakness of the human situation by adding "And hopeless grist enough it looks/Ever to grind to soil for grass."

A sense of the unbearableness of life can be seen in the barren landscapes that fill Frost's poems as well as the empty lives of many characters who inhabit these environments. The people in Frost's poetry live in oppressively sterile conditions, deprived of any genuine excitement, vividness, or pleasure.

Several characters in the poetry struggle to get through life by telling themselves that life is bearable.[7] Characters in Frost's poems who fail to make a virtue of necessity by indurating themselves to the inevitable, are sometimes

castigated by others. The mother in "The Housekeeper" (CP, 81-89) says of John, a man deserted by the woman he has been living with for fifteen years: "All is, he's made up his mind not to stand/What he has got to stand." The lesson Frost often seems intent on teaching us is how to "stand" the intolerable.

An example of Frost's attempt to persuade himself that life is not as onerous as it seems appears in "Our Hold on the Planet," where he argues that earth is propitious to human existence:

> 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.
> CP, 349

The fact that Frost has to resort to so logical and inductive a proof suggests that his belief in the "liveability" of existence is belied by actual experience. We prove to ourselves empirically what we are otherwise disinclined to believe.

"On The Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind" is the poem that most fully explores the theme of hope vs. hopelessness. In it, Frost once again suggests that a clear-sighted, mature confrontation with life does not attempt to mitigate the facts: to do so is to let the heart "cloud" the mind. Unflinching encounter with life recognizes its terror and does not seek comfort in illusory "tale[s]"[8] of its beauty or benignity.

Looking out of his lower berth window "at moonlit sky and moonlit earth," the speaker in "On the Heart's Beginning to

Cloud the Mind,", noting "here and there a star" in the sky, says:

> The earth had a single light afar,
> A flickering, human pathetic light,
> That was maintained against the night,
> It seemed to me, by the people there,
> With a Godforsaken brute despair.

The "flickering" of the light represents the tenuousness of human hope. Moreover, the narrator says that "It would flutter and fall in half and hour/Like the last petal off a flower." Frost implies that man is fighting a losing battle.

"But," continues the speaker, "my heart was beginning to cloud my mind." Faced with the authentic prospect of a terminus, he invents a "beginning." Like the narrator in "Directive" who advises the reader to "Make [himself] up a cheering song," the speaker invents a tale that deliberately occludes the true desperateness of the situation. He recognizes the self-deception inherent in this "new" tale, but entertains it nonetheless.

The tale attempts to mitigate the harshness of reality. The far light "flickers" not because of its inherent weakness (the hopelessness of the human situation), but "because of trees." Hence, the obstacles to human well-being and possibility are accidental, external factors that can, hypothetically, be eliminated. The people who live in the desert are in control: they command the situation, rather than vice versa. They

> can burn [the light] as long as they please;
> And when their interests in it end,
> They can leave it to someone else to tend.

This "can" works on two levels, showing the people's power over the light in two ways. First, when they decide to suspend their supervision of the light, there will be someone else to whom they can pass its supervision on to. Yet, more subtly, it shows that they are not so profoundly dependent on its support that they cannot dispense with it.

Moreover, the speaker who might "Come back that way a summer hence,/... should find it no more no less intense." The light of hope burns with equal intensity throughout the ages. There is an unbroken, uniform transmission of the light--of culture and civilization:

> I pass, but scarcely pass no doubt,
>
> When one will say, 'Let us put it out.'
> The other without demur agrees.
> They can keep it burning as long as they please.
> They can put it out whenever they please.

Again, Frost seems determined to establish the fact that man has control over the light and, therefore, by implication, the "people there" control over the situation they find themselves in. Clearly, Frost's intentness on establishing their control over the light issues from a dormant recognition (which they are doing their best to, but which they cannot, deny) that, in fact, they are not in control--and to a terrifying degree. Moreover, the intensity of their need to establish their control testifies to the extremity of their lack of control. The rest of the poem turns into a strangely melodic, mesmerized chant, monotonously rehearsing the various signs and suggestions that indicate their life is tolerable and that they are, indeed, in control. As if

trying desperately to exorcise a spectre of doubt and darkness that hangs over the whole poem, Frost moves deliberately but statically through several phases of denial:

> One looks out last from the darkened room
> At the shiny desert with spots of gloom
> That might be people and are but cedar,
> Have no purpose, have no leader,
> Have never made the first move to assemble,
> And so are nothing to make her tremble.
> She can think of places that are not thus
> Without indulging a `Not for us!'
> Life is not so sinister-grave.
> Matter of fact has made them brave.
> He is husband, she is wife.
> She fears not him, they fear not life.
> They know where another light has been,
> And more than one, to theirs akin,
> But earlier out for bed tonight,
> So lost on me in my surface flight.

Again, the word "can" connotes freedom and possibility. "She can think of places that are not thus/Without indulging a `Not for us!'" In other words, the wife can view her own situation, recognizing its bleakness and desolation, with unillusioned eyes and without self-pity or regret. It is precisely by countenancing the truth of her situation that she has learned to accept it: "Life is not so sinister-grave." She and her husband derive whatever consolation they can from the regularity of routine and role: "He is husband, she is wife." The terror of the unknown--inside them as well as outside--does not scare them: "She fears not him, they fear not life." The whole list reads like a litany of self-assurance.

In fact, it is as if they fear a sudden debacle, a collapse of routine into an emptiness so complete that no amount of

reassurance could recall them from the devastation into which they are entering. Clearly, these characters are on the verge of psychological catastrophe--an avalanche of impending terror and dread that shall dispossess the mind of its very sense of reality. Or, put differently, they seem to be staring into an abyss that has suddenly opened under them--and they have just discovered this abyss to be the abyss of their lives. These lines move toward a crescendo in which the world of recognizable reality spins irreversibly out of orbit, as though they were entering a nightmare with no beginning and no end.

Because of Frost's strong belief in the hopelessness of life, he requires as a constant tonic repeated assurances to the contrary. So if we frequently encounter in his poetry flat and dogged assertions that things are tolerable, these asseverations should not blind us to the sense of doubt that renders them necessary. Only the lowering of expectation makes life bearable. Such depreciation of desire is, in fact, a strategy of survival.

At its strongest, the sense of hopelessness in Frost turns into a rabid sense of futility. Frost's characters often question the point of existence; they wonder whether it's really "worth" it. The result is a shrewd, if pessimistic assessment of the possibilities of life--a sense of the unequal balance of pain and rewards, privations and pleasures.

"A Question" poses this sense of discomfiture with unflinching honesty:

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. CP, 362

The injunction, "Look me in the stars,/And tell me truly," serves as a partial incrimination of human honesty; were man indefeasibly truthful, no injunction would be necessary. What makes it necessary is man's capacity for deception (or self-deception). But if man does not acknowledge the truth, it is not because he does not know it but rather because he does not want to acknowledge it. For, if man were asked upon his honor to tell the truth, were he put in such a position that evasion and subterfuge were impossible, then he would be able to give an answer, and the answer given, presumably, would differ from the answer he would give if not forcibly held accountable.

Hence, Frost suggests that man's capacity to endure life depends on his sustaining a belief in the balance of rewards and penalties--on his capacity to rationalize his suffering in terms of some compensatory calculus. "A Question" deliberately interrogates man's belief in the liveableness of life, however, by exposing the psychological needs that engender his dependency on this belief. Even if we choose to see Frost's posing "A Question" as a question, a dilemma rather than an assertion, the very difficulty of answering serves as a partial legitimization, if not, indeed, an affirmation of doubt.

Frost's sense of futility is also strongly apparent in "Hannibal," a short poem from West-Running Brook:

Was there ever a cause too lost,

Ever a cause that was lost too long,
Or that showed with the lapse of time too vain
For the generous tears of youth and song?
CP, 262

Though the poem implicitly praises the point of view that resists despair, clearly the poem has a tendency to see causes as "lost." Tears become a means of registering man's indignation about loss. Lament becomes, ironically, a means of resistance--the elegiac, a defiance of the Fates, for by holding onto his grief for the loss of things, man symbolically holds onto these things.

Frost's most recurrent metaphor for the loss of a sense of meaning in life is obscured vision and he frequently uses the word "dim" to express it. In "An Empty Threat," he speaks of the vagueness of the perception of life's purpose:

It's sometimes dim
What it is to me
Unless it be
It's the old captain's dark fate
Who failed to find or force a strait
In its two-thousand-mile coast... CP, 210-12

In "The Discovery of the Madeiras" (CP, 343-47), he writes of the "stolen lady" who has been stunned into self-forgetfulness by the narration of a violent tale, "For slowly even her sense of him/And love itself were growing dim." And in "Pod of the Milkweed" (CP, 411-12), the obscurity of an argument that would explain such violent self-destructiveness on the part of living creatures induces the following reflection: "Something eludes [the surviving butterfly]. Is it food to eat?/Or some dim secret of the good of waste?" In these poems, the very basis

for existence seems to grow faint. Man pauses on the brink of experience, wavering and lost, unknowing of his purpose or direction. Such a sense of directionlessness is found in the penultimate stanza of "Reluctance," just prior to the speaker's enunciation of the ignominy of retirement:

> 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 heart is still aching to seek,
> But the feet question "Whither?" CP, 29-30

Man pauses at a crucial juncture in his existence, trying but unable to find some credible meaning to direct his life.

The sense of lost direction can be seen most clearly of all in the dyptich "Two Witches"--"The Witch of Coos" (CP, 202-07) and "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" (CP, 207-10). Two women, looking back at their lives, voice their sense of the futility of it all. The vehemence that prompted their defiance in youth seems sadly "spent"--in both senses. The witch of Coos wonders why she "ever cared" and the witch of Grafton expresses her doubt as to whether she would have had the "courage/To make so free and kick up in folks' faces/... if [she'd] a-known that this would be the end." There is a great sense not only of the futility of human effort, but also, even more terribly, its unimportance. Having stepped over a line that divides reason from madness, faith from doubt, they have passed beyond human ordinance into a realm where the very rationale of existence seems vague, uncertain, lost. Disinherited, dark, these characters stand strangers to themselves and to life; transfixed

and puzzled, like the other characters in the poems mentioned above, they pause on the brink of experience, depleted of, perhaps even defiled by, the very energy that once claimed their youth.

There is, therefore, in Frost a perpetual conflict between the will to believe in the value of human existence, and the tendency to doubt it, an argument Frost clearly had with himself. Moreover, his sense of futility is ultimately related to his belief in the lack of progress in man's fight against nature. Like the boyhood enemy in "The Grindstone" (CP, 188-91) "whose pride has failed to get him anywhere" and like the grindstone itself that "stands beside the same old appletree," man's battle with nature fails to get anywhere.

"In Winter in the Woods," which serves as the climactic poem in Frost's oeuvre in much the same way that "Crossing the Bar" serves in Tennyson's, presents in its most explicit form Frost's conception of man waging war with nature:

> 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. CP, 470

The preposition "against" in the second line defines the

opposition between man and nature. Man stands "alone against" nature, unaided by cosmic compassion. The indecisiveness of the struggle, especially as it is portrayed in the last stanza, is particularly impressive. The battle resolves itself into a routine--man's steadfast hammering away at the undisputed sovereignty of nature's rule. Frost conceives of a lifetime as a finite series of blows exchanged between man and nature in which man dies without witnessing the final overthrow of nature's rule. Frost is wise enough to recognize the ineffectuality of human energy in radically reducing the sway of natural violence. Yet, he also resists the temptation to infer his own defeat from this fact, and thus successfully resists despair. Retreat does not inevitably entail defeat, and the pattern of human life resolves itself into an ongoing struggle that is never resolved, yet also never lost. As long as he does not regard his inability to vanquish nature as proof of his failure, man is not defeated.

FOOTNOTES

[1] "An Empty Threat," which centers on a fur trader's prolonged isolation and his almost cosmic doubt as to the value of his enterprise, also allows us to see Frost's conception of existence in terms of a struggle through its use of the word "fail." The final stanzas are directed primarily to a fellow spirit who has also "failed," Henry Hudson:

> Don't ask Joe
> What it is to him.
> It's sometimes dim
> What it is to me,
> Unless it be
> It's the old captain's dark fate
> Who failed to find or force a strait
> In its two-thousand-mile coast;
> And his crew left him where he failed,
> And nothing came of all he sailed.
>
> It's to say, "You and I--"
> To such a ghost--
> "You and I
> Off here
> With the dead race of the Great Auk!"
> And, "Better defeat almost,
> If seen clear,
> Than life's victories of doubt
> That need endless talk-talk
> To make them out." CP, 210-12

Alighting on Henry Hudson, whose failure "to find or force a strait" seems strangely prescribed by fate and, therefore, akin to his own, the speaker sees his life as "failed" and his fate that of defeat.

[2] The White-Tailed Hornet" (CP, 277-79, l.65).

[3] Lawrance Thompson and R.H. Winnick, Robert Frost: A One-Volume Edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981), p. 130

[4] T.S. Eliot, "Gerontion," ll. 41-46 from T.S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909-1962 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Publishers, 1970), pp. 29-31

[5] The possibility of extinguishing desire is brought up (but ultimately rejected) in "I Could Give All To Time," a poem whose composure is among its more formidable achievements:

> To Time it never seems that he is brave
> To set himself against the peaks of snow

To lay them level with the running wave,
Nor is he overjoyed when they lie low,
But only grave, contemplative and grave.

What now is inland shall be ocean isle,
Then eddies playing round a sunken reef
Like the curl at the corner of a smile;
And I could share Time's lack of joy or grief
At such a planetray change of style.

I could give all to Time except--except
What I myself have held. But why declare
The things forbidden that while the Customs slept
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There,
And what I would not part with I have kept.
CP, 334-35

Here Time is portrayed as neither exulting in nor deploring its destructive power; rather, it executes its acts of extermination with philosophical reflectiveness. The speaker's enunciation that he "could share Time's lack of joy or grief/At such a planetary change of style" registers his own attempt or desire--ultimately abandoned--to be indifferent to fortune and disaster, pleasure and pain.

6 Frost's re-definition of the struggle as one that occurs within rather than outside the self, appears in his use of the word "let" in two other poems as well. In "Brown's Descent," Brown is said "never [to] let the lantern drop." This signifies Brown's determination not to "let" the forces of nature defeat him. Later he is said to have "saved the light from going out." The word "let," however, suggests that the "natural" tendency of things is for the lantern to drop and the light to go out. Unopposed by man, the lantern will fall. At the same time, the word also suggests that the lantern can only drop if man allows it to; it can only fall through his deferral to it. Hence, if man is to prevent the lantern from falling, the light from going out, and the battle from being lost, he must actively refuse to allow nature to have its way unimpeded. Man best fights nature by resisting the impulse to yield to it.

In "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury," the pullet that so tenaciously refuses to be harried off into retreat by night is so fierce that it is said to be "the last to let night drive her off." Again, night can only drive her off if she "let[s]" it. Through this word, Frost underscores the element of choice in man's acquiescence to nature; if he decides to make a stand against nature, then, half the battle is already won.

[7] The housewife in "A Servant to Servants" tells herself and her guests, "I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going:/Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I?"

[8] "On The Heart's Beginning to Cloud The Mind" (CP, 290-92, l. 14)

CHAPTER THREE

ORDER AS ENVIRONS

Divining the centrality of the theme of defense in Frost, William Pritchard entitles one of his chapters, "Forms of Guardedness."[1] It is because danger is so pervasive in Frost that the need for vigilant self-defense is so great. This need exists most emphatically on the physical level, but it exists on psychological and intellectual levels as well since the threats are directed at man on all levels.

In order to defend himself, man erects barriers. Anyone attentive to Frost must be struck by the predominance of two basic kinds of imagery: barriers (walls, fences, borders, boundaries, partitions, and gates) and shelters (houses, cabins, thatches, sheds, shacks, and barns). The manifest function of these barriers and shelters is to obvert the threats: they repel violence, impede flux, and occlude infinity.[2]

The need for strong protective measures is frequently established by their very dearth or frailty. In "The Lockless Door," the danger of invasion is abetted by the lock's absence. The woman's uneasiness about returning home at night in "The Fear" is caused by the ineffectuality of door-locks to keep intruders out:

> Doorslocked and curtains drawn will make no difference.
> I always have felt strange when we came home
> To the dark house after so long an absence,
> And the key rattled loudly into place
> Seemed to warn someone to be getting out
> At one door as we entered at another. CP, 89-92

The tramp who uses a farmer's "pasture for a camp" in "An Unstamped Letter in Our Rural Letter Box" is careful to tell the farmer, "It wasn't someone at your locks," as if to assuage some all-pervasive fear. And in "The Old Barn at the Bottom of the Fogs" the tramp who sleeps in the barn is given "troubled dreams" by the absence of locks on the doors.

In these poems, the act of entry receives special emphasis. The impulse to rattle the key for safety as one enters a temporarily uninhabited house is stressed in "House Fear:"

> They learned to rattle the lock and key
> To give whatever might chance to be,
> Warning and time to be off in flight:
> And preferring the out- to the indoor night,
> They learned to leave the house door wide
> Until they had lit the lamp inside. CP, 127

The doorway marks the locus where protection and vulnerability coincide. One of Frost's most menacing poems, "Bereft" (CP, 251), situates the speaker on the threshold of his house, "Holding open a restive door,/Looking downhill to a frothy shore," as does "One More Brevity" (CP, 419-21). Especially in the first poem, we become conscious here of both how crucial and insufficient such defenses are. As if to make explicit this inadequacy, Frost shows the house in "A Fountain, A Bottle, A Donkey's Ears, and Some Books" (CP, 212-17) as easy target to "stone and lead" thrown by "Boys and bad hunters" at "unprotected glass."

On a conservative count, in at least twenty-three of Frost's poems barriers figure prominently.[3] Of these poems, "Bond And Free" makes most explicit the protective function of

barriers:

> Love has earth to which she clings
> With hills and circling arms about--
> Wall within wall to shut fear out. CP, 120-21

In "Triple Bronze" (CP, 348-49), Frost lends an almost programmatic expression to the theme of shutting fear out.

In nine of these poems, Frost makes clear that barriers defend man against violence, which may be posed either by living creatures or by the elements. In "The Flood," the symbolic image of "barrier walls" conveys man's attempts to "contain" violence. In "Triple Bronze," the speaker writes of his making

> Of wood or granite or lime
> A wall too hard for crime
> Either to breach or climb.

And in "Trespass," the speaker is given "a strangely restless day" by a stranger's trespassing onto his land; some fundamental human boundary has been transgressed.

In several poems where violence is specifically elemental, the barrier defends against wind and storm. Frost speaks of the immensity of a mountain that serves as a physical barrier between him and the wind in a poem titled simply "The Mountain":

> The mountain held the town as in a shadow.
> I saw so much before I slept there once:
> I noticed that I missed stars in the west,
> Where it black body cut into the sky .
> Near me it seemed: I felt it like a wall
> Behind which I was sheltered from a wind. CP, 40-44

In "An Empty Threat," Frost suggests the need for a barrier between man and nature, even while noting its absence:

No,
There's not a soul
For a windbreak
Between me and the North Pole-- CP, 210-12

In "Atmosphere," a wall protects a bit of land from aridity or desolation:

Winds blow the open grassy places bleak;
But where this old wall burns a sunny cheek,
They eddy over it too toppling weak
To blow the earth or anything self-clear;
Moisture and color and odor thicken here.
The hours of daylight gather atmosphere. CP, 246

So, too, in "There Are Roughly Zones," the need for barriers is called up by the severity of the wind and cold:

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.
CP, 305

Because the elements are so inclement, man must employ care in keeping within certain "zones": "Though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,/There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed." These zones are defined by the boundaries that protect man and his property from nature's violence. In "An Unstamped Letter in Our Rural Letter Box," it is the cold and wet that the barrier (this time a juniper) defends man against:

There I elected to demur
Beneath a low-slung juniper
That like a blanket to my chin
Kept some dew out and some heat in... CP, 380-81

And in "The Bonfire" (CP, 129-33), the elemental violence takes the form of a blaze set by a mother and her children; recollecting a bonfire she had previously set ablaze, the mother

says that she "trusted the brook barrier, but feared/The road would fail."

Man finds it necessary to shut out not only natural threats, but also cosmic ones. Man's occlusion of the Infinite by erecting barriers between himself and it is seen quite clearly in "The Exposed Next," where recalling his friend's attempt to protect a nest of young birds, the speaker says:

> You wanted to restore them to their right
> Of something interposed between their sight
> And too much world at once--could means be found.
> CP, 109-10

Boundless space is experienced as a kind of physical and psychological assault. Only in a finite environment can man find any sense of scale and order. The word "right" indicates that man perceives a limited world as a legal and moral perogative.

"Triple Bronze" also identifies the motive for erecting barriers with the desire to occlude the Infinite:

> The Infinite's being so wide
> Is the reason the Powers provide
> For inner defense my hide.

Just as man's "hide" defines and individuates the human self, so the Infinite dissolves and abrogates that self. Absorbing the self into its expanse, the Infinite deprives the self of the means of determining its own distinctness. In the last two lines of the poem, Frost reuses the phrase "too much," emphasizing once again in simple, quantitative terms the vertigo induced by the Infinite:

> Then a number of us agree
> On a national boundary
> And that defense makes three

Between too much and me.

In "Assurance," the Infinite takes an oceanic rather than cosmic form:

> The danger not an inch outside
> Behind the porthole's slab of glass
> And double ring of fitted brass
> I trust feels properly defied. CP, 363

Even though transposed into a different element, the "danger" remains essentially the same--the boundlessness of cosmic force.

Frost's use of the image of wall as barrier between man and nature can be broken down into two finer groups: those in which it functions as shield and those in which it functions as container. As shield, the function of the wall is to deflect hostile assaults, where the enmity of nature usually takes the form of wind, snow, and storm, as in "The Mountain" and "An Empty Threat."

As container, the function of the barrier is to withhold the insurgent chaos of nature. Here, nature's aggression is experienced as a steady, continuous pressure that impinges on human walls made to withhold that pressure. Any fissure in these walls would be eagerly "embraced" by nature as an opportunity to pour amain into the realm of human habitation. Examples of this use of the image of barrier are "Assurance" and "The Bonfire." "The Witch of Coos," with its skeleton sequestered behind a door and waiting for an "opening" to come out and enter the bedroom, also conforms to this description.

At least a third of Frost's poems possess some kind of structure or shelter. As early as the fourth poem in A Boy's

Will, entitled "Love and A Question" (CP, 7-8), Frost includes references to shelter. A stranger comes "to the door at eve" and "speak[ing] the bridegroom fair..../He [asks] with the eyes more than the lips/For a shelter for the night." In the last poem in A Witness Tree (Frost's seventh volume), "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus" (CP, 368-72), the speaker comes to the door of a farmhouse at night and also asks for shelter. That Frost's cannon is framed by two such requests underscores the centrality of the theme of shelter.

In "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury," Frost states the function of structures with startling directness: "The lowly pen is yet a hold/Against the dark and wind and cold" (CP, 279-81). In "Storm Fear" (CP, 9-10), "Snow" (CP, 143-56), and "There Are Roughly Zones" (CP, 305), the house is a refuge from the assaults of wind, snow, and rain. Men, women, and children "hole up" inside the warmth and safety of the house, as does the drumlin woodchuck in his burrow in the poem of that name. "The Runaway" (CP, 223) ends with the speaker's appeal (or injunction) for the colt's owner "to come and take him in." In "An Old Man's Winter Night" (CP, 108), the room that the old man inhabits is a refuge not only from the physical enmity of nature, but from its moral and psychological animus as well. "The Cocoon" (CP, 247-48) likens a house to a protective cocoon that is being "anchor[ed]...to an earth and moon/From which no winter gale can hope to blow it." In "The Thatch" (CP, 252-53) we appreciate the importance of shelter all the more clearly

because of the speaker's loss of its protection--first voluntarily (because of an argument with the people inside), and then involuntarily (because of its superannuation). In "Willful Homing" (CP, 341-42) the end of the subject's determined trek in a hair-raising storm is his house. And in "A Cliff Dwelling," the speaker speculates that possibly

> Some halfway up the limestone wall,
> That spot of black is not a stain
> Or shadow, but a cavern hole,
> Where someone used to climb and crawl
> To rest from his besetting fears. CP, 392

The violence from which structures shelter man is not only natural; it can protect man from his fellow creatures, too. Thus, in "The Fear" (CP, 89-92), "House Fear" (CP, 127) and "The Lockless Door" (CP, 240-41), we become keenly aware of houses as defenses against intruders, even when these defenses are insufficient.

In "A Drumlin Woodchuck," Frost specifies that man (and other animals) build their shelters as defenses not only against predators, but also against the Infinite:

> One thing has a shelving bank,
> Another a rotting plank,
> To give it cozier skies
> And make up for its lack of size. CP, 281-82

Though comically ironic, the phrase "cozier skies" suggests that through his shelters man actually refashions the firmament on a more manageable scale. In "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury" (CP, 279-82), Frost, using the adjective "abiding" to modify the word "pen," suggests that it is precisely through the ministrations

of such shelters that man ensures his own survival.

In the process of obverting nature's assaults, barriers and shelters transform man's environment, creating conditions diametrically opposed to those prevalent in nature. If nature is violent, motile, and boundless, these new environments possess a serene or static atmosphere, are fixed in location (in relation both to their own external environments and to their own boundaries), and are defined by clear external boundaries.

Such an environment is found in "Snow." A preacher, ironically named Meserve, has stopped at the Cole's house as a half-way station on his way home during a very severe storm. The Coles, especially the woman, try desperately to reason him out of his intention to continue. Despite his insistence on continuing home, Meserve, one of Frost's most rhetorically accomplished characters, manages nevertheless to sing the praises of the warmth and security of their house:

> You make a little foursquare block of air,
> Quiet and light and warm, in spite of all
> The illimitable dark and cold and storm,
> And by so doing give these three, lamp, dog,
> And book-leaf, that keep near you, their repose...
> CP, 143-56

The room possesses a quiet stillness. Earlier, Meserve comments: "`The wind's at naught in here./It couldn't stir so sensitively poised/A thing as a bookleaf.'" The room is also fixed in position. And it is circumscribed by horizonal limits--walls.

In using the adjective "all" in reference to "The illimitable dark and cold and storm," (as he uses it in "An Old

Man's Winter Night" and "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury" in reference to the night), Frost emphasizes that the "dark and cold and storm" are the "All." Man's refuge from nature is, at best, a retreat. Shelter does not permanently displace nature nor rival it. Its vantage-ground is limited, at best--insignificant, at worst.

"Atmosphere" (CP, 246) presents another such environment. Though a natural rather than artificial enclosure, it has come into being as the result of human labor (the building of a wall). "Rose Pagonias" too depicts such an environment:

> A saturated meadow,
> Sun-shaped and jewel-small,
> A circle scarcely wider
> Than the trees around were tall;
> Where winds were quite excluded,
> And the air was stifling sweet
> With the breath of many flowers--
> A temple of the heat. CP, 13-14

Though natural rather than human, this refuge functions as a sanctuary from nature's animus.

Man's erecting of barriers is not only defensive; it is also a creative act. Man fashions a new environment--one that will support his existence in a way that nature, with its fierce and unconquerable enmity, does not allow. Man changes the way in which the world affects him on physical, psychological, and intellectual levels. Instead of experiencing the world as dangerous, man experiences it as safe; man experiences it with a sense of security rather than a sense of insecurity; and man experiences order rather than disorder.

Safety, security, and order are the three primary desiderata in Frost's poetry. Though initially, one might suppose safety the more determinative condition and regard security and order as subordinate conditions, it is really order that is the main focus of Robert Frost's poetry. In fact, the struggle for survival culminates in man's attempt to establish order--both in the external, physical world and in the domain of his own intellect.

If the three primary attributes of nature are violence, flux, and boundlessness, it follows that the three primary attributes of order are stasis, fixity, and limit. These qualities are precisely those that characterize the enclosed environments in which man seeks refuge from nature, and, in fact, order is often portrayed in Frost's poetry as a domain. As a bounded land area, order is both literally and figuratively a realm--a province that becomes the "ground" of man's existence. Order is, for Frost, the basis of human existence in much the same way that culture or civilization is. It is the peculiar environmental and intellectual adaptation man devises to enable his survival, his defense against and refuge from chaos. Within order's fold one may find safety and is assured the basic sustenance of existence; outside it, one is assured of danger.

For Frost--as perhaps for us all--the basis of man's sense of order is his sense of relation. The most basic form of relationship for man is between himself and the world. In order to perceive relations within the world, one must perceive

objects that are the markers of these relations. One's relation to the world (and therefore one's sense of order) is mediated through its objects or, rather, through one's perceptions of them. In an objectless world--a world in which nothing exists save for the self--it would be impossible to perceive any relation except for the one between self and world, and one's sense of order would therefore be limited to the basic opposition of self and world. (I purposely put aside the possibility of perceiving relations within one's own self--the possibility that one's self may constitute a world in its own right, as is the case in Walt Whitman's poetry.) With the introduction of objects into the world, however, the possibility of a more extended and richer sense of order increases as does the possibility of a more complex, resilient, and baffling sense of disorder. One might even entertain the notion that complexity of relation increases the possibilities of order as much as it may potentially jeopardize them. The more fixed and precise man's sense of these relations, the more fixed and precise his sense of order. Order is fundamentally defined therefore as coherence of relation.

It is not objects <u>per se</u> that allow one to predicate relations; any interruption of the undifferentiated space of an objectless world--any punctuation of it by form, sensation, or sensation-inducing form--stimulates a recognition of relation. The important element is "difference" since it is "difference" that permits one to perceive relations. Visually, we might term

this interruption of undifferentiated space that allows one to measure relation a notation, a "mark."

Besides being a notation of difference, the mark is also a limit--in two senses. First, the principal function of the mark is to limit chaos. Since chaos may be conceived of as a lack of coherent relation, the mark, in instituting relation, creates order. The mark literally limits the degree of disorder. The mark symbolically unites these two meanings (the institution of relation and the contraction of chaos) through its expunging or effacing of undifferentiated space; it literally blots out the undifferentiated. Second, the mark is self-delimiting--and therefore inchoate, limited, fragmentary.

For Frost, the very possibility of order originates with the introduction of limit; or, conversely, limit introduces the possibility of order. Of the three properties of order (stasis, fixity, and limit), limit is most crucial to Frost's theory of order. As order is the presiding theme of Frost's poetry, so limit is its determinative trope. The image of the line, limit, or grapheme is literally the defining figure in Frost's poetry.[4] It exerts pressure on almost all of his central and many of his minor poems. Its role as thematic sign-post is analogous to the role of dawn on Dante's seeing of Beatrice in the Paradiso. Not only a structuring and esthetic device, not only an emblem of the poetry, limit declares the ontos and dianoia of its ruling idea as well.

Frost's representation of order as limit conveys the genetic

connection between the establishing of relation and the creating of order: by producing the means by which relations can be discerned, limit engenders order. If order is a delimited topographic region, this region is engendered by its boundaries. Frost portrays order literally in terms of its defining feature.

Yet, if the representation of order as a delimited topographic entity indicates the causal connection between limit and order, it also indicates the delimitative function of order. The beauty of the representation of order as delimited province is that it indicates the precise coincidence and contemporaneity of these two phenomena.

Frost's most overt enunciation of the idea of limit as a guiding principle of his poetry, as order, occurs in "A Star in a Stoneboat":

> 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...
> CP, 172-74

Here Frost "defines" his own intellectual and poetic position in distinctly individualist terms, with limit his orienting standard.

In "Mending Wall" (CP, 33-34), Frost again defines his own position in separatist terms, and the idea of limit becomes central in articulating Frost's sense of social and poetic identity: "`Good fences make good neighbors.'" Though the speaker questions his neighbor's belief in the importance of fences, the poem nevertheless seems to affirm rather than deny this importance. The poem does, after all, end with the

neighbor's repetition of the phrase, "`Good fences make good neighbors,'" and the speaker does not so much provide solid evidence against fences as raise a doubt that might itself be dispelled. Equally crucial is the fact that the speaker, for all his doubt, nevertheless assists his neighbor in repairing the wall.

Similarly, in decrying man's tendency to overstep and ignore boundaries and limits, "There Are Roughly Zones" asserts their importance:

> What comes over a man, is it soul or mind--
> That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?
> 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?
> CP, 305

Again, it is nature, albeit here "human nature," that tends to transgress boundaries. Moreover, since the poem is about man's transplantation of southern trees to northern climes, the nature to which Frost refers is, in a sense, physical nature itself.

In "Beech," Frost himself delineates between two forms of demarcation--abstract and concrete--attempting to lure the reader into reflecting on their relation:

> 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 an piled,
> One tree, by being deeply wounded,
> Has been impressed as Witness Tree
> And made commit to memory
> My proof of being not unbounded.
> Thus truth's established and borne out,

Though circumstanced with dark and doubt--
Though by a world of doubt surrounded. CP, 331

Abstract delineation involves the intellective process of predicating abstract relations. Concrete delineation involves the construction of physical markings on top of abstract demarcations so as to commemorate and render them manifest. Frost's "imaginary line" has been concretized ("iron spine"). Abstract demarcation effects tangible change. In this sense, the concrete demarcation is a symbol for the abstract one; its physical substantiality represents the ontological substantiveness of abstract demarcations. We can even see the concrete demarcation as a representation of the mind's attempt to apprehend the abstract by representing it as concrete.

Frost frequently represents the relation of order to chaos as the contraposing of two adjacent regions divided by a thin boundary-line. As he says of a man in "New Hampshire" (CP, 159-72), "He knew too well for any earthly use/The line where man leaves off and nature starts,/And never overstepped it save in dreams." In "The Witch of Coos" (CP, 202-07), too, the threshold that divides the world of rational composure from that of supernatural vision is the bed, a metonymy for dream. Dream transports man beyond his realms of rationality and order.

The representation of order as a region of land separated by a boundary from another region demonstrates that although the line between order and chaos is extremely tenuous and fine, without it man would be destroyed. There is no simultaneous straddling of the boundary that divides order from chaos, no

dual citizenship.

Taking the boundary that divides order from chaos, Frost often extends it on all four sides so that order becomes a completely enclosed area. Frost thereby makes his "definition" of order literally more encompassing. As this conception of order renders its definition more complete, so it also renders the dominance of nature more encompassing; nature entirely surrounds the delimited region of order, engulfing order within its indeterminate vastness.

Order may be conceived either as an external condition of reality or as an internal condition of the mind. Frost's enclosures represent both. As much as they represent outward embodiments of physical order, they represent outward correlatives of internal order. The relationship between these two types of order can be further defined. Physical order (order in the external world) can be the condition and occasion of internal order (order as a state of mind)--a means of producing the latter. Hence, Frost's and his characters' insistence on ordering environments can be seen as an essential symbol of his own need for order. Yet, it can also be seen as a philosophical attempt to divulge the nature of order as an idea. Outward, physical order therefore becomes not only the occasion of internal, mental order, but its precise correlative, its symbolic representation. By representing the intellectual concept of order or the inner condition of order as an external physical phenomenon, Frost clarifies the lineaments and contours

of order, allowing us to grasp as a concrete, tangible representation what otherwise were an abstract, intangible idea.

There are three varieties of complete enclosure in Frost's poetry: a clearing in a dense growth of trees or an isolated but fertile enclave in a surrounding waste; a man-made structure in a surrounding wasteland; a man-made structure in a clearing that is itself bounded by trees. In all versions, the image of order is an enclosure within a larger tract of space: an enclave--a sanctuary of either fertility or stasis and calm--within an environment of either barrenness or storm.

The most rudimentary form is the image of enclosure as a clearing in a forest--an open piece of land not yet overrun by the surrounding growth, as in "Rose Pagonias" and "Atmosphere." The fertile sensuousness of "Rose Pagonias" is everywhere apparent. The clearing is rife with growth, suffusing a rich, ebullient organicity. "Saturated" and "stifling sweet," the meadow exudes a Keatsian lushness, a profuse, luxurious ripeness that seems to "drip" order and scent like the farm in "Build Soil" which Frost counsels to "Turn...in upon itself/Until it can contain no more,/But sweating-full drips wine and oil a little" (CP, 316-25).

The meadow in "Rose Pagonias" is also endowed with an almost mystical religious symbolism that emphasizes its perfect circularity and jewel-like geometry. In the second and third stanzas, Frost extends the strain of sacred significance by invoking, first, the idea of "worship" and, next, the idea of

"prayer." The simultaneous attribution to this hortus conclusus of sensuous richness and sacred significance is surprising in a poet who tends to have little of either, but its presence in the poem is deliberate and purposive. (Increasingly, the sensuous richness that can be found in A Boy's Will disappears from Frost's later poetry, where, in general, the sacred takes the form of the rune or riddle, of gnomic sententiousness. Frost's poetry rarely effuses what could be considered a serious and intended spirituality.) However, the presence of these qualities ceases to be quite as shocking when we realize that order is for Frost a source of nutrient vitality and that if Frost attached sacred significance to anything, it was assuredly to order—a hieratic concept that is not usually associated with the numinous, but in so thoroughgoing a secular poet as Frost may very well be the nearest approximation to it.

The vegetative lushness and organicity of the clearing in these images represent the fertility of order. Similarly, the wasteland surrounding the clearing symbolizes the sterility and impoverishment of nature. In a strange trans-valuation of properties, order becomes endowed with a rich and fecund sensuousness while nature, the surrounding environment, originally the realm and center of life, becomes biologically dead and vegetatively sterile. In this particular image, nature is not, as it is so often elsewhere, a teeming, chaotic realm overflowing with aggressive, predatory life. Ironically, order becomes the realm of life while nature becomes the realm of

inanition. Frost's depiction of order in terms of organic culture, in the imagery of vegetative flourishing, at once shrewdly paradoxical and literal, metaphoric and cagey, suggests that order is indeed like "culture," in both senses of the word--organic and social. Like organic culture, like fertile soil rich with minerals conducive to life, order nurtures man, allowing him to flourish. Like social culture, it is an artificial creation that has its roots in biological necessity. Man creates order to insulate himself from nature's shocks, to nourish himself psychologically and spiritually. Order becomes to man a second nature--one more amenable to his existence than nature itself.

In these images of order, the fertility of the enclave is intermeshed with the de-composition of life. Decay, like predation, is a double-sided concept, involving an interpenetration of creation and destruction. Viewed simply, decay signifies life's resolution into inorganic humus. Viewed more complexly, it signifies a predatory, even parasitic relation -- a generation of life out of death. Viewed even more closely, however, it indicates a growth of life from its own decay. These two trajectories -- decay and generation -- are intimately correlated so that as one side moves toward disintegration into inert activity, the other side hastens toward toward abundance and generative activity. A complex metaphor, decay involves the chiasmus of both generative and dissolutive processes and thus, like predation (of which it is

an aspect), pinpoints a crucial moment in the re-distribution of energy.

In "Rose Pagonias," Frost implies the transitoriness of order. Its emergence marks the passage-point from dearth to opulence, from sterility to wildness:

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

The prayer is confusing only if we insist on adhering to the idea that order is something completely at man's disposal that can be conjured at will and as readily maintained. The association of order with the esthetic presents order as a fragile offspring of labor that blossoms exuberantly for an interval and is then effaced by nature's advance. The representation of order as a small, limited enclave of fertility and calm in the midst of an all-encompassing region of barrenness or violence serves to convey order's confinement to isolated, sporadic, and fragmentary moments.

Frost portrays nature, then, not only in dynamic terms as an excess of commotion, an ebullience of movement, but also in static terms as a paucity of movement, a depletion of force. This characterization involves both an emptiness and an enervation of forms. Pushed to its extreme, this depiction culminates in an equation of disorder with nothingness.

Like the meadow in "Rose Pagonias," the enclave in "Atmosphere" is endowed with a rich, even tactile organicity -- at once ripe and fertile, tangible and thick. The thickening of "Moisture and color and odor" might almost be taken as a correlative for the cultural abundance of order -- its stewing with fertile minerals and generous resources. By contrast, the "open...places" around the garden enclave have been blown "bleak" by the winds.

Frost deftly indicates the assurance with which nature arrests human growth, terminates human vision, and truncates human life in the phrase from "In The Home Stretch" where the woman says of the view out the window: "Not much of that [the open field] until I come to woods/That end all" (CP, 110-17). The woods, especially as envisioned in this poem, represent the point at which, human hopes expire and the vitality of life, be it physical, psychological, or intellectual, perishes. The other side of the coin -- the assurance with which order truncates natural violence and occludes chaos -- is clearly implied by such a strict assertion of the distinctness of order from chaos. The image is double-edged; which particular emphasis Frost chooses to highlight at any particular moment depends on his mood and his meaning -- on the degree to which his pessimism overrides his faith or his courage his despair.

Besides these "natural" enclosures, Frost frequently depicts a house in a clearing that stretches endlessly. In "The Census-Taker," for instance, the opening lines of the poem define the

significant features of the landscape: a house, a waste, and their stark, unmediated contraposition:

> I came an errand one cloud-blowing evening
> To a slab-built, black-paper-covered house
> Of one room and one window and one door,
> The only dwelling in a waste cut over
> A hundred square miles round it in the mountains:
> And that not dwelt in now by men or women. CP, 174-76

Subsequently, the outlying regions are described as "an emptiness flayed to the very stone."

"On The Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind" (CP, 290-92) and "The Figure in the Doorway" (CP, 292) also present structures situated in barren surroundings. In both poems, the speaker observes from a passing train an isolated human settlement (or constellation of lights) that becomes the occasion for a meditation on the quality of life for the inhabitants. In the former, the blank desertion of the scene is broken only by a "single light afar" that, as previously mentioned, punctuates the darkness like a symbol of human resistance. Conjuring a woman who inhabits this waste, Frost images her "look[ing] out last from the darkened room/At the shiny desert with spots of gloom." Thinking they

> might be people and are but cedar,
> Have no purpose, have no leader,
> Have never made the first move to assemble,

she finally resolves that they are therefore "nothing to make her tremble." Likewise, in "The Figure in the Doorway," the arid wasteland the figure inhabits presents "nothing to the eye," save for "scrub oak, scrub oak and the lack of earth/That kept the oaks from getting any girth."

The edifice represents the culmination of delimitation in complete, three-dimensional form--its consummation into structure. Although an elaboration of the enclosure, it is a far more integral and formidable symbol. It imparts to the image of order one of its most important features: the element of fortification, of physical defense and solidity. In the poems that present order as structure, nature's barrenness and its seemingly ubiquitous domination are clearly visible.

"In The Home Stretch" presents a house situated in a barren environment, but as the poem proceeds, we become conscious of a slight difference in conception between this poem's topography and that cited in the other exemplars. Instead of stretching illimitably away into the distance so that the eye cannot discern its limits, as in "The Census-Taker," the area immediately surrounding the house in this scene is itself bounded by woods "That end all."

A similar conception is found in "A Cabin in the Clearing," which consists of a dialogue between Mist and Smoke as they weave around a house they are intently discussing. Speaking of the house's inhabitants, Smoke says:

> They've been here long enough
> To push the woods back from around the house
> And part them in the middle with a path.
> CP, 413-15

As in "In the Home Stretch," the clearing in which the house is situated is interrupted by a stand of trees.

The motif of the house situated in a clearing bounded by

trees is repeated in "The Black Cottage." Here a minister and the narrator "chance in passing by.../To catch in a sort of special picture/...[a] little cottage...Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass.../Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees" (CP, 55-59). In this conception, the man-made enclosure becomes an intensified form -- a consolidation -- of the enclosure around it. Conversely, we could view the clearing that surrounds the structure as an extension of the structure.

The house, a central symbol in Frost's poetry, frequently occupies a central location in the landscape of the poem. Frost's house imparts to the poem the solidity that we associate with Frost's own poetry: well-built, substantive, durable, made of two-by-fours and nails -- a sturdy structure.

A structure consists of three primary qualities: closure, organization, unity. The structure's closure is manifest in its self-delimitation -- in its assertion of its distinctness from its surroundings. More precisely, its self-delimitation defines this distinctness. The organization of a structure is manifest in the subordination of its internal constituents to the whole. These two qualities are by no means discrete. The closure of a structure is integrally determined by its internal organization; s structure defines itself as distinct from its surroundings through the principle by which its internal constituents cohere. Its closure is therefore a function of its cohesiveness rather than vice versa. Were it simply a bundle of particles roped in by a containing wall, it would not be a structure.

The image of the house calls attention to a sustained analogy between physical and abstract structures -- constructions and constructs. Our very notion of "abstract" structure derives from a prior knowledge of concrete structure. The further we drift from this model, the more the idea of abstract structure fades into uncertainty and vagueness. The success of our attempt to conceive abstract structure rests, therefore, on our ability to sustain this presumed analogy between them, presumed because before we can even verify the existence of such a concept as abstract structure, we must posit it. Though we shall only gain admittance to it through an analogy, the analogy we make must a priori already presuppose its existence. So indissolubly is the concept of abstract structure wedded to the image of concrete structure that we cannot even be certain of the authenticity of this concept even as we try to conceive it.

Despite its concreteness, Frost's poetry continually invites us to extrapolate from the concrete level to the abstract. The distinctness Frost maintains between these two levels in some sense necessitates the movement from one to the other, for by preserving their distinctness, Frost paradoxically asserts their relation. The extrusion from the poem of its abstract significance, the autonomization of the concrete as though it were entirely devoid of the abstract, makes us conscious of a level of experience that is concurrent with, if distinct from, the concrete. We are as conscious of the

abstract level as we would be were we reading a narrative that, assiduously refusing to provide abstract underpinning (repelling it as a kind of daemonic double), compels us to provide the abstract meaning. Frost's poetry achieves clarity by maintaining the discreteness of these two levels. Were there infiltrations of the abstract into the concrete, we would infer their natural and inevitable co-incidence. The abstract meaning is like a counterbalancing antinomy into which the concrete may be translated. Our sense of the insufficiency of the poem without this impels us toward the counterbalancing act. The poem finds its fulfillment in the equipoise of the reader's mind.

The abstract is inseparable from the concrete in Frost, even if it remains external to the poem. The concrete prefigures the abstract. Since we derive our idea of abstract structure from the image of concrete structure, the latter must be in a fundamental sense an isomorph for it, and whatever we predicate of the one must be predicable of the other. There is one serious exception, however: the physicality of concrete structure is foreign to abstract structure. The defining qualities of concrete structure -- closure, organization, unity -- remain however, fundamentally those of abstract structure. By portraying order as a concrete structure, Frost enables us to grasp graphically the precise lineaments of abstract structure. He provides us with a paradigm for abstract structure that bears a precise relation to it without involving us in a purely

immaterial, disembodied contemplation of it.

As abstract structure, order could presumably represent an order of the mind -- a psychic structure or episteme. It could be argued that each of Frost's poems presents such a structure -- an achieved balance and coherence of perception and cognition that radically arrests a moment of equipoise in the life of the mind when all its materials and tensions are deployed into an integrated tissue. And it could be said that order in Frost is primarily intellective -- a realization of cognitive entelechies in which the integrating mechanism of the mind finally succeeds in subduing its recalcitrant elements into a fine cerebral structure, a tenuously wrought, imperfectly sustained matrix of meanings. Such a moment in the life of the mind is rendered momently in Frost's poems -- an exquisitely tailored tissue of association that shall imminently be disrupted and shortly destroyed. This moment, preserved in its transitive passing, is endlessly recoverable yet permanently preterite -- an amalgram embalmed in language, but subject to the interpolative violence and hysteria of each reader's intrusive and deconstructive designs.

By casting order as a concrete image, Frost lends immediacy to that concept, visually tracing its traits and effects. The multiple levels on which the correspondence between the idea of structure and order obtains can be broken into two groups: the correspondence, first, between the qualities of structure and order and, second, between the functions of structure and order.

Like a physical structure, order is distinct from nature with an identity and organization integral to itself. Order is a clearly defined entity, is, in fact, a structure in its own right -- a self-contained and -delimited entity with a clear pattern of internal organization whose parts are subordinated to the whole and to one another. As a structure, order is a complete, self-sustaining construct -- a unitary intellective unit, an episteme.

The geometric symmetry and three-dimensionality of a house present a more ramified, versatile image of order than the two-dimensional image of a clearing in a forest or garden in a wasteland. We become conscious of order as an autonomous entity whose ineluctable unity inheres in its very form. Order is rendered visibly as a monad -- an architectonic construct whose systematic pattern of organization subordinates all difference to a reasoned tribunal of synthetic law. As an integral construct, order represents the culmination of the urge toward relation into a multifarious, seasoned, and extended network of pattern and position -- the moment at which limit achieves a totalizing coherence. Order becomes a self-adjudicating system of reference and relation whose integrating principle of design is entirely internal to itself.

The analogy between structure and order also obtains on the level of function. The representation of order as physical structure serves to convey Frost's sense of order as refuge. As man seeks protection from the inclemencies of storm by taking

refuge within a house, so he seeks protection from chaos by taking refuge within order. Order repels the threat of mental chaos in much the same way as structure withstands the physical threat of storm.

The analogy between structure and order also indicates that chaos assaults man's mind as certainly as it assaults his body. The abstract idea of order, when represented as physical structure, acquires tangibility. Though the storm be raging in all its elemental fury, once secured within order's fold, man remains immune to its rage.

By conveying the efficacy with which order obverts chaos, the representation of order as refuge also conveys the extent of man's dependence on order. But the representation of order as an external shell alerts us to its extrinsicness from our lives. Its protective grace can be forsworn, lost, or sacrificed. Without order, man cannot live, but whether he obtains its protective safety is up to him.

In addition to endowing order with immediacy, tangibility, and distinctness, the representation of order as external shell also endows order with a verifiable objectivity. In representing order as physical structure, Frost indicates that it is radically distinct from nature and that it does not surrender its integrality under nature's onslaught. Even if we choose to interpret order in Frost as constituted by and made immanent in man's mind, its representation as extrinsic underscores the fact that the foundations of this order are fixed and immutable.

Though order realizes itself in consciousness, it is not inseparable from subjective process.

The representation of order as extrinsic structure reveals the restrictiveness of the conditions under which order protects us. Though the house is an effective refuge from the storm, its protective power is contingent on our remaining within it. In short, its efficacy in protecting us depends on our willingness to accept its limitations -- its boundaries.

The image of order as a physical structure also indicates the genetic relation of man to order: one must build these structures for oneself. Order is man's artificial adaptation to his environment. Translated into symbolic terms, the image suggests that after making them, man literally inhabits these orders. The idea of dwelling stresses how order encompasses man's life: it contains, encloses, and includes him.

All of Frost's houses can be seen not only as images of order, but as orders in their own right -- embodiments of ordered systems of meaning and reference. In "The Black Cottage," a minister shows the speaker a cottage "Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass/...A front with just a door between two windows,/Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black. The minister then proceeds to expatiate on the woman cottager's resistance to contemporary, changing forms of belief. The pertinacity of her convictions constitutes a stronghold against the erosions of time and fashion. She persists in clinging to the noble ideals of freedom and equality, much to the amused,

slightly bewildered condescension of the minister. At last, feeling foiled by the woman's determination, the minister evokes an image of enclosure:

> 'As I sit here, and oftentimes, I wish
> I could be monarch of a desert land
> I could devote and dedicate forever
> To the truths we keep coming back and back to.
> So desert it would have to be, so walled
> By mountain ranges half in summer snow,
> No one would covet it or think it worth
> The pain of conquering to force change on.
> Scattered oases where men dwelt, but mostly
> Sand dunes held loosely in tamarisk
> Blown over and over themselves in idleness.
> Sand grains should sugar in the natal dew
> The babe born to the desert, the sandstorm
> Retard mid-waste my cowering caravans--' CP, 55-59

In its resistance to change, this "desert land" becomes a symbolic order -- a domain resistant to the embattled assaults of external reality. It creates an immured, sheltered environment that exemplifies all three traits of order: stasis, fixity, and limit. In fact, one detail Frost includes at the end of the poem indicates an intended parallel between this hypothetic kingdom and the cottage itself. Although, as the minister conjures it, the realm is desert, the minister does invest it with an element of fertility and sweetness through the sand grains that "sugar in the natal dew/The babe born to the desert." In the last lines of the poem, the minister says, "There are bees in this wall." The nourishing sweetness that belongs to the hypothetic kingdom belongs as well to the black cottage, which is, in its own way, the realm the minister has conjured -- an order that resists time and survives change.

The cabin in "A Cabin in the Clearing" can be viewed as the

embodiment of a larger order -- the order of the West. Speaking of the occupants' desire for self-definition and orientation, Mist says:

> 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 part of their religion. CP, 413-15

The faith in the utilitarian benificence of knowledge, the commitment to empirical investigation, that this passage attributes to the occupants might well represent the scientific tradition of Western civilization. Mist continues, saying, "Putting out the lamp has not put their thought out.../They murmur talking in the dark/On what should be their daylong theme continued." Their persistence represents the efforts of the West to find its bearings through its belief in the supremacy of knowledge. Speaking of "the onlooking world" beyond the cabin, perhaps those who also suffer from the same sense of ennui and exhaustion as their "neighbors," Mist says:

> All they maintain the path for is the comfort
> Of visiting with the equally bewildered.
> Nearer in plight their neighbors are than distance.

Like order, civilization is a defense against the barbarities of nature and chaos.

The "slab-built, black-paper-covered house/Of one room and one window and one door" in "The Census-Taker" can also be taken to represent an integral and discrete order: the esthetic order of the American literary tradition. Its present desertion is indicative of Frost's assessment of its destitution, save for

the "census-taker," presumably Frost himself, who comes

> last with some hope, but not much,
> After hours' overlooking from the cliffs
> An emptiness flayed to the very stone. CP, 174-76

Frost makes a point of mentioning that it "never had been dwelt in...by women," a judgment that squares well with Frost's known dislike of Emily Dickinson, the woman whom Frost might have "let in" to this pantheon.

Many of Frost's poems resolve themselves into a dialogue between images of enclosure and boundlessness. By enclosing order on all sides, Frost engenders a distinction between "indoors" and "outdoors" that becomes a motif in Frost's poetry. In completing the circle, making order a bounded province within nature, Frost makes even more apparent their distinctness from one another. The motif of the intrinsically opposed "in" and "out" recurs throughout Frost's poetry. The most prominent context in which it appears is in poems where an invader exits a house through one door as the returning occupants enter at another. In "The Fear," the woman tells her husband that she

> always [has] felt strange when we came home
> To the dark house after so long an absence,
> And the key rattled loudly into place
> Seemed to warn someone to be getting out
> At one door as we entered at another. CP, 89-92

In "House Fear," the couple is said to have "learned to rattle the lock and key/To give whatever might chance to be,/Warning and time to be off in flight..." (CP, 127). In the one poem, the rattling of the key gives unintentional warning, whereas in the other, it is performed deliberately.

In and out seem poised in a sensitive balance that necessitates the unequal and opposed response of one to the other. As Frost says in "Build Soil," "We're always too much in or too much out.../And if we don't draw in/We shall be driven in" (CP, 316-25). The indoor/outdoor opposition can also be seen in "The Runaway," which concludes with a stark contrast of the virtues of "in" as against the dangers of "out:"

> Whoever it is that leaves him out so late,
> When other creatures have gone to stall and bin,
> Ought to be told to come and take him in. CP, 223

One can also witness the antagonistic exclusivity of order and chaos in "The Thatch" (CP, 252-53), where the tension between inward and outward gets transmuted into a struggle of wills: "I would not go in till the light went out;/It would not go out till I came in." This antithetic relation between in and out can be seen even more clearly in "The Lockless Door" (CP, 240-41) where the speaker's departure coincides precisely with the intruder's invasion.

There is, however, another kind of exclusivity to which the image of indoors and outdoors calls attention -- that is, order's effective extrusion of chaos. As indoors shuts out outdoors, so order shuts out chaos. Before order, chaos' animus is suddenly rendered harmless.

The disarmament of nature's power is seen in "Snow" where the winter storm raging outside a couple's house is likened to a monster:

> It looks as if
> Some pallid thing had squashed its features flat

And its eyes shut with overeagerness
To see what people found so interesting
In one another, and had gone to sleep
Of its own stupid lack of understanding,
Or broken its white neck of mushroom stuff
Short off, and died against the windowpane. CP, 143-56

Rendered impotent by the warmth and sociality within the house, the monster succumbs to a deadening stupor hypnotically induced by the very thing it fails to understand.

If order protects us when we are within its fold, it also increases the intensity of our awareness of the chaotic boundlessness that surrounds it. If the mysterious efficacy with which order excludes chaos gives rise to a sense of wonder, it also gives rise to an even greater awe and terror at overarching nature. However effective the house is in shutting out the monster, it cannot eliminate chaos from the universe. All it can do is hold chaos at bay.

Sometimes, nature's all-enveloping presence is seen as a proliferating force and our need to contain it is compelled by its tendency to expand to ever greater dimensions. In "The Fear," the woman needs to ascertain the precise location of the threat and confront it before it swells to more menacing dimensions:

And now's the time to have it out with him
While we know definitely where he is.
Let him get off and he'll be everywhere
Around us, looking out of trees and bushes
Till I shan't dare to set a foot outdoors. CP, 89-92

Her prophecy literally comes true: the woman is later said to speak "as if she couldn't turn." The paralysis by fear presaged in the beginning of the poem fulfills itself at the end.

The ubiquity of the enemy leads to a terrifying sense of inescapability. In "An Old Man's Winter Night" (CP, 108)the darkness outside the old man's room is seen as an "All" that has driven the man into this final retreat. Man may flee to clearings, erect shelters, take refuge in a room, and devise orders, but the presence of the night remains, surrounding one's refuge and staring in through the window, like the monster in "Snow."

The point at which an enclosure meets the domain that encloses it defines in Frost the boundary between order and nature. It is usually located where an open stretch of land meets a sudden outcropping of wooded growth, forest. This boundary could be looked at in two ways: as established by nature (the trees) or as defined by man. If defined by man, the boundary could be the result of mowing or building. As the construction of buildings represents the creation of order, so do the mowing of fields and the chopping of trees, acts by which man literally checks nature's growth. Insofar as enclaves of fertility are products of human labor, they are also symbols of man's enterprise, of his creation of order.

Although the boundaries are fixed at any one given moment, they are nonetheless continually shifting. As the sprouting and growth of trees impinge on the clearing and as man prunes and hedges this outgrowth, the boundary shifts its position. Frost represents the incursion of nature into order as the outgrowth of new woods in a clearing. Nature always seeks to advance and

enlarge her claim; man always seeks to assert and re-assert his.

In this contest, the ax and mower become human weapons. Frost occasionally dramatizes the human opposition to nature as a "going" against trees. In "New Hampshire," he writes:

> I know a man who took a double ax
> And went alone against a grove of trees;
> But his heart failing him, he dropped the ax
> And ran for shelter quoting Matthew Arnold:
> "`Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood';
> There's been enough shed without shedding mine.
> Remember Birnam Wood! The wood's in flux!"
> He had a special terror of the flux
> That showed itself in dendrophobia. CP, 159-72

The man goes "alone" against a grove of trees, friendless and unaided in the battle. Man's aloneness against nature is a motif that opens "In Winter in the Woods" (CP, 470)in which Frost says, "In winter in the woods alone/Against the trees I go." In these images, Frost strips the universe of all detail, arriving at a frightening starkness in which the cast of characters is pared down to two. Purged of all elaboration, Frost's conception of existence achieves a stern yet startling, inalterable dualism.

It is also significant that man, dropping the ax, runs for "shelter." Here Frost distinguishes between two strands of his conception: protection and assertion. Man's "going against" nature is motivated by self-preservation. The building of shelters also constitutes a going against nature -- an act of symbolic opposition. Yet, here the act of opposition is separated from that of self-defense.

The line of demarcation between trees and clearing

constitutes the boundary-line between order and chaos. Just as Frost carefully establishes the in/out antinomy to represent the inherent exclusivity of order and nature, so he uses the imagery of clearing and trees. Whenever nature is given an "opening" by which to enlarge its domain, it does so unhesitatingly. Hence, either man vigorously supervises his conquests, or nature will rush unsparingly into the opening. In the poem "In The Home Stretch," Joe tells his wife that the "woods/..northward from your window at the sink" are "Waiting to steal a step on us whenever/We drop our eyes to turn to other things,/As in the game `ten-step' the children play." As in "The Witch of Coos" where the skeleton "Almost the moment he was given an opening/...began to climb the attic stairs," so here, too, nature lurks in wait for man to "drop [his] eyes...[to] turn to other things," so that, "overtaking" man's spaces, it can establish its supremacy.

This conflict is manifested in territorial terms also in "The Fear." Determined to confront the figure she has glimpsed in the dark, the woman calls out, "`What do you want?'" and is "startled when an answer really [comes]." The unseen man offers to "`come forward in the lantern-light'" and commences to do so. Frost writes: "She stood her ground against the noisy steps/That came on, but her body rocked a little." In "A Trial Run" (CP, 306) the speaker admonishes himself as he turns on a machine that makes a tremendous commotion, "Stand your ground,/As they say in war." This struggle to "stand one's ground," perhaps the

hardest encountered in Frost, involves a ruthless ability not to surrender space to the enemy. It involves a stoical resistance of one's most fecund fears and of one's inclination to run.

The trees' steady encroachment on human domain is a recurrent image of man's struggle against nature. This motif first occurs in "Ghost House," the second poem in A Boy's Will. The house's decay symbolizes the evisceration of man's structures of order. The woods have begun to traverse the mown field and overrun the ruined fences:

> I dwell in a lonely house I know
> That vanished many a summer ago,
> And left no trace but the cellar walls,
> And a cellar in which the daylight falls
> And the purple-stemmed wild raspberries grow.
>
> O'er ruined fences the grapevines shield
> The woods come back to the mowing field... CP, 5-6

Frost's detail, "The footpath down to the well is healed," implies, ironically, that man's cutting back of nature's wildness is an incursion against its supremacy. Moreover, in metaphorizing human self-assertion as a wound to nature, Frost suggests that the chaotic profusion of natural violence is the normative condition of the universe and that human order represents only a brief interval.

The image of encroachment appears in another early poem from A Boy's Will, "Storm Fear." Speaking of himself and his family sequestered inside a house during a storm, the narrator says:

> I count our strength,
> Two and a child,
> Those of us not asleep subdued to mark
> How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length...

Here the fire, like the humanly created clearing, registers the encroachment of nature (the cold) by dying.

The struggle between man and nature is in a very fundamental way in Frost a struggle for territory. Hence, the attempt to establish order expresses itself as man's attempt to reconnoiter chaos, colonize nature, and settle landscapes -- to delimit a province within which one may erect a dwelling which serves symbolically as a fortress against the incursions of natural violence.

Three nearly successive examples of the motif of the battle between man's determination to cut down trees and nature's pertinacity in renewing its growth of forests appear in West-Running Brook: "The Times Table," "The Last Mowing," and "The Birthplace." In the first poem, a farmer, hearing his mare deliver a sigh, a venting of emotion, recites the following saying:

> `A sigh for every so many breath,
> And for every so many sigh a death.
> That's what I always tell my wife
> Is the multiplication table of life.' CP, 263

At this point, the narrator (not the farmer) interpolates a warning:

> The saying may be ever so true;
> But it's just the kind of thing that you
> Nor I nor nobody else may say,
> Unless our purpose is doing harm,
> And then I know of no better way
> To close a road, abandon a farm,
> Reduce the births of the human race,
> And bring back nature in people's place.

Superstitiously yet also stoically, he insists that to lend outward expression to the pain of life is to concede defeat. One must wear a tight upper lip, stifling all impulses to emotion or expression. The cutting back of nature's domain in building a road is literally to make an in-road into the latter's oppressive rule. The last two lines of the poem present human existence as a collective enterprise in conflict with nature.

In "The Last Mowing," the speaker, referring to a meadow "We never shall mow in again," says, "Now is the chance for flowers/That can't stand mowers and plowers" to overtake it. However, he warns the flowers:

> It must be now, though, in season
> Before the not mowing brings trees on,
> Before trees, seeing the opening,
> March into shadowy claim. CP, 264

The trees, he says, "Are all I'm afraid of,/That flowers can't bloom in the shade of." Nature's militant progress is imaged as an army of trees that resolutely marches into whatever "opening" it finds. The trees' preclusion of flowers may be taken as an indication of their hostility to all that man finds beautiful and all that supports and nourishes him. The adjective "shadowy" metaphorically insinuates that there is something morally suspect -- shady -- about nature.

In "The Birthplace," the speaker writes that his father, who has restrained nature's exorbitant growth and imposed human order, has

> built, enclosed a spring,

Strung chains of wall round everything,
Subdued the growth of earth to grass... CP, 264-65

Frost begins "The Birthplace," "Further up the mountain slope/Than there was ever any hope," emphasizing the extreme unlikeliness of the enterprise's flourishing. At the poem's end, the trees make their inevitable come-back. Though at an earlier time

the mountain seemed to like the stir,
And made of us a little while--
With always something in her smile

the narrator comments, "Today she wouldn't know our name." Having "pushed us off her knees" like a forgetful and disowning mother, her lap is now "full of trees." The reclamation of nature by trees, after an interlude of human proprietorship, reveals the inherent transience of the human "order."

This theme appears, too, in "Something for Hope" from Steeple Bush. In Frost's long-perspectived version of the ecological cycle, the "edible grass" gives way to meadowsweet and steeple bush, and these, in turn, to "maple, birch, and spruce." The poet cautions against trying to cultivate the land:

No plow among these rocks would pay.
So busy yourself with other things
While the trees put on their wooden rings
And with long-sleeved branches hold their sway.
CP, 375-76

Next, he advises:

Cut down the trees when lumber grown,
And there's your pristine earth all freed
From lovely blooming but wasteful weed
And ready again for the grass to own.

He makes the irrepressibility of nature's cycle the foundation of a laissez-faire philosophy. Man's intervention occurs only to cut down the trees, thereby hastening the process:

> A cycle we'll say of a hundred years.
> Thus foresight does it and laissez-faire,
> A virtue in which we all may share
> Unless a government interferes.

Although in this poem the trees are not associated with evil, the steadfast resurgence of natural growth nonetheless emphatically asserts itself.

In "A Cabin in the Clearing," the denizens have succeeded in pushing "the woods back from around the house/And... [parting] them in the middle with a path" (CP, 413-15) Again, man asserts order by making in-roads into nature. In "Mending Wall," Frost gives a comic variant of this motif:

> There where it is we do not need the wall:
> He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
> My apple trees will never get across
> And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
> CP, 33-34

Even though the passage is sardonic, its basic conception is consistent with Frost's usage of this theme. The playful repudiation of the need for a wall calls up precisely the same imagery -- trees -- that Frost uses elsewhere to establish such need. This passage is a parodic allusion to Frost's own characterization of the march of trees -- the appetitive element that characterizes so much of the natural world in Frost's poetry.

"The Line-Gang," about the erection of telephone lines, also casts the conflict between man and nature in terms of trees.

The men who erect these lines are said to "throw a forest down less cut than broken." Paradoxically, "They plant dead trees for living, and the dead/They string together with a living thread." Insofar as they make possible the articulation of thought over distances previously unconducive to human speech, the line-men may be said to be the pioneers of civilization. Their reckless defiance of the natural world becomes manifest in the last three lines of the poem:

> With a laugh,
> An oath of towns that set the wild at naught,
> They bring the telephone and telegraph. CP, 141

Man's battle against nature's ascendancy works itself out in Frost's poetry as a relentless competition for space and land. Frost represents nature as the prior, undisputed champion, man's coming along as a dilatory, later outcome. Hence, man must wrest from nature what she has claimed. Frost does not characterize man's incursion, however, as illegitimate, but recognizes humanity's claim to existence, if not sovereignty.

In "The Gum-Gatherer," Frost refers to the "stolen shack" that the gum-gatherer has built in a mountain pass:

> It had to be a stolen shack
> Because of the fears of fire and loss
> That trouble the sleep of lumber folk:
> Visions of half the world burned black
> And the sun shrunken yellow in smoke. CP, 140-41

Whatever refuge man finds from nature's pervasive chaos must be "stolen."

The idea of the coerciveness of man's victories over nature is sustained in the opening lines of "The Star-Splitter" where,

after an extended meditation upon the ridicule that Orion subjects him to, the speaker says:

> Has a man, I should like to ask, no rights
> These forces are obliged to pay respect to?
> CP, 176-79

Brad McLaughlin's indignation arises from a nascent yet resistant recognition that perhaps man does not have any rights -- at least none that nature is "obliged" to recognize. Nature's transgression of man's rights is symbolically prefigured in the second line of the poem in which Orion, throwing "a leg up over our fence of mountains," literally oversteps the line that divides man from nature, thereby trespassing upon human autonomy. Man's instinct for self-preservation continually drives him to separate his own domain from nature's, to assert the autonomy of his jurisdiction and his domain's closure. But any acknowledgement of man's rights must be won or wrung from nature through forcible coercion.

Fixity, the second characteristic of order, is at once a property of the mind and a property of the mind embodied outwardly as a property of nature. As a property of the mind, fixity is an essential component of intellectual and internal order, signifying the mind's capacity to resist the torrents of flux and hold by its own strictures. As a property of external reality, fixity consists of two primary features: first, the fixity of external horizons in relation to the outside world; and second, the fixity of these horizons in relation to the internal environs.

Frost's most strenuous assertion of fixity appears in "The Sound of Trees":

> I wonder about the trees.
> Why do we wish to bear
> Forever the noise of these
> More than another noise
> So close to our dwelling place?
> We suffer them by the day
> Till we lose all measure of pace,
> And fixity in our joys,
> And acquire a listening air.
> They are that that talks of going
> But never gets away;
> And that talks no less for knowing,
> As it grows wiser and older,
> That now it means to stay.
> My feet tug at the floor
> And my head sways to my shoulder
> Sometimes when I watch trees sway,
> From the window or the door.
> I shall set forth for somewhere,
> I shall make the reckless choice
> Some day when they are in voice
> And tossing so as to scare
> The white clouds over them on.
> I shall have less to say,
> But I shall be gone. CP, 156

The pun on "means" in line 14 conveys the correlation between fixity and order. "Means to stay" could mean "intends to stay." Yet, it could also be construed as "produces meaning for the purposes of staying." Staying becomes the motive of meaning. Man generates meaning in order to resist the entropic forces of flux. Meaning becomes literally a "means" to order. Interestingly, in this reading meaning becomes subordinate to the larger, more inclusive term, order.

The theme of fixity forcefully evinces itself in three primary, recurrent terms: stay, keep, and hold. "Keep" especially alerts us to the interconnection of fixity and self-

preservation. However, in its transitive form, "keep" also intimates possession. To "keep" is to "hold"--to possess through grasping. Insofar as "keep" means possession, it also suggests encompassment. Keep unites the two explicit meanings of stay and hold. Like the equation in "The Sound of Trees" (to mean in order to stay), "keep" suggests the equation: to encompass in order to stay or to stay by encompassing. Keep mediates between staying and holding, suggesting the preservative function of possession and the stabilizing effect of encompassment. Delimitation is metaphorized as fixity and vice versa.

One of the most important functions of fixity in Frost is to defend against uncertainty. In the first stanza of "A Prayer in Spring," Frost makes this function manifest:

> Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
> And give us not to think so far away
> As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
> All simply in the springing of the year. CP, 12

The "uncertain[ness]" of the harvest can be minimized by a willful effort "not to think so far away/...[but to] keep...here. By resisting the temptation to hope, man can root himself in a more fruitful soil, a more plentiful culture.

"Acceptance," as its title manifestly reveals, abjures an embattled resistance of fate, finding its equilibrium in surrender. This equilibrium involves an acceptance of the limits placed on human perception and knowledge, of epistemological horizons:

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." CP, 249

Like "A Prayer in Spring," this poem presents a prayer for staying. The willingness to reside in the dispensation reality proffers, without veering off into doubt or complaint, becomes a plea for fixity, for perpetuative endurance.

In "A Hillside Thaw" (CP, 237-38), Frost explicitly ties the theme of fixity to that of intellectual coherence. Three times Frost uses some form of the word "think": "To think to know the country" (l. 1), "But if I thought to stop the wet stampede" (l. 9), and "The thought of my attempting such a stay" (l. 35). These instances exemplify how Frost lends to the vernacular an almost hallucinatory clarity and elevation of meaning. Though the phrase, "But if I thought to stop the wet stampede," could be interpreted as a casual indication of intent, it can also be regarded symbolically: like the phrase "means to stay" in "The Sound of Trees," this phrase reveals thought as the instrument by which flux is aborted.

Frost's famous definition of poetry as "a momentary stay against confusion"[5] explicitly ties poetic creation to order. Man, in Frost, fights chaos through poetic creation. Moreover,

each poem represents an ordered matrix meaning--a coherent pattern of relation. We can see this clearly in "The Armful":

> For every parcel I stoop down to seize
> I lose some other off my arms and knees,
> And the whole is slipping, bottles, buns--
> Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,
> Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.
> With all I have to hold with, hand and mind
> And heart, if need be, I will do my best
> To keep their building balanced at my breast.
> I crouch down to prevent them as they fall;
> Then sit down in the middle of them all.
> I had to drop the armful in the road
> And try to stack them in a better load. CP, 266-67

The entire poem is a complex metaphor for order. Man attempts to hold the scattered and diverse objects of his perception in a momentary equipoise. That this order is intellectual rather than physical is revealed in the words "comprehend" and "mind." Frost highlights the tendency of orders either to break down or to reify and hence is agile enough to refashion his "building" when necessary.

In "The Hardship of Accounting," the metaphor of poem as order is still more obvious:

> Never ask of money spent
> Where the spender thinks it went.
> Nobody was ever meant
> To remember or invent
> What he did with every cent. CP, 309

As a spatial entity, an intellectual or poetic order invites comparison with a structure; as a temporal entity, it invites comparison with a system. In this poem, we witness the poetic artifact as process, and process as an ordered movement of meaning. The poem is about accounting (an economic process) and

insinuates an analogy between such process and poetic process. The quick series of end-rhymes particularly establishes the poem as a kinetic, fluid entity, a temporal scheme. Such a poem exhibits both closure (through the rhymes), coherence, and movement within the perimeters of its boundaries. It is a structure that imposes the laws for its own functioning.[6]

FOOTNOTES

1 Pritchard, Frost, 109-44

2 For critical notice given to the importance of barriers in Frost, see Marion Montgomery, "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers," James M. Cox, ed., Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.Y.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962) Frost uses the word "guard" as noun on three separate occasions: in "The Death of the Hired Man" (l. 5); in "New Hampshire" (l. 13); and in "The Door in the Dark" (l. 5). And twice, Frost uses the word "guard" as a verb: first, in "In Dives' Dive" (l. 3), and second, in "Of the Stones of the Place" (l. 11). In line 14 of "Of Stones of the Place" Frost uses the word "self-defense." In "The White-tailed Hornet," speaking of the uncanny accuracy with which the hornet evades all his attempts to brush it aside, Frost again uses the word "defense" (l. 8). The word "defense" also figures prominently in "Triple Bronze" (l. 11). In "Ghost House," Frost uses the verb "shield" (l. 6).

3 "Ghost Houses," "Mending Wall," "The Mountain," "Home Burial," "The Exposed Nest," "Meeting and Passing," "Bond and Free," "The Bonfire," "A Star in a Stoneboat," "The Witch of Coos," "An Empty Threat," "Atmosphere," "The Flood," "The Birthplace," "There Are Roughly Zones," "Not Quite Social," "Beech," "Triple Bronze," "Assurance," "Trespass," "An Unstamped Letter in Our Rural Letter Box," "Skeptic," and "Any Size We Please."

4 The image of the line or limit is, from one perspective, no more than a visual marking--hence, a grapheme.

5 Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes" in Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem, eds., Selected Prose of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1949), p. 18

6 For a discussion of the third property of order, stasis, I refer the reader to the beginning of this Chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROST'S CRITIQUE OF ORDER

i

The Will to Knowledge

There is another drive in Frost as fierce and as resolute as the will to self-preservation: the will to knowledge. There are certain things man needs to know in order to survive, but defining knowledge in that sense renders it subordinate to survival. In Frost, the will to knowledge resists subordination to the will to life. In a stunning reversal, the will to knowledge renders the will to survive a means to the former: man does not know that he may live; he lives that he may know.

But we collide with the impassive question: "Know what?" One could answer by saying that the aim of knowledge is to fathom the purpose of existence. But we have already divined that the aim of knowledge is to know. To say that man is to know that he is to know is not a satisfactory answer. So, the question reasserts itself once more: "Know what?" The absence of an answer necessitates our embarking upon a search for it. The answer, presumably, would be the proper object of man's need to know: the supreme object of knowledge, an Absolute -- or the Absolute -- Truth.

These two drives (toward self-preservation and knowledge) possess an archetypal universality; they correspond to the two primary literary modes of the West: the agon and the quest.

These two drives are necessarily antithetical. Whereas the struggle for survival culminates in the creation of order, the search for knowledge leads to the pursuit of Truth. And whereas the establishment of order involves the erection of boundaries between oneself and nature, the pursuit of Truth involves excursion into the boundless domain of nature. One cannot inhabit enclosures and simultaneously explore nature's expanse. Insofar as these two tendencies are exclusive, Frost's poetry presents us with a dualism as fierce and irreconcilable as that between man and nature or order and chaos. Man must choose between two fundamental alternatives. Either he may seek to preserve himself or he may seek to apprehend supreme Truth.

The agon between order and truth becomes the larger theme and ultimate philosophical dilemma of Frost's poetry. Much of the intellectual content of Frost's poetry is generated by the necessity -- and impossibility -- of choosing between order and truth. In choosing between the will to self-preservation and the will to knowledge, between the struggle for survival and the search for understanding, one is not only selecting between order and Truth: one is also deciding between safety and danger and between confinement and freedom.

The conflicting claims of these two drives manifest themselves as an oscillation between two primary modes of imagery: entrenchment in enclosure and excursion into expanse. The clearest instance of the polarization of enclosure and expanse and of entrenchment and excursion is the early poem,

"Bond and Free":

> Love has earth to which she clings
> With hills and circling arms about--
> Wall within wall to shut fear out.
> But Thought has need of no such things,
> For Thought has a pair of dauntless wings.
>
> On snow and sand and turf, I see
> Where Love has left a printed trace
> With straining in the world's embrace.
> And such is Love and glad to be.
> But Thought has shaken his ankles free.
>
> Thought cleaves the interstellar gloom
> And sits in Sirius's disc all night,
> Till day makes him retrace his flight,
> With smell of burning on every plume,
> Back past the sun to an earthly room.
>
> His gains in heaven are what they are.
> Yet some say Love by being thrall
> And simply staying possesses all
> In several beauty that Thought fares far
> To find fused in another star. CP, 120-21

The motives that propel the two human inclinations — Love and Thought -- seem as different as their respective environments. Love, associated with the wish for security, is clearly identified with images of enclosure ("hills and circling arms about," "wall within wall," "the world's embrace"). Undesirous of any special providence or knowledge, Love attempts to maintain its position and preserve the status quo. Thought, on the other hand, dissatisfied with earthly limitation, is identified with images of expanse ("Thought cleaves the interstellar gloom/And sits in Sirius' disc all night") and fares off into space in search of an exoteric Absolute. The image of expanse is associated with the pursuit of knowledge; the image of enclosure is associated with the desire for self-

preservation. Love's commitment to form is really an investment in order while Thought's commitment to infinity is really a quest for knowledge.

Initially, the poem depicts the quest for Truth, rather than the effort at self-preservation, as the heroic course. Whereas Love "clings," Thought is winged. Moreover, whereas the images of enclosure acquire in the course of the poem connotations of enslavement, the images of expanse acquire those of freedom. Love is "thrall" and, straining in "the world's embrace," is, by implication, confined by it. Thought, on the other hand, "has shaken his ankles free" and "cleaves the interstellar gloom," unimpeded in its journey through space.

The last stanza of the poem, however, reverses direction by asserting that Love, in its sedentary tendency, achieves dominion equivalent to Thought's. By "being thrall and simply staying" -- by inhabiting its enclosures -- Love "possesses all/In several beauty" that Thought attempts to possess in its journeyings beyond earth and form. Whereas Love is said to "possess" all, Thought fares far in order to find it. We can be certain (what "some" say) that Love has achieved its ends, while we cannot know whether Thought has. Frost leaves us with an image of pursuit in regard to Thought, but an image of possession in regard to Love.

The word "possess," used to describe Love's mastery of its domain in the poem's last stanza, re-involves the poem in the image of containment, but reverses its implications. Instead of

being contained by earth, as in stanza two where it strains "in the world's embrace", it comes to enclose "all." Although the poem presents two alternative images -- enthrallment and possession -- it moves toward their reconciliation -- that is, Love possesses by being possessed.

Having so firmly established the antinomy between the image of enclosure and that of expanse, between the will to self-preservation and the will to knowledge, Love and Thought, Frost is free to qualify and play with this dialectic. Love "strain[s] in the world's embrace" as though in some secret way it resists subjugation to a confined order. Even as Frost praises order's ultimate dominance over the quest for knowledge, he nevertheless expresses a recognition of its confiningness. Frost registers his awareness of the reliance of intellection upon distinction, structure, and limit even as he seeks to affirm Thought's transcendence of them. Thought "cleaves" the interstellar gloom, thereby performing much the same activity as that of ordering through delineation and division. Also, Thought is presented as returning at daybreak to its "earthly room," as though even in its pursuit of a transcendent truth, Thought cannot entirely forswear the intellectual apparatus of order: limit, structure, and distinction. Further, even if Thought gleans its insights in the undifferentiated realm of the Infinite, it returns to the realm of structure, resuming its formal constraints, in order to convey these insights and knowledge. Seen even more radically, this idea suggests that

only by renouncing absolute Truth and knowledge can man utter words of recognizable and coherent discourse.

Frost's assessment of the will to self-preservation undergoes a complete transformation in the light of the will to knowledge. The will to self-preservation is transformed from a salvific to a restrictive and prohibitive principle. Only by overcoming the urge to self-preservation can man pursue knowledge, a quest as significant and as vital as that for survival. Moreover, the creation of order, in which the will to self-preservation culminates, also undergoes a full-scale reassessment. Far from abetting man's attempt at a fruitful, fulfilling existence, order becomes a penalizing, privative force that compromises and endangers fulfillment at every turn. In fact, insofar as entrenchment within enclosure precludes excursion into expanse, so order (or its cultivation) excludes Truth (or its perception).

Frost registers this critique of order metaphorically by transforming the image of enclosure into a confining, debilitating prison. The brilliance of this transformation lies in the fact that Frost uses the identical image for both assessments of order, thereby allowing us to experience its dual-natured identity. We cannot falsely attribute its dualistic nature to sequentially discrepant moments. The force of Frost's critique depends on our perception of this inseparability.

As order in Frost comprises three elements -- stasis, fixity, and limit -- so its critique transforms these three

elements into a deadening and oppressive inertia (stagnation), a restrictive immobility (transfixity), and a suffocating confinement (limitation).

ii

Stagnation

The negative corollary of stasis is stagnation. The metaphors Frost uses to portray this stagnation are essentially those of inanition, sterility, and decay. In Frost's poetry, people enclosed in orders sometimes perish from being undernourished, cut off from nurturing resources. The impoverishment takes place on physical, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual levels. These people suffer an anemia of the soul, a hardening of the heart, an occlusion of the spirit. They become moribund, bodies that persist even after the death of the soul.

The stasis-enforcing environment, consumes the very resources upon which the soul feeds. These environments, originally created and structured as protection from external threat, become too indigent and empty of resource to sustain them.

"The Investment" most forcefully of all Frost's poems summons up the idea of enervation. It broaches the theme in a familiar, even anecdotal fashion, yet simultaneously manages to convey some of the urgency of its apprehension:

> Over back where they speak of life as staying
> ("You couldn't call it living, for it ain't"),
> There was an old, old house renewed with paint,
> And in it a piano loudly playing.

Out in the plowed ground in the cold a digger,
Among unearthed potatoes standing still,
Was counting winter dinners, one a hill,
With half an ear to the piano's vigor.

All that piano and new paint back there,
Was it some money suddenly come into?
Or some extravagance young love had been to?
Or old love on an impulse not to care--

Not to sink under being man and wife,
But get some color and music out of life? CP, 263-64

The whole poem is a meditation on the effects of implanting oneself in a continuous, steady situation. The slow defection from the characters' lives of anything resembling spontaneity and enjoyment is flawlessly portrayed. We receive the impression of an existence totally devoid of intellectual or emotional excitement -- an existence more "endured" than lived. Beneath the outward squalour and tedium of such an existence lurks a deadly and desperate morass; one has the sense of a stifled scream.

The poem fulfills itself figurally in a most organic and autonomous fashion. The piano music and the paint's color are physical facts of the poem, yet by the last line they acquire wholly symbolic and proverbial resonance. This subtle, unobtrusive growth of physical fact into symbolic idea, of literal into proverbial, occurs so smoothly and naturally, we hardly notice it.

The conception of the poem is inspired in its very detail. Setting the husband out in the field and the wife in the house with the paint and piano suggests not only physical

separation, but possibly spiritual estrangement as well. The detail that the piano (which literally means "soft") plays "loudly" seems to underscore the blatancy of the pair's outcry, all the more powerful for being stifled and mute, against their fate. The idea of staying, introduced in the first line, is repeated in the description of the potatoes "standing still." The "unearthed" potatoes are implicitly recalled in the words "sink under." The poem is rife with quantitative allusions, with emphasis on deficiency: the digger is "counting" winter dinners, "one" a hill, with "half" an ear to the piano's vigor. By contrast, the third stanza, as if to underscore the indigence of the second, refers to "All that piano and new paint back there," as though it were a quantifiable, though excessive amount. The prepositions "over" and "back" evoke a fairy-tale unreality. It is as if Frost is taking us into a half-fantastic land of death and dissolution, a hinter land of bareness and deprivation; certainly the idea of "back" suggests recession and regression into complete diminution. The word "out" in line 5 suggests the exposed condition of the lovers, their susceptibility to life's pains and disappointments, as well as the digger's own forlornness, his outcastness. Amidst all this fatigue and stagnation, the adverb "suddenly," like the poem's other adverb, "loudly," introduces the antithetical concept of change and movement, making us feel the foreignness of excitement to their lives.

"The Cocoon" also centers on the stultifying effects of

an immurement within a closed condition:

> As far as I can see, this autumn haze
> That spreading in the evening air both ways
> Makes the new moon look anything but new
> And pours the elm-tree meadow full of blue,
> Is all the smoke from one poor house alone,
> With but one chimney it could call its own;
> So close it will not light an early light,
> Keeping its life so close and out of sight
> No one for hours has set a foot outdoors
> So much as to take care of evening chores.
> The inmates may be lonely womenfolk.
> I want to tell them that with all this smoke
> They prudently are spinning their cocoon
> And anchoring it to an earth and moon
> From which no gale can hope to blow it--
> Spinning their own cocoon did they but know it.
> CP, 247-48

As so often in Frost, the serious takes cover under the whimsical. What seems a spoof, a flippant imagining, actually bodes a stern admonition. The haze that surrounds the house may indicate the moral and spiritual confusion in which its inhabitants live. The significance of the smoke becomes clear in Frost's meditation upon it; it is a protective covering -- a shell -- that hides and shelters "lonely womenfolk" from the dangers of reality. Thus, the obfuscating tendencies of the smoke enforce both a moral turbidity and a physical safety.

It is the indissolubility of moral confusion and physical security that becomes the focus of the poem. Though they are "anchoring" their home to "an earth and moon/From which no winter gale can hope to blow it," they are also "spinning their own cocoon did they but know it." They are at once entrenching themselves into a protective shelter and consigning themselves to a moribund condition. Significantly, the inhabitants are

referred to as "inmates," emphasizing the constraining nature of their home. Everything about the house suggests indigence. It is "poor," has "but one" chimney, and the inmates are "lonely." Frost constructs out of the facts of the poem a vision of sterility and impoverishment. The house and those within it have withdrawn into a self-occluded and -occluding solitude that purchases safety at the expense of life. Even the moon, a force of fertility and magic, has been rendered curiously antique by the house's smoke -- the symbol, as in "A Cabin in the Clearing," of the inhabitants' inner confusion. By enclosing oneself in order, one loses knowledge of the springs of passion, the sources of belief and vitality: in short, one vegetates.

People who create orders in Frost develop a debilitating dependency upon them. The orders eventually consume them. Though such characters successfully evade nature's terrors, the structure they build so presses upon them them that it enforces a condition just as terrifying. They succumb to an enslavement to the structure.

"The Figure in the Doorway" illustrates this problem more forcefully than any of Frost's other poems:

> The grade surmounted, we were riding high
> Through level mountains nothing to the eye
> But scrub oak, scrub oak and the lack of earth
> That kept the oaks from getting any girth.
> But as through the monotony we ran,
> We came to where there was a living man.
> His great gaunt figure filled his cabin door,
> And had he fallen inward on the floor,
> He must have measured to the further wall.
> But we who passed were not to see him fall.
> The miles and miles he lived from anywhere
> Were evidently something he could bear.

He stood unshaken, and if grim and gaunt,
It was not necessarily from want.
He had the oaks for heating and for light.
He had a hen, he had a pig in sight.
He had a well, he had the rain to catch.
He had a ten-by-twenty garden patch.
Nor did he lack for common entertainment.
That I assume was what our passing train meant.
He could look at us in our diner eating,
And if so moved uncurl a hand in greeting.
CP, 292

In drawing apart from humanity, the man has sought to overcome his need for it. But it is not only the need for human society that he has managed to repress. In removing himself from the vicinity of all human presence, he has sought to stifle his appetite and by minimizing the outward variety of his world render himself impervious to desire. He has sought to place himself apart from humanity both by his physical removal from it, and by his transcendence of the very desires and appetites that define man as human.

Yet his disquiet evinces the difficulty of severing his connection with humanity. Beneath his impassivity lurks an aggravated emotional life that, in being denied outward expression, seems to grow ever more intense. This outward calm seems to harbor an inward restlessness and ferocity so great that we imagine the imminence of some kind of debacle. It is significant that the fall the speaker imagines for the figure is "inward," as though all the significant facts of this man's life are indeed inward. He has so dissociated himself from the world of men that experience for him constitutes an internal rather than external dimension.

The possibility that the giant figure might be "moved" by the sight of people eating in a diner car takes on awesome meaning from both the lack of movement earlier in the poem and its suggestion of intense emotion. (Evidently, the man has been standing with his hands closed in a fist like the "old-stone savage armed...Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top in each hand...[who] moves in darkness" in "Mending Wall.") The word "moved" must be taken to have reference to passional as well as physical response. The only truly expansive movement in the poem -- the uncurling of the hand in greeting -- so minimal yet so significant occurs as a fitful participation in social exchange -- a brief exposure to other people. One can only guess at the depths of loneliness, the reserves of despair, that lie hidden in this man's being that he should be so profoundly affected by such a fleeting encounter. It suggests that he hovers on the edge of catastrophe.

The calculated, even deliberate strangulation of impulse or expression, the suppression of appetite or desire, seems to return to wreak a subtle revenge upon the man in terms of inward violence, just as in "A Brook in the City" (CP, 231) the repression of the brook returns to haunt the city built over it and disturb the sleep of its inhabitants. It is also significant that the figure is moved by the sight of people in a "diner eating" -- people in the process of gratifying appetite, an appetite which he has done so much to deny and overcome. It is the impossibility of eradicating all traces of his own

humanity, the inability to stifle his need for humanity, that constitutes his enduring tie with humanity.

The tragedy of the man, then, is his self-denial, the self-imposed regimen of extreme sparseness. The "scrub oak" of the third and fourth lines which the "lack of earth...kept from getting any girth" adumbrates the man, whose environment also prevents him from achieving any spiritual or emotional breadth. (The expression acquires additional force in recalling Melville's description of Ahab as "the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree."[1])

In one sense, "The Figure in the Doorway" portrays the effects on an individual of inhabiting an order which, failing to requite him with sufficient resources, becomes debilitating. The order slowly begins to congeal around the man, until it petrifies his entire being. Indeed, the poem reveals a dependency in the man upon his limited world, even as it shows the inevitable degradation of such a dependency. He has become a function of his environment even though he originally created it as a defense. Now, it suffocates him.

In large part, however, the poem is also about an individual who, his surroundings failing to provide him with an adequate sustenance, is driven back upon his own resources and manages to survive by virtue of his will power. What is so sternly cold, so forbidding about the man, is the way in which he has contrived to escape the stimulation and appeal of appetite. Though the profundity of his outward resilience seems

to belie his actual infirmity and terror, the stoicism with which he denies these emotions is almost supra-heroic. The significance of the detail that he stands "unshaken" lies in the fact that, although he feels from within a rising insurrection, he resists this debacle, outwardly betraying no evidence of the tumult within. He becomes a paragon of emotional self-discipline, an embodiment of the force of will.

It is also crucial that we remember that the figure has chosen this existence with its sparseness and solitude. His induration to the extremes of isolation and solitude has allowed him (or has seemed to) to go beyond the realm of need and want to explore new dimensions of spiritual denial. In many ways, he, like Ahab, is a pioneer, an explorer: existing on the very edge of human society, he is investigating the human limits of self-deprivation.

For all his indigence and intensity, he surpasses us in the strength of his will. The use of the adjective "living" in the sixth line to refer to the man ("We came to where there was a living man") engenders a critical awareness of the meaning of life. The superfluity of the adjective (all men to whom we customarily refer as though they were before us are living; we do not speak of corpses as "men") forces us to examine our very concept of life -- the conditions under which it becomes significant and the conditions under which it ceases to be so. Not only does the adjective impel us toward an examination of our concept of "life," but it insinuates that not all men are

truly alive, drawing a distinction between mere existence and complete living, between minimal and maximal being. There is even a sense of discovery and excitement, as though the speaker has come upon some rare and vanishing species. Frost implies that only those who undertake to render their existence wholly self-sufficient and autonomous, like this man, are truly, fully alive. The rest of us simply "are."

As much as the "figure in the doorway" shrinks before us, an impoverished anchorite, he also rises above us, an heroic individual. He, unlike us, has thrown off the debasing nature of a dependent existence -- has freed himself of the ties and constrictions of social existence. The adversitive "But" in the fifth line, following, as it does, the former statement that there was "nothing to the eye," suggests the sight of this man and his settlement, provides in some way a counterpoint to the nothingness of the region, an interruption of the landscape's bleak monotony -- a note of color and value, of life, like the punctuating lights in "On The Hearts's Beginning to Cloud the Mind," the poem directly preceding it or like the paint and piano in "The Investment."

In the course of the poem, this figure acquires mythic dimensions. The use of the word "great" in reference to the man is ambiguous, referring, on the one hand, to his physical height, yet enforcing, on the other hand, dim echoes of his symbolic stature. The poem's suggestion of his heroic stature is reinforced by the reference to a fall so that he becomes not

only heroic in his indomitability, but tragic as well. He fills his environment perfectly, measuring "to the furthest wall", indicating that the man has adapted himself to his environment and that as much as his world is the measure of the man, he is the measure of his world.

The line, "But we who passed were not to see him fall," is indicative of the figure's elevation. The line mentions three activities: "passing," "seeing," "falling." Though all three activities convincingly refer to everyday activities, they also possess a symbolic, proverbial generality so that "falling" could become associated with the tragic fate of a hero. Moreover, there is the suggestion that whereas "passing" is the activity appropriate to and characteristic of us ("we" are recognizable as those who "pass"), "falling" is the activity attributed to "him" ("he" is recognizable as "he who falls"). The association of the "we" with passing diminishes "our" identity (which becomes associated with the reader's identity); we are passing not only in the sense of moving by on the train, but also in the sense that we are ephemeral beings whose appearance on earth is transient. This transience could be taken to represent the insignificance of our being, which has its moment of significance precisely when we appear to the figure. That is our brief moment of glory. On the other hand, the fact that he falls endows him with stature: his demise is brought about precisely because of his stature. Our lateral movement, less lofty and spectacular than his vertical movement,

belittles us into a more limited, "passing" role.

Further, the speaker reveals a profound, if enigmatic attraction to the figure. It is precisely the ambiguity of the man's fate and the ambivalence of his character that draws Frost. In viewing this human, perhaps even Melvillean isolato, the speaker may even be witnessing some counterpart of himself. This is intimated in the opening line, where the idiomatic meaning of the phrase "We were riding high" -- we were comfortably riding on the tide of success -- prepares one for a precipitous descent -- a descent that is subsequently predicated of the figure. At the end of the poem, when the figure "uncurl[s] a hand in greeting," the act of salutation registers a subtle kind of acknowledgement, even recognition on the part of the figure that he and the speaker share a mutual fate. To what extent the portrait of the figure is self-projection, a willing fantasy that tells us more about the fears and hopes of the speaker than about the figure himself must remain obscure.

The figure in the doorway is Frost's conception of the tragic individual. His silence is preternatural, boding a supra-heroic reserve. His remoteness from human settlement symbolizes his distance from human understanding and sympathy -- his own as well as ours. Ultimately, the nature of his inner life remains a total mystery. All we can know of him is what our imagination tells us. "The miles and miles he lived from everywhere/Were evidently something he could bear" [my emphasis]. What we know of reality, Frost seems to be saying, is limited to our senses,

which are woefully inadequate to the fathoming of human character. At once "great" and "gaunt," the man is a living embodiment of terse contradictions—stunning in his isolation, yet pathetic in his loneliness.

iii

Transfixity

The corollary of fixity in Frost's critique of order is transfixity. Whereas fixity signifies man's admirable resistance of all forces that would erode certainty and undermine security, transfixity signifies a restrictive adherence to place, a confining contraction and immobility. Fixity denotes a positive perseverance in the face of eviscerative energy; transfixity denotes a negative persistence in the face of compelling vitality. Transfixity can hardly be discussed in isolation from its two complementary qualities -- confinement and stasis. Confinement can become the agent of transfixity, holding man to a single place by enclosing him within imprisoning barriers. Similarly, stagnancy can become the result of transfixity, enforcing inanition through inertia.

The effect of prolonged dwelling in Frost is always death -- death of the soul and spirit, if not the body. In portraying the self's shrinkage and atrophying by "staying," Frost indicates the stymieing effects of order, demonstrating the attrition of freedom and possibility that accompanies entrenchment into a stabilized area of space. Fixing oneself in time and space is not necessarily a fruitful enterprise in

Frost. The longer one stays rooted to a setting, home, or country-side, the more tyrannical grows the grip of that setting until it entirely drains one's strength. One of the clearest indications of Frost's critique of order as the shift from fixity to transfixity is Frost's use of the word "keep." Used by itself, "keep" underscores the centrality of the theme of survival in Frost's poetry. Frequently, however, Frost adds the word "from," in which case the meaning changes from self-preservation to restriction, from holding to withholding. We become aware of the inevitable attrition of freedom that self-defense entails. To "keep" oneself is to keep danger from oneself, yet in the process one also keeps oneself from experience.

iv

Limitation

Frost's critique of order on the level of limit -- as limitation -- falls into three discrete categories: physical, psychological, and intellectual. This critique manifests itself as physical paralysis and emotional enslavement and, on the intellectual level, as ignorance or epistemological confinement.

Although discrete, all three levels are interrelated. Frost represents psychological and emotional enslavement as physical entrapment. Many of Frost's characters manifest their restlessness in confining relationships through claustrophobia; they experience psychological confinements, caused by a response

to marriage or family, as physical confinement (as confinement to a house or room). Similarly, Frost represents intellectual limitation in terms of sensory ones (limitations of sight and vision). Blockage on one level manifests itself as blockage on another.

Frost critiques order by shifting our perspective of objective images of order so that they become oppressive and detrimental rather than protective and enhancing. The clearest example of this is the image of enclosure. No longer seen as a protective refuge from chaos, it now becomes a cage that withholds one from life. The metamorphosis of the image of enclosure from one of protection to confinement deftly indicates the readjustment of Frost's perspective on order from affirmative to condemnatory. Significantly, the image of enclosure remains palpably the same. The entity does not change; our relation to and perception of it does.

Frost's explicit incarnation of confinement is the cage. The first appearance of the cage is in "Wind and Window Flower" (CP, 10). The imaginative flirtation between the wind and a window flower occurs

> When the frosty window veil
> Was melted down at noon,
> And the caged yellow bird
> Hung over her [the flower] in tune...

The bird's confinement to its cage prefigures the fate of the window flower which remains behind as the wind passes by. Insofar as the occasion of Frost's song is the sorrow attendant upon staying, the yellow bird, also imprisoned, becomes a symbol

for the song itself -- for song born of denial. (We are reminded of another poem in which staying is associated with song, "The Sound of Trees" [CP, 156]).

If we do not count "An Empty Threat," where John-Joe, "My French Indian Esquimaux," is said to be "off setting traps -- in one himself perhaps," the next use of the explicit cage occurs in the last stanza of "The Lockless Door," where Frost invokes the a cage only to confound our understanding of its function:

> So at a knock
> I emptied my cage
> To hide in the world
> And alter with age. CP, 240-41

That the speaker enters the world in order to hide "in" it perplexes us with its reversal of attributes; usually we hide in cages rather than vice versa.

"Desert Places" also instances a series of images of enclosures whose metamorphoses into images of confinement demonstrates that order can be a privative as well as protective entity. In the second stanza of the poem, Frost presents us with three successive images of enclosure. Though they are not necessarily a series of concentric rings, it is tempting to read the images as such:

> 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. CP, 296

The first circle is emphatically possessive, using both the verb "have" and the possessive pronoun. Once again, Frost illustrates how closely connected are the ideas of encompassment

and possession -- holding and having. The second circle manifestly revises Frost's thesis of order: lairs, to animals what houses are to men, become suffocating. The third circle "includes" the poet, likening "loneliness" to an enveloping enclosure. All these images evince the loss of freedom and the impossibility of escape. The universe is a gallery prisons. Like an oppressive regime, it pulls man into its own diabolic emptiness. The speaker's inclusion in the loneliness might mean his envelopment in it, but it might also mean his becoming part of it. The speaker's absorption into the deadly matricies of the universe happens "unawares." Or, perhaps drawing a causal relation between the two events, we can say that the speaker's absorption into the universe extinguishes consciousness. Human consciousness, the factor of positivity in a lifeless and blank universe, is ultimately nullified by the universe that absorbs it. The mergence of mind with matter is synonomous to mind's obliteration by matter. In ingesting human presence, the universe also divests it of its singularity and its intelligibility. Envelopment becomes a trope for annihilation.

The first stanza of "Desert Places," with its suggestion of a blank expressionless mask deftly calls attention to the obscuring effects of order:

> 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 Latin form of the word "cover" is tegere, from which we

derive "protect." The word's etymology makes us conscious of how defensive behavior involves the erection of barriers; as the process of self-protection becomes more refined, social rather than physical, protection comes to involves masks, veneers, and veils rather than walls and fortresses. A sensitive reader of Frost notes not only the overt themes of physical defense, but the bandying and bantering poses the poet assumes as poetic defense and counter. Concealment, evasion, tact, and finesse become the poet's psychological defenses against the invasions of the reader.

The cage also occurs in "The Old Barn at the Bottom of the Fogs," when speaking of the barn, Frost says:

> Its only windows were the crevices
> All up and down it. So that waking there
> Next morning to the light of day was more
> Like waking in a cage of silver bars. CP, 289-90

And speaking of an acquaintance who has slept there one night, the speaker says:

> And it had almost given him troubled dreams
> To think that though he could not, lock himself in,
> The cheapest tramp that came along that way
> Could mischievously lock him in to stay.

The barn becomes an object for focusing his fears of entrapment.

The image of confinement finds its most metaphorical application in poems that deal with domestic themes -- familial enslavements, sexual discord, and emotional strife. Three exemplars are "Home Burial" (CP, 51-55), "A Servant to Servants" (CP, 62-68), and "The Hill Wife" (CP, 126-29). In all three poems, Frost emphasizes a sense of physical and spatial

confinement. The house becomes a prison that entraps man and wife. Clearly, physical confinement becomes a metaphor for psychic confinement. Imprisoned in their own perceptions and emotions, husband and wife radically fail at imaginative self-projection and transcendence; they fail to envision the other's point of view, becoming trapped in their own emotional upheaval. Their physical confinement parallels the constrictingness of their relationship. Physical proximity is the only kind of intimacy they share. Consequently, they experience even this kind of closeness as a crowding of their life-space. This sense of crowding, however, might be more the result of the eruption of feelings from within than the actual density of physical objects without. The couple experiences the world as confining because the host of emotions that beset them from within externalize themselves into shapes of physical reality.

In "Home Burial," the wife's sense of the confiningness of the relationship, the house, and her own psyche results in several declarations of intent to bolt from the house, to tear herself from her husband and rush outdoors. These declarations (like the actions she conjures) are impulsive and explosive, and yet uttered more as a threat or challenge, than as an assertion of intent. The first declaration occurs toward the beginning of the poem, after the husband has made manifest his recognition of their child's grave outside the window:

> "Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"
> "Not you!--Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
> I must get out of here. I must get air--"

The word "must" might, on first glance, suggest an irrepressible need. Yet what becomes apparent from the wife's next statement -- "I don't know rightly whether any man can" -- is that the emphaticness of her declaration is intended, in part, as a provocation to her husband -- to resist her will, override it, or submit to it. If she were truly intent on bursting out the door, she would simply do so, without lingering to ask, "`Where's my hat?'" Rather than simply executing her desire, she asks a question that engages her husband in her intent. Does she really expect her husband to help her look for her hat so that she can run outdoors? Why ask the question?

At the poem's end, she renews her declaration, saying: "`I must go -- somewhere out of this house.'" Again, the use of the word "must" suggests a passive recognition of a necessity that brooks no opposition or control and peremptorily dictates her decisions. The fact that she recognizes a need to get out of the house without any clear knowledge of where it is she wants to -- or can -- go ("`Somewhere out of his house'"), suggests the magnitude of her panic and distress. The rushing from the house might be seen as a final attempt at sundering herself from an intolerable situation--a final act of rebellion against a force that, welling up within her, also seems to be amassing itself from without, overrunning her life. (In her desperation, she reminds us of certain characters in Ibsen, like Hedda Gabler, who, having reached their threshold of tolerance, seek remedy in a hopeless, final act of "escape.")

As in "Home Burial," in "A Servant to Servants," the wife's sense of psychological confinement expresses itself in a sense of physical entrapment. In this poem, the immediate source of discomfiture is not an event in the past (the loss of a first-born child), but the oppressive regime of domestic duties. The woman several times expresses a feeling of being inundated by household duties. As in other Frost poems, the character expresses a sense of helplessness and passivity. Because of her inability to stem the tide of ungovernable responsibilities, obligations, and debts, the only form her imagination can find for a sense of relief is in dissociation from her present situation. Unlike the wife in "Home Burial" who bolts out the door, the wife in "A Servant to Servants" only fantasizes about bolting, entertaining visions of living "out on the ground," the way her guests have been doing, but she never actually does so. Instead she satisfies herself with the vicarious escape of gazing out the window and daydreaming about fleeing. But as she herself recognizes, "There's more to it than just window views," meaning that just fantasizing about escape is not an actual equivalent for it. Yet neither is she sufficiently convinced of the efficacy of flight to attempt it. Hence, she contents herself with her situation, arguing perfunctorily, "I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going:/Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I?"

As a matter of fact, she already has moved from one residence to her present home. Uncertain of the efficacy of

moving, she didn't insist upon the change but "waited till Len said the word." For a while the change seemed salubrious; she "looked to be happy, and I was,/As I said, for a while--but.../Somehow the change wore out like a prescription." Hence finding the same sense of desperation and confusion overtaking her, she fantasizes once more of picking up roots, of bolting, but without sufficient confidence in its remedial powers to try. Moreover, the notion that her unhappiness is a function of the external environment that can be corrected simply by a shift in location seems fundamentally mistaken. Subjecting this notion to a critical scrutiny, Frost intimates that the true source of unhappiness is internal and therefore cannot be eradicated by a mere change of scenery.

The wife's sense of confinement in "A Servant to Servants" is in part the result of the turbidity of the house in which she lives. Like her mother who had to live with her uncle upstairs imprisoned in a "sort of cage," so the narrator has also had to share her home with intrusive and violative elements. She lived in the house in which the cage was built, and though "he was before [her] time -- [she] never saw him" -- she must have, especially at night "felt [his] shadowy presence" since the cage "stayed exactly as it was/There in the upper chamber in the ell,/A sort of catchall full of attic clutter." Hence, her eagerness to leave the house is, in part, a response to the crowding of associations it holds for her. As she says, speaking of her move away from that house, "No wonder I was glad

to get away."

Just as in "The Black Cottage" (CP, 55-59) where the image of the desert land "walled/In mountain ranges half in summer snow" becomes a symbolic reflection of the cottage itself, so the cage in which the woman's uncle has been kept in "A Servant to Servants" becomes a correlative for her own entrapment. Her sense of confinement is in part the result of the cage's presence in the attic -- symbol of the claustrophobic, even incestuous impingement of these familial associations on her life.

Having left one house filled with disturbing elements, she finds herself now in another house where she also has to share her lebensraum with intruders. Her husband, Len, employs men who board in the house:

> We have four here to board, great good-for nothings,
> Sprawling about the kitchen with their talk
> While I fry their bacon...
> No more put out in what they do or say
> Than if I wasn't in the room at all.

A kind of violative element, the men pose as both a sexual and aggressive threat:

> I don't learn what their names are, let alone
> Their characters, or whether they are safe
> To have inside the house with doors unlocked.

Violating the sanctity and decorum of the marriage relationship, the men are one more source of an internal insurgence that induces the woman's claustrophobia and her need to free herself from besmirching and deadening entanglements. Significantly, it is the men's sense of freedom, their entirely unconstrained

sense of propriety, that engenders her unease. Whereas she may be said to diminish as a result of the tightness of her environment, they seem to expand in order to occupy it, "sprawling about the kitchen with their talk."

Moreover, a certain logical imprecision in the lines, "I don't learn.../...whether they are safe/To have inside the house with doors unlocked," alerts us to the symbolic meaning of the men and the confusion of internal/external dimensions of feeling and fact. If the danger issues from the men (who are within the house), then locked doors would not in any way help guard against the danger. In fact, insofar as the danger dwells within the house, unlocked doors would be desirable, allowing quicker flight and prompter aid. The confusion may even indicate an unconscious wish to be locked in with the men. The danger stems not only from within the house, but from within her own person--her own sexual and instinctual impulses that she is intent on guarding against and keeping locked inside her.

V

Further Ramifications

Elsewhere in his poetry, Frost registers a sense of claustrophobia amidst vast, open, even infinite expanses. In "Skeptic," a late poem from Steeple Bush, Frost directly likens the infinite space of the universe to a covering wrapped around him:

> The universe may or may not be very immense.
> As a matter of fact there are times when Iam apt

To feel it close in tight against my sense
Like a caul in which I was born and still am wrapped.
CP, 389-90

It is particularly striking that the infinite does not here create -- as it does so often elsewhere -- a sense of endless, immeasurable freedom, but the exact obverse: a sense of constraint, imprisonment and even paralysis. The image of the caul is very apropos since Frost conceives of order as a protective covering interposed between man and nature. The failure of such a shield to provide man with a sense of true security is explained by the infinite multiplicability of layers. Or, put otherwise, these coverings do not eliminate the infinite, and because of their extreme thinness, the defensive efficacy of the partition becomes pathetically slight.

One reason for Frost's uneasiness with enclosures, despite their defensive purpose, is that though they provide shelter, they are in turn enclosed by a frightening outer world. In a curious way, the poet feels trapped not only by his enclosure, but also by the outer space surrounding the enclosure. Despite the vastness of outer space and the fact that the poet is enclosed in a structure that shelters him from this space, the poet develops an oppressive sense of the closeness of outer space. In a paradoxical and bizarre manner, the agoraphobic fear of extended space becomes claustrophobic. This shrinkage of the physical universe and of the enclosures in which man resides is seen in the last lines of "Beech":

Thus truth's established and borne out,
Though circumstanced with dark and doubt--

Though by a world of doubt surrounded. CP, 331

What security can come to a man whose protection from external reality lies in being sealed within an enclosure itself engulfed in that reality? The outer world becomes a kind of enclosure, and one is enclosed, therefore, in coverings within coverings and enclosures. All of outer space impinges on one's shelter with a force that holds it in check. The "net" effect of this is the realization that one has retreated into safety only to find that the retreat holds one captive.

Frost very deftly conveys his critique of order through his use of the symbolism of night. In "House Fear," Frost describes the tendency of a couple who, when returning home at night to a "lonely house from far away,/To lamps unlighted and fire gone gray," rattled "the lock and key/To give whatever might chance to be,/Warning and time to be off in flight." Frost adds:

> And preferring the out- to the indoor night,
> They learned to leave the house door wide
> Until they had lit the lamp inside. CP, 127

Presumably, the night is the one thing that the house -- order -- effectively extrudes, yet night here extends its domain to the structure -- there is an "indoor night." In a swift, bold conceit, Frost indicates that the realm of order possesses its own dark side. Order is invaded by the very force it sought to overcome and exclude.

Frost represents the detrimental effects of order by depicting houses as run-down, delapidated, and decaying. Most

of the houses in Frost's poems are, in fact, in an antiquated, fallen, and ruined state. As in "The Black Cottage" (CP, 55-59) and "The Census-Taker," the houses have not only fallen into disrepair, but are completely deserted. In "A Fountain, A Bottle, A Donkey's Ears, and Some Books" (CP, 212-17), Frost writes of the house he and his friend finally come upon, "I never saw so good a house deserted." Later in the poem, he says of it, "We trod uncomfortably on crunching glass/Through a house stripped of everything." As if to indicate the frailty of order, its degeneration into a structure too battered by nature to be of any protective use, Frost speaks of the house's vulnerability, its exposure to the inclement assaults of nature and men:

> Boys and bad hunters had known what to do
> With stone and lead to unprotected glass:
> Shatter it inward on the unswept floors.

Order, man's defense against nature, finally reveals its own defenselessness.

Frost frequently signifies the privativeness of order by associating his images for it with emptiness: a frame or shell that encloses absence, void. Instead of portraying order as stronghold of fertility and culture, Frost portrays it in these poems as a vehicle of impoverishment, a vessel of vacuity.

A container necessarily brings with it an expectation of contents; to discover the container's emptiness is, in some way, to uncover an absence of such proportions that it registers as the ultimate failure, the supreme pretense. It is to discover a

deficiency that belies the very function of the object. So when Frost reveals the emptiness of his images of order, he is underscoring the collapse of a whole host of expectations, desires, and hopes that the reader, in reading his poetry, has come to invest in the idea of order. Not only is Frost exposing order as something it is not, but, more importantly, he is exposing it as something that is not. Though this "exposure" of the fradulence of order is sporadic and fitful, it points to the doubt that is a necessary aspect of all his embodiments of it.

The idea of emptiness is extraodinarily important in Frost. This sense of the void beneath (or within) most things, is one aspect of Frost's pessimism. The sense of diasppointment it gives voice to carries with it an intense skepticism, even cynicism about the value of almost everything -- a sense of reality's ultimate pretentiousness and fraudulence. As Frost scathingly says in "A Masque of Reason":

> The chances are when there's so much pretense
> Of metaphysical profundity
> The obscurity's a fraud to cover nothing....
> ...Get down into things,
> It will be found there's no more given there
> Than on the surface. CP, 473-90

Frost's belief in this underlying emptiness explains his emphasis on surfaces, appearances, poses, and postures. The very idea of performance, which is so insistent a theme of his correspondence and critical remarks,[2] is fraught with the importance of sustaining an outward appearance, without allowing the reader to divine ultimate purpose. Frost erects an impenetrable surface that sustains expectations and curiousity

while defying analysis and close investigation. It is Frost's particular power that he does not allow us to ascertain the ultimate sources of his tone and ironies, thereby forcing us to remain suspended on the surface with them.

One of what might be called Frost's "portrait poems," "An Old Man's Winter Night," indirectly equates the old man's room with a cage and thereby intimates the stiflingness of order:

> What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
> Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.
> What kept him from remembering what it was
> That brought him to that creaking room was age. CP, 108

By association, we can extend the idea of constraint to the room, even though the cause of constraint is directly attributed in one case to the the lamp and in the other to age, since the room is the scene of this constraint and its effectual agent. Thus, the old man's entrappment is symbolized by his confinement to the room.

Significantly, the room which the old man occupies is spoken of as "empty," a word that describes the man's life as well; but it may also been seen to refer, at the least, to the emptiness of the order that this man inhabits -- its paucity of resource, its deficiency of stimuli. Even though the old man "fills" the room, his filling of it is not very "full."

"The Oven Bird" (CP, 119-20), a poem also about emptiness and loss, presents an equally good illustration of how Frost's orders come to enclose a void that then becomes a property of them. The poem culminates in the "framing" of the question:

"What to make of a diminished thing?" The question frames a diminished thing -- an emptiness. In regarding this image from a strictly graphic point of view, we see a frame surrounding empty space -- an image of order as avatar of inanition. Frost has placed borders around a missing presence.

Frost's critique of order as limit also manifests itself as intellectual limitation -- ignorance. The barrier that stands between man and the various threats of nature also bars man from the perception of a higher, more inclusive reality. The occlusion of disorder becomes implicated in an epistemological occlusion -- the occlusion of Truth. Frost represents this intellectual occlusion in physical terms. The walls that buffer nature's attack also hedge in human vision. Man cannot see beyond his enclosure into the distance that, more and more, comes to represent the domain of Truth. Perception and its blockage become a metaphor for intellection and intellectual blockage.

In "Acceptance," Frost's only sunset poem, he defers to this occlusion, regarding ignorance almost as a kind of benevolence:

> 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." CP, 249

Enclosed within its darkness, the waif does not protest the confinement of its purview, but finds within night's borders a sense of security and safety. By implication, the boundaries that define its sensory limits become metaphors for man's cognitive limits. Like the bird that cannot see into the future, man cannot see into the ultimate mysteries of reality or being. But man, unlike the bird, rebelling against this occlusion, instinctively desires to apprehend a higher truth.

The image of "the dark" shrouding man's vision and sharply defining visual perimeters occurs again in "Too Anxious For Rivers:"

> 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. CP, 379

The closing of the dark round us "So broodingly soon in every direction" presents us with an image similar to that in "Acceptance." If man cannot perceive beyond the limits of his senses, neither can he know beyond the limits of his mind. The limitations of our minds prevent us from knowing "truth."

There are, thus, two values assigned order in Frost. The first, characterized by stasis, fixity, and limit, provides mankind an invaluable service by protecting it from nature,

thereby rendering the universe inhabitable. This is the positive pole of safety, clarity, and coherence. The second, characterized by stagnation, transfixity, and limitation, drains existence of all vitality, thereby rendering it stifling, enervating, and deadening. The negative pole of order depletes and enforces ignorance. Life, in Frost, perpetually oscillates between these two poles.

Frost's critique of order is so constructed as to render the neat delineation of these two poles possible in theory, but not in practice. In Frost's poetry, the positive and negative poles are interlaced, interpenetrating one another. We are simultaneously conscious of stagnancy, transfixity, and limitation as the indissociable counterpart of order. Frost's initial insistence on the necessity of order undergoes swift re-evaluation and revision as we become sensible of its intrinsic and inescapable draw-backs.

Finding order involves for Frost closing oneself off from experience; order is given to man only at the expense of life itself. The essence of life, for Frost, is movement, change, impulse, and energy -- everything that renders the human need for safety and knowledge grotesquely impertinent. To live is to embrace by immersing oneself in the rife energies of perception and change, to plunge into the molten plenitude of their compelling currents; to seek order is to insist on a stability resulting in changelessness. Frost sees force or Will as savage, uprooting, and disorienting, responsible for the

defilement of life and desire. At the same time, however, he sees it as an undeniable, self-vindicating, and insurgent necessity, the suppression of which is as dangerous and impossible as a life unsequestered and unsheltered from nature. Only by immersing oneself in force, can one participate in the movement of the universe. Some reality-testing and -inducing faculty in man absolutely insists upon his countenancing force. It is the crucial and everlasting reality of the universe that, although destroying man, sanctifies his existence with its imperiousness. To contravene its mandates, to resist its sanctions, is to attempt to absent oneself from the scheme of being and to pursue death by asphixiation, loss and hunger, rather than by violence, flux, and infinity.

vi

Re-definitions

The word "prudence" allows us to see the radicalness of Frost's revision of his own argument -- the incisiveness of his poetry's sub-plot. In "The Cocoon" (CP, 247-48), Frost uses a form of the word "prudence" to designate his approval of the determination of the "inmates" to stay alive and the craftiness of the method they use to go about it: "I want to tell them that with all this smoke/They prudently are spinning their cocoon..." The word "prudence" suggests that the problem of survival is very much a matter of choice and judgment -- of strategy. It necessarily renders the effort at self-preservation an art --

difficult, deceptive, elusive. The will to self-preservation is not in itself sufficient to guarantee survival; accuracy of judgment, fineness of perception, and shrewdness of calculation are also necessary. Survival, like predation, necessitates that we read below the surface, that we develop our capacity for interpretation, and that we refine our ability for intuiting fraud. We must achieve a Machiavellian subtlety of response--in our capacity both to infer intent from devious, indirect communications and to determine response in others through our own communications. Such an art requires an intensely vigilant attentiveness to our environment. In the most fundamental sense, survival becomes political, involving us in a complex web of relations with an environment whose shifting alliances and tensions necessitate a continuous assessment, reassessment, and testing of the world. Under such conditions, it is not surprising that the calculations necessary for survival should become the determinant of our success and that they should achieve an almost suprarational complexity.

The underlying impulse governing this consciousness is the primary commitment to survival. It is possible to regard the intensity of this committment, Will, as the determinant of the efficacy of such judgment, prudence, and interpretation. The battle for survival refines itself into a war whose primary weapon is wit or intelligence. Hence, Frost's subtlety as a poet, the deceptiveness of his voice, the artfulness of its evasiveness, his cleverness in eluding the reader's attempt to

grasp his meaning, all instance the same qualities that in his poetry support the success of man's attempt at survival. And perhaps Frost's "survival" as a poet shall be ultimately the product and result of his wariness, the extreme caginess and prudence of his "policy" -- his instinct.

Moreover, the word "prudence" also identifies the attempt at survival with the creation of order. In "A Ribbon at Amesbury" the word "prudence" is used to far other ends. In that poem, the pullet, having returned victorious to its pen after winning a winter show, allows its sense of security, provided by the warmth and comfort of the pen, to enlarge, expanding until the bird virtually rules the coop with a complete sense of autonomy. It becomes comically blasé about its privileges and assumes over the other birds a magisterial sense of superiority so complete that it renders the bird a kind of bully or tyrant. Even its keeper cannot ripple its composure:

> No human specter at the feast
> Can scant or hurry her the least.
> She takes her time to take her fill.
> She whets a sleepy sated bill.
>
> She gropes across the pen alone
> To peck herself a precious stone.
> She waters at the patent fount.
> And so to roost, the last to mount.
>
> The roost is her extent of flight.
> Yet once she rises to the height,
> She shoulders with a wing so strong
> She makes the whole flock move along. CP, 279-81

Buffered from wind and cold by the pen, the bird has forgotten the vulnerability of its condition. It has become oblivious to the dangers that encompass it and the extent of its dependency

on the pen and its keeper. At this point in the poem, Frost writes:

> The lowly pen is yet a hold
> Against the dark and wind and cold
> To give a prospect to a plan
> And warrant prudence in a man.

The plan that the pen gives a prospect to is the keeper's idea of using the pullet "to start/...a race/That shall all living things displace." Like the pen, a plan represents man's attempt to control the future and ensure prosperity, and is therefore, also like the pen, a symbol of order. Through the phrase "give a prospect to a plan," Frost indicates that order opens out onto a more expansive area of existence. Ironically, enclosure is the means by which man opens order out onto a greater possibility. Yet, with the next line, the poet registers his awareness of order's constrictiveness of the spirit and its tendency to breed in its beneficiaries a smug indifference to the threats from which it protects them. Man must be protected from the very thing that protects him from nature -- from order itself. Otherwise, he shall become enclosed not only by his structures, but by his resulting unawareness of their artificiality and extrinsicness. By taking them for granted, he becomes prey to a forgetful, blinding pride that does not reckon the full extent of his vulnerability. If in "The Cocoon," prudence facilitates the creation and inhabitation of order, in "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury" it instances itself in the avoidance and evasion of order. Hence, prudence comes to be associated not

with the pursuit of self-preservation through order, but with the pursuit of self-preservation through an awareness of order's limitations.

Another example of the danger posed by man's complacency within his shelters can be seen in the seventh stanza of "Brown's Descent;" describing Brown tumbling down the icy slope, Frost writes:

> Faster or slower as he chanced,
> Sitting or standing as he chose,
> According as he feared to risk
> His neck, or thought to spare his clothes. CP, 137-40

Clothes, like structures, are insulating barriers that buffer not only nature's assaults, but also man's awareness of nature's omnipresent destructive intent. In warming man, they shut out not only the cold, but man's awareness of the cold as well, luring man into a complacent forgetfulness of his true peril. Thus, the final line of the stanza, in comically paralleling the saving of Brown's neck with the sparing of his clothes, as though an equal expenditure of energy could (and should) be bestowed on such discrepant concerns, highlights the desensitizing effects buffers have had on Brown. The inequality of concerns testifies, even if parodically, to a warping of values, a loss of perspective, and a peculiar, if amusing, self-indulgence.

FOOTNOTES

1 Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1964), p. 169

2 See Richard Poirier, Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. xiii

CHAPTER FIVE

"WHOLENESS IN A SENSE"

i

Frost's Late Poetry

If Frost's early and middle poetry is dominated by the imagery of limit and enclosure, his later poetry is equally dominated by the imagery of the boundless. The title of Frost's sixth volume, A Further Range, indicates this accession to a more expansive subject matter: Frost has literally widened, if not deepened, his poetic range. All three volumes after A Further Range witness a preponderance of astral, cosmic, and celestial imagery. This gradual acquisition of scope bespeaks a deepening boldness vis-a-vis the enormity of the undefined problems of space and reality as well as Frost's growing impatience with limited, parochial horizons. More importantly, the transformation in imagery points to a shift in theme: from earth to sky, enclosure to expanse, order to Truth.

Frequently in this later poetry, Frost takes the cosmos as his point of reference. Instead of standing nakedly transposed against nature, man is starkly set against the universe itself. As Frost writes about in his March 25, 1935 letter to The Amherst Student, "The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration."[1] No gradual transition in this image

accommodates man's finite faculties to the immensity of external space.

This jarring contraposition is seen in the first line of "The Most of It," where the protagonist of the poem, "...thought he kept the universe alone" (CP, 338). And at the end of "Any Size We Please," the central figure "Slapped his breast to verify his purse/And hugged himself for all his universe" (CP, 396). In "An Unstamped Letter in Our Rural Letter Box," a tramp says that his vigil in the pasture, "left me freely face to face/All night with universal space" (CP, 380-81).

Frost's late poetry not only enlarges its spatial span; it also broadens its temporal span, extending its purview backward to the beginnings of geological time and forward to the dissolution of centuries. Frost demonstrates an interest not only in man's pre-history, but in his future evolutionary development as well.[2] Many of the poems show a refined escatological awareness.[3] No longer interested in the history of individual men, Frost displays a concern with the fate of civilizations, indeed, of the entire human race.

The cast of "characters" in these late poems is often limited to three: the poet, the universe, and the celestial spheres that inhabit its infinite space. Frost frequently uses the theatrical metaphor, likening the universe to a stage whereon is enacted the religious comedy -- or tragic farce -- of human existence. In "The Fear of Man," the speaker refers to his "brief bolt across the scene" (CP, 386). In "Two Leading

Lights," the sun and moon, referred to as "the two in the celestial cast/Whose prominence has been so vast" (CP, 390) are treated as contending actors in a play. In "It Bids Pretty Fair," Frost also brilliantly sustains the theatrical metaphor:

> The play seems out for an almost infinite run.
> Don't mind a little thing like the actors fighting.
> The only thing I worry about is the sun.
> We'll be all right if nothing goes wrong with the lighting. CP, 392

Allowing us to grasp life as a transitory show, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," the theatrical metaphor provides a powerful critique of human desire and vanity, rendering man's self-aggrandizing claims to greatness in the context of a sublimely indifferent universe. Such poems present a quiet, collective vision of the human condition as essentially aimless clamour and possess an almost Shakespearian grandeur and impersonality. Life, the vainglorious spectacle, is ultimately insubstantial and insignificant -- a mere pantomime of meaning. Beside the august interrogations of the Infinite, man's obstreperous assertions of his importance seem shrill and his pretensions to profound emotion or serious tragedy, as in "Any Size We Please," absurd, even comical:

> No one was looking at his lonely case;
> So, like a half-mad outpost sentinel,
> Indulging an absurd dramatic spell,
> Albeit not without some shame of face,
> He stretched his arms out to the dark of space
> And held them absolutely parallel
> In infinite appeal. Then saying "Hell,"
> He drew them in for warmth of self-embrace. CP, 396

By contrast, the presence of the Infinite speaks eloquently of a dimension of meaning so vast as to render human existence ant-

like by comparison. The Infinite transvaluates our very sense of reality, making human duration seem fictive, ephemeral, while the Infinite is enduring.

In these late poems, Frost progressively sheds the layers of defense that had previously protected him from the Infinite. Frost seems to have finally overcome his trepidation about leaving his refuges of order and to have achieved a certain comfort with the Infinite that might bespeak acceptance. No longer does its entropic vastness produce panic; instead, it seems almost to provide him with a source of reassurance, as though its enormity and incomprehensibility were warrant for a belief in its ultimacy.

Increasingly, Frost instances the Infinite as a presence of supreme mystery. Its defiance of intellective grasp oddly insinuates its benignity. Though we often find the Infinite mystifying in these poems, rarely do we find it terrifying. Instead, the poems instill a recognition of the inconsequential nature of experience, the unfathomable complexity of Being, and the unnatural sublimity of space.

The inception of a cosmic consciousness in these poems coincides with the engendering of a comic one. Although a comic point of view pervades the late poems, it is not focused on any specific object. The humor lies not in an occasional aside, a witty interjection, or banter, but in some wry, ironic attitude that is endemic to his material. It is as if Frost had finally begun to comprehend the full significance of his own line from

an earlier poem, "The way of understanding is partly mirth."

These poems are playful to an extent hardly even approached by his previous poetry. Often, they read like facetiae or jests -- flippant, frivolous, ironic. Often they seem so light, even light-hearted, as to preclude our considering them serious or sensical at all. Their stylistic simplicity is often so great that they almost seem doggerel. With their cunningly sportive nonchalance, their stealthy yet elusive esprit de corps, they possess the careless élan of impromptu remark.[4]

Frost seems, in fact, to have arrived at some primordial insight into the profundity of play as a mode of gnosis. And, in a fundamental sense, the playfulness of these poems transforms our very understanding of the term "serious." Whereas we might initially consider certain forms of slapstick or inconsequence beyond the pale of the serious, these poems make us reconsider that response. We become conscious that a certain laxity of tone and posture is consistent with a higher, more resilient meaningfulness. Frost turns his scrutiny on the superficiality of our sense of the serious, and by mocking the solemnity that sometimes passes for seriousness, broadens our understanding of the term.

At times, the suggestion of an increased levity induces in us a sense of the poet's sapience. These poems witness even more clearly than the early ones the emergence not only of Frost's humorist propensities, but of his gnomic ones as well. Often, they bear a strong resemblance to riddles. Their

meanings seem determined in highly complex, eccentric ways. We feel that some profound yet secret meaning lurks at the center of the poems which, if we but had the key, would be peremptorily revealed to us. Though their resistance to our efforts to "solve" them augments our sense of their mysteriousness, it does not dispel our belief in their decipherability. We continue to read them in the hope that one day the hidden design underlying their seemingly unconscious chatter shall be made known to us.

What particularly enforces the sense of some hidden though inscrutable wisdom is their ostensible, if not ostentatious stylistic simplicity, their pronounced composure:

> We dance round in a ring and suppose,
> But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.
> "The Secret Sits," CP, 362

Despite our obsessive efforts to penetrate the core of these riddles, Frost persistently defies us, ridiculing the elaborate irrelevance of our attempts. Frantically casting about in search of their meaning, we merely skirt their margins, the butt of Frost's amused ironic irreverence.

Because of the increased disparity between their tonal informality and their persistent aura of hermeneutic rigor, these poems are troubling in a way never quite equalled by Frost's previous poetry. They are unsettling, not so much because they convey painful truths, but because they do not provide sufficient instruction about how to read them. They often do not go anywhere; sometimes, at the end, they seem even less resolved than at the beginning.[5] If they are

sophisticated, it is with the sophistication of true accomplishment -- one that engenders in us a false sense of carelessness, even inadvertence.

One source of the difficulty is the elusiveness of Frost's point of view. Sometimes, mid-way through a poem, Frost will reverse point of view, radically undercutting the poem's very premises. This indeterminateness of viewpoint can be seen in the late sonnet, "No Holy Wars For Them":

> States strong enough to do good are but few.
> Their number would seem limited to three.
> Good is a thing that they, the great, can do,
> But puny little states can only be.
> And being good for these means standing by
> To watch a war in nominal alliance,
> And when it's over watch the world's supply
> Get parcelled out among the winning giants.
> God, have You taken cognizance of this?
> And what on this is Your divine position?
> That nations like the Cuban and the Swiss
> Can never hope to wage a Global Mission.
> No Holy Wars for them. The most the small
> Can ever give us is a nuisance brawl. CP, 398

The point of view in this poem fluctuates between ironic deprecation of the small and the sympathetic outrage for and identification with the small that flares up briefly in lines 9 and 10. The speaker then reverts to his previous scorn. But why, amidst such disparagement for the small, should the speaker start questioning the law of might, as though this law has suddenly become cruel and unconscionable in his eyes, when previously he seems to have regarded it as regulative, even orthodox? Though it is possible to see the sudden outcropping of doubt as undercut by the irony directed against it, the shift

still throws the reader off-balance, thwarting his attempt to get a definite "fix" on the poem.

The indeterminateness of point of view in these poems might be related to the Infinite's fixity of presence. By its very tendency to multiply points of view indefinitely, the Infinite dissolves all point of view. Even Frost's irony, which also acts like a corrosive, can be seen as a response to the interrogatory impact of the Infinite. Instead of rooting ourselves in one particular position, we circulate endlessly among innumerable vantage points.

This indeterminateness of viewpoint affects (or infects) the poems' imagery, which loses much of its individuation. Often the poems seem so pared down as to have expunged all vestiges of the extraneous.[6] They seem to have arrived at the final vestitures of meaning--the very core of Being. Hence, they convey a true sense of existential isolation and loneliness, and of the absolute silence and emptiness of space. In reading them, we become conscious of a uniform, seamless canvas, a vast distended blankness that admits of no interruptive particularity, no particle of compressed individuality.

This lack of focus might also be viewed as a consequence of Frost's accession to a more "universal" subject matter and cosmic perspective. Focus presupposes limit or, at least, restriction. The illimitability of the Infinite necessarily deprives man -- or, better, absolves him -- of such a focus. In the panorama of its immensity, man drifts down a gallery of

endlessly widening vistas, his gaze unarrested by any spectacle of piercing specifity.

Despite this lack of focus in the late poetry, the image of the Infinite achieves, paradoxically, a sharpness and clarity lacking in his previous poems. This is due to the fact that the Infinite is the central character of these poems. Its predominance effectually casts out all other contending images. We experience the Infinite as a tangible object, an irrefragible reality. To so render the Infinite must, by itself, be deemed an accomplishment.

It is not quite accurate to say either that these poems completely lack detail; rather, Frost's sense of detail has changed. Whereas previously Frost's use of detail had been smoothly integrated with -- even merged into -- the symbolic, he now uncannily intensifies the split, although still keeping us suspended in uncertainty as to which level we are, at any given moment, inhabiting.

Thus, an almost surrealistic intensification and clarification of the particular, as well as a diffused, generalized sense of the symbolic, dominates the late poetry. Put differently, there seems to be a dissociation between our two fields of vision -- between figure (the particular) and ground (the Infinite) -- a disproportionality that confuses and alarms us and that might also be the result of the disorienting effect of the Infinite.

This difference in Frost's sense of continuity between the

symbolic and the particular in his middle and late work can be seen by comparing "Unharvested" from A Further Range with "The Objection to Being Stepped On" from Frost's last volume, In The Clearing. "Unharvested" begins:

> A scent of ripeness from over a wall.
> And come to leave my routine road
> And look for what had made me stall,
> There sure enough was an apple tree
> That had eased itself of its summer load,
> And of all but its trivial foliage free,
> Now breathed as light as a lady's fan.
> For there had been an apple fall
> As complete as the apple had given man.
> The ground was one circle of solid red.
>
> May something go always unharvested!
> May much stay out of our stated plan,
> Apples or something forgotten and left,
> So smelling their sweetness would be no theft.
> CP, 304-05

The details of this poem possess a solidity and realism that make them perfectly convincing; we need not think they necessarily refer to some imagined event. The poem's language contributes to this sense of verisimilitude. The poem does not use an exalted or hieratic rhetoric that loftily points to the significance of the event. "Stall," "load," "routine," "left" are all sufficiently familiar, everyday words to allow us to experience the poem as presenting an everyday situation.

At the same time, too many of the features of the poem suggest a symbolic significance to permit us to regard the poem as a merely factual recounting of a real experience. Apples and "fall" immediately allude to Genesis. Theft, too, though an emphatically demotic term, fits into the Biblical parallel, as do "stated plan" (making us think of our "first estate" in Eden

and of God's original, providential plan for mankind, spoiled by the "apple fall," man's disobedience), and "forgotten" (clearly a word referring to knowledge as well as to its loss -- Adam's and Eve's forgetfulness of God's injunction). Even the word "routine," though too routine a word to carry great significance, can be assimilated to this pattern as a reference to the fallen, quotidian world man inherited. The reference to the lady's fan teasingly reminds us of Adam's and Eve's sudden awareness of their nakedness and their assumption of apparel after eating the apple. Even "road" fits the Biblical analogue--the road out of Eden and further, the road of history man must now traverse in order to regain paradise .

Thus, in addition to possessing a "solidity of specification," in Henry James' phrase, the objects and terms of the poem are also hospitable to a symbolic reading. Once we review the poem from a systematically symbolic point of view, we see how the poem, like the tree in it, has literally been stripped of its "trivial foliage." The symbolic inheres in the poem as persistently as the literal.

But the remarkable thing is that the poem works on both the realistic and the symbolic, the particular and the abstract, levels <u>simultaneously</u>. We do not feel a disjunction between these two levels, forcing us to abandon one in order to occupy the other. They cohere so inextricably that the more powerfully we apprehend the one, the more deeply we experience the other. And this is the greatness of the poem. It is, paradoxically, a

concrete universal -- no less concrete for being universal, no less universal for being concrete.

Now, we move to Frost's late poem, "The Objection to Being Stepped On":

> At the end of a row
> I stepped on the toe
> Of an unemployed hoe.
> It rose in offense
> And struck me a blow
> In the seat of my sense.
> It wasn't to blame
> But I called it a name.
> And I must say it dealt
> Me a blow that I felt
> Like malice prepense.
> You may call me a fool,
> But was there a rule
> The weapon should be
> Turned into a tool?
> And what do we see?
> The first tool I step on
> Turned into a weapon. CP, 450

Here, too, we are presented with the factually convincing details of a real experience. Nothing in the poem compels us to believe it the result of invention. For one thing, the details are too obtrusively plain. The rhyming "row," "toe," and "hoe" all possess a material specificity that almost precludes our regarding them as symbolic. The particularity of "hoe" is especially unsettling. Why "hoe" rather than "spade" or "rake"? we wonder. The specificity of the hoe makes us curious about its special significance. If this were a middle poem by Frost, the object, particularizing itself on the level of thing, would also simultaneously particularize itself on the level of idea or symbol. Acquiring specificity, it would also acquire

universality. But here, in this late poem, we are left with a strangely extra-specific detail, one whose burden of specificity directs us to look for -- without finding -- a heightened symbolic significance. Outside of those three extra-specific terms, the poem possesses a sententious and symbolic generality. "Tool," "fool," "rule," "weapon" all possess a generic as well as a clear moral meaning. But "toe," "row," and "hoe" do not. Hence, the poem startles us into a kind of disjunctive awareness of the split between symbolic and particular. Either we seem to be working on the symbolic level (and for the most part of the poem we are) or on the literal. The two levels do not inhere simultaneously in the same object. Why should a poem whose climate is so clearly symbolic, bother to introduce terms that are so resistantly a-symbolic? We are disoriented because we do not know if the symbolic is obtruding into a realistic climate or vice versa. The discontinuity is also disturbing because it violates a fundamental principle of literary form -- the consistency of the texture of the world, the uniformity of vision. It is like moving suddenly from Spenserian allegory to the realism of Defoe without any means of integration; the mind demands more coherence than such an admixture presents.

Just as, imagistically, Frost's late poems lose much of their specificity, so, lexically, they lose much of their density. They also seem metrically more relaxed. Whereas in the early and middle Frost we get a sense of the adhesive tensions yoking each word to the next, in the later poetry all

too often we get a sense of complete repose -- the positioning of each word in the line seems fortuitous, arbitrary. Though even in the early and middle poems, the line is never so dense as to give a sense of strain, of involuted or volatile intensity, each word exerts sufficient pressure on the next to rivet it in place, thereby securing the firmness of the line. By contrast, in the late poems there is a greater sense of space between the words, of their isolation and entropy, as though each is marooned on its separate isle of syntax, surrounded by oceans of silence. Logically and figurally, the poems also seem less determined and precise, despite the impression of an underlying hermeneutic coherence. Their subject matter, too, seems more indefinite, less decisive and firm.

The lexical, metrical, and logical tensions that the late poems forswear could be seen as precisely the tension that had engendered Frost's basic theme -- the tension between the struggle for survival and the search for Truth. It is as if, having relinquished one half of his poetic concern and allowed himself to concentrate exclusively on the other, the latter loses much, if not most, of its meaning. Divorced from the competing half of its dialectic, the search for Truth seems strangely pointless. Left to pursue his search for value without having to fend for survival, man finds himself, ironically, bereft of a sense of purpose.

This turning away from a concern with survival toward a concern with the pursuit of Truth can be partly seen as the

result of Frost's own growing popularity and success. No longer faced with the exigencies of having to earn a living and support a family, having become a respected and established member of the academy, Frost no longer had to face in his life, as in his poetry, the struggle for sustenance. Instead, he could concentrate on the philosophical aspect of his poetry -- ironically, much to the detriment of that poetry.

An evaluative approach to Frost's late poetry might note the the spareness of his line, the loss of imagistic specificity, and the casual, seemingly random sense of direction and regard them as indicative of a loss of poetic value. This approach overlooks, however, the fact that Frost's poetic skill in his late verse is engaged not primarily as a maker of poems, but as a philosopher. Though we may agree that Frost's poetry has suffered a decline, to evaluate it from the standpoint of critical excellence is to mistake its purpose and to credit Frost with an aim he deliberately repudiates.

In a fundamental sense, Frost's late poetry -- unlike his earlier corpus -- does not seek to establish itself in our minds primarily as poetry. Frost has moved beyond the limited and specific purpose of making formalistically sound poems; he has moved toward an end in which the making of poems is tangential to a "higher" purpose. The formlessness of this poetry represents the poet's incipient movement beyond form toward a domain of meaning where form is, at best, an encumbrance, at worst, an obstacle.

Thus, if we were to discuss the late Frost under his proper heading, it would be as theosophist, mystic, sage -- not as poet. Perhaps we do best to refer to the late Frost as Thomas Mann referred to Franz Kafka -- as a "religious humorist"[7] -- for there is to Frost's late poems both a religious and parodic dimension. If Frost invokes the Infinite, it is to discredit our insistence on the finality and authority of our own perspective. If he uses modes of sensuous and intellective apprehension, it is to purvey a more transcendent knowledge of the limits of these modes. And if he employs a pervasive levity of tone, it is to deepen our understanding of the seriousness of humor. His irreverence both chastens and chastises us, teaching us a truer attentiveness to the ironies of existence. Frost's aim in these poems ia at once varied and simple, teasing and complex. Ultimately, Frost aims at nothing less than a radical reassessment of our and his own humanity. Ultimately, he seeks to educate us in the proper humility of our being human.

ii

The Quest for Truth

Although the quest for Truth is for Frost primarily an intellective one, he portrays it in physical terms -- as the excursion into space.[8] This representation can be subdivided. First, there is the agent of intellection, the mind, represented as a body moving through space. Second, there is the object or end of intellection, represented as the Infinite. Third, there is the medium of intellection (or, to use Frost's word,

Thought), represented as the space through which the mind or body moves -- also the Infinite. This aspect of Frost's representation of intellection reverses the normal order of things by placing the medium of intellection, Thought, outside the agent of intellection, mind, whereas what we should expect is that intellection inheres in the mind.

Through the image of excursion, Frost suggests that knowledge is a proximate act -- an act of nearing, never of attainment. This representation presupposes that the mind is always separated from the object of its knowledge -- a separation Frost represents as a spatial distance. Frost overcomes this separation by plotting the end of intellection as identical to the medium of intellection. In using the same image (the Infinite) to represent both the medium and the end of intellection, Frost equates them. The Infinite is at once the end toward which intellection strives (the end that it strives to apprehend) and the medium through which it strives (the means by which it strives to apprehend that end). Even as the mind pursues the Infinite, the mind moves through the Infinite, immersed in it. As both medium and end of intellection, the Infinite becomes a symbol of a self-reflexive act -- Thought as process seeking to apprehend itself as end. Intellection becomes its own object. In Frost's words, "The reaching toward/Is its own reward."[9]

Frost's representation of the intellective process overcomes this separation in other ways as well. By its very nature,

indefinite, the Infinite, unlike other objects of knowledge, offers no localized, concretized focus on which the mind may fix. Consequently, in trying to apprehend Infinity, the mind finds itself continually de-fused, eluded, mocked. It aspires to apprehend an object that can never be rendered sufficiently discrete to be apprehensible. The mind voyages toward an end that continually recedes as it attempts to approach that end. Consequently, it aspires to an end that has no end. Thus far, at least, Frost sustains the idea of absence, of consciousness's essential separation from its object, as a pre-condition of intellection.

There is, however, another consequence of this continued recession of the object of knowledge from the mind. The mind can only progress by fixing on an end; all teleological movement presupposes a telos toward which the instrument of movement advances. This end may or may not be co-extensive with the agent's ultimate end. In the case of the Infinite, these ends are most assuredly not identical to that ultimate end since the mind cannot at any given point in progress toward the Infinite encompass the entirety of the Infinite as an end. Consequently, the mind can only approach the Infinite through a series of finite ends that may be seen as provisional way-stations as it moves toward its ultimate end.

Insofar as these provisional ends become the only means by which the mind can approach the Infinite, these finite moments become, in a sense, the mind's only image of the Infinite. Put

differently, the mind's perception of the Infinite is mediated through its perception of finite moments in the Infinite. Only through these moments can the mind know the Infinite. Hence, the mind can only know the Infinite in bits. The act of intellection consists in moving from one finite moment to the next, and so on ad infinitum. Insofar as these finite moments of the Infinite represent the mind's only image of the Infinite, through them, the Infinite comes to represent the intellective process of which they are representative. As end becomes conflated with medium, so it also becomes conflated with act.

Insofar as the act of intellection is inclusive of agent, medium, and end of intellection, the Infinite, having become representative and symbolic of the act of intellection, comes to represent inclusively all aspects of intellection -- agent, medium, and end. As a symbol of intellective process, the Infinite represents the inherent unity of this process and, conversely, intellection becomes associated with the inherent unity of the Infinite. Mind aspiring to the Infinite becomes one with it as the very act of aspiring to the Infinite becomes the end of aspiration.

In addition to representing Truth or the Absolute, the Infinite represents the freedom of the immaterial or Ideal. In aspiring to the Infinite, the mind, therefore, is also aspiring to the freedom of the immaterial. Intellection culminates in liberation -- from the constraints of the material into the freedom of the Ideal.

In this identification of intellection with the freedom of the immaterial, the material becomes associated, necessarily, with enslavement. From this perspective, the protective barriers man forges as a shield against nature come to exist as shackles -- barriers to freedom and Thought. It is only through the progressive release from such barriers that the mind can find freedom or the soul, Truth. In Frost's own words, "We are not the kind/To stay too confined."[10]

Frost indicates the immateriality of the freedom of the intellective by divesting the journeying mind of its material embodiment so that the mind becomes as disembodied as the Infinite itself -- a disembodied agent questing after disembodied Truth. One consequence of the immateriality of the intellective (its progressive disemburdening and divestment of the material) is that the mind merges into the immaterial realm through which it sojourns, seeking freedom. The act of aspiring toward the freedom of the immaterial imparts to the aspiring mind some of the freedom for which it seeks.

The freedom of immateriality is, therefore, a metaphor for the freedom of intellective process. By aspiring to the freedom of the immaterial, the mind achieves the freedom for which it longs. As the object of the mind's quest, the Infinite represents not only Truth, but the transcendent freedom of the intellective process itself -- the freedom mind wins for itself not only in apprehending Truth, but in the mere striving toward such apprehension.

The highest incidence of poems using the imagery of quest occurs in West-Running Brook, Frost's fifth volume. Two poems appearing in sequence in that volume, "Sand Dunes" and "A Soldier" explicitly broach the quest theme. Both present an object's imaginative trajectory in an increasingly expansive field of space. The indefiniteness of the telos toward which the object is propelled conveys the idea that the ultimate destination of the object is intellective freedom. The end of aspiration epiphanizes itself as continuous with the medium through which the agent moves, thereby letting us identify the end with the act of aspiration -- intellective process itself.

In "Sand Dunes," the human's progressive disemburdening of all materials shells and formal encumbrances provides a potential basis for a liberation of the human into an intellective form of existence:

> Sea waves are green and wet,
> But up from where they die
> Rise others vaster yet,
> And those are brown and dry.
>
> They are the sea made land
> To come at the fisher town
> And bury in solid sand
> The men she could not drown.
>
> She may know cave and cape,
> But she does not know mankind
> If by any change of shape
> She hopes to cut off mind.
>
> Men left her a ship to sink:
> They can leave her a hut as well;
> And be but more free to think
> For the one more cast-off shell. CP, 260-61

The phrase "free to think," another example of Frost's

conjoining of the colloquial with the proverbial, the literal with the symbolic, suggests not only that freeing the intellect from material constraints allows the mind greater freedom to pursue its end, but also that the intellect aims toward the freedom of the immaterial itself and that one achieves freedom through Thought.

In "A Soldier," the spear serves as a metonymy for the soldier and the trajectory of the weapon becomes a metaphor for the trajectory of the soldier who flings it:

> He is that fallen lance that lies as hurled,
> That lies unlifted now, come dew, come rust,
> But still lies pointed as it plowed the dust.
> If we who sight along it round the world,
> See nothing worthy to have been its mark,
> It is because like men we look too near,
> Forgetting that as fitted to the sphere,
> Our missiles always make too short an arc.
> They fall, they rip the grass, they intersect
> The curve of earth, and striking, break their own;
> They make us cringe for metal-point on stone.
> But this we know, the obstacle that checked
> And tripped the body, shot the spirit on
> Further than target ever showed or shone. CP, 261-62

Frost's thought first turns on the apparent pointlessness of the spear's flight, its lack of a target "worthy to have been its mark." Frost intimates through the image of the spear's "plow[ing] the dust" that this is a fruitless assay. Even as Frost invokes the notion of the value of this specific quest ("nothing worthy to have been its mark"), he negates it, fearing that the spear has been spent aimlessly or, at least, on an unvalued target.

In the sixth line of the poem, however, a counter-argument

begins. If the spear seems to have been spent on a fruitless mark, it is because

> like men we look too near,
> Forgetting that as fitted to the sphere,
> Our missiles always make too short an arc.

It is our earthly perspective that betrays us into short-sightedness. We wrongly ascribe a purely material and immanent object for the soldier. Frost suggests that the obstacle that finally obstructs the flight of the spear serves only to launch the "spirit" beyond that mark, precipitating it into another realm. The question of the pointlessness of the spear's flight (the soldier's life) resolves itself almost religiously; a higher aim directs the spear toward a loftier goal, but one we cannot see. The earthly serves not only as a bar to our perception of the spear's higher end, but also as the impediment that urges the spear/soldier beyond the earthly. Hence, a physical terminus marks a spiritual beginning; death becomes the agent of release.

In "Misgiving," Frost's most explicit quest poem, he makes clear the link-up between freedom, knowledge, quest, and space: All crying, "We will go with you, O Wind!"

> The foliage follow him, leaf and stem;
> But a sleep oppresses them as they go,
> And they end by bidding him stay with them.
>
> Since ever they flung abroad in spring
> The leaves had promised themselves this flight,
> Who now would fain seek sheltering wall,
> Or thicket, or hollow place for the night.
>
> And now they answer his summoning blast
> With an ever vaguer and vaguer stir,
> Or at utmost a little reluctant whirl

That drops them no further than where they are.

I only hope 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. CP, 236

As the pursuit of "the knowledge beyond the bounds of life" is seen as an heroic activity -- beyond the realm of bounds -- so the failure to undertake such a quest is marked with the stigmata of disgrace. Though freedom here is a pre-condition of quest, it is also its consequence.

The theme of extension also works itself out in Frost's poetry on the personal level as a quest for companionship. The act of extension becomes the reaching out of one human being for another, not always human, being, in a gesture of embrace. Frost frequently represents this reaching out as a physical extension of the hand or as an emotive extension in which the self opens up toward the Other with a predisposition toward acceptance. Sometimes, the self inclines toward the Other with almost religious awareness, as if ready to enter into communion with it.

As in the other forms of extension, this reaching out is fraught with risk, but here the risk is emotional -- that of missed connection, failed response. In his poetry, Frost is exceedingly pessimistic about the likelihood of such an act culminating in genuine contact and fulfillment; the improbability of its success seems, at times, to foredoom the act even before its commmencement. Yet, this form of extension assumes a poignance and, sometimes, even pathos, all the more

moving for being opposed by a prevailing sentiment of doubt as to its viability. If there is any tenderness in Frost, it resides in such moments.

Because of this peril, the act of extension often culminates in a recognition of its own impossibility -- in retraction and withdrawal. Yet precisely at such moments, as in "To A Moth Seen in Winter," when the poet recognizes the futility of his gesture, he begins to establish a more significant relation with the Other, for implicit in his confrontation with his own distance from the Other is a recognition of its autonomy. Frost seems to be arguing that a perception of the Other is contingent on the acceptance of its Otherness. Hence, precisely at the point at which Frost perceives the unbridgeable isolation between himself and the Other, he establishes a more profound and "touching" relation with it.

The three primary examples of this confrontation with the Other are all from A Witness Tree and have claim to being among Frost's greatest lyrics. The first, "To A Moth Seen in Winter," begins with an act of literal extension -- the speaker's reaching a "gloveless hand" to a moth:

> Here's first a gloveless hand warm from my pocket,
> A perch and resting place 'twixt wood and wood,
> Bright black-eyed silvery creature, brushed
> with brown,
> The wings not folded in repose, but spread.
> CP, 356-57

The moth quickly becomes an object of compassion, sorrow, and fear to Frost, not least because it, too, is involved in a

journey (a pilgrimage from "wood to wood") that mirrors the poet's own quest or, more immediately, the poet's extensional act toward the moth itself. Addressing the moth in a tone of wistful sadness, the poet deepens the analogy between his own quest and the moth's:

> And now pray tell what lured you with false hope
> To make the venture of eternity
> And seek the love of kind in wintertime?

The moth's act of extension directly echoes the speaker's: the object of its quest is "love." Hence, the futility and sadness of the moth's quest become a reflection of the futility and sadness of the poet's quest. Like the moth's attempt at finding love, the speaker's attempt at solacing or just communing with the moth is doomed to failure.

There is, at this point in the poem, the possibility that the moth will become simply a surrogate for the poet, one that receives the burden of the speaker's narcissistic sorrow over the futility and blindness of his own love. Were that the case, the speaker's compassion for the mite would merely reflects the sadness he feels at being unable to love and be loved by others. And as the poem proceeds, it seems to bear out these apprehensions. The despair and fatalistic doubt deepens, culminating in an anthropomorphization of the moth:

> But stay and hear me out. I surely think
> You make a labor of flight for one so airy,
> Spending yourself too much in self-support.
> 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.

At this point, the poem begins to turn, and what could have resulted in cosmic despair in which narcissistic self-projection obscures the perception of the Other, results instead in renewed recognition of the Other's discreteness, a recognition that repudiates the self-pity the poet was beginning to fall prey to. The adversitive "But" marks the inception of this shift:

> But go. You are right. My pity cannot help.
> Go till you wet your pinions and are quenched.

Significantly, it is the speaker's awareness of his inability to effect changes, of his powerlessness vis-a-vis the moth that signals the reversal. This awareness spurs another recognition -- the recognition of the discreteness and divergence of their destinies:

> 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.

This recognition allows a full appreciation for the moth's autonomy to emerge. Even while recognizing a kinship with the moth, the poet performs the gesture of release that frees him for a true encounter with its Otherness: "I cannot touch your life, much less can save,/Who am tasked to save my own a little while." As always in Frost, the perception of the limits of one's will and autonomy makes possible both a recognition of Otherness and a communion with it.

"A Considerable Speck" possesses the pathos of "To a Moth Seen in Winter," but adds to it a satirical energy and comic relief that enlarges the poem's dimensions. The poem begins

with one of Frost's idiomatic expressions that literalizes the proverbial:

> A speck that would have been beneath my sight
> On any but a paper sheet so white
> Set off across what I had written there.
> CP, 357-58

Literally but also figuratively "beneath [his] sight," the speck seems so insignificant that the poet is ready to blot it with his pen,

> When something strange about it made me think;
> This was no dust speck by my breathing blown,
> But unmistakably a living mite
> With inclinations it could call its own.

Significantly, it is the strangeness of the speck that induces both a recognition of it and a curiousity about its form. In "The Thatch," the word "strange" also signals Frost's encounter with Otherness: "But the strangest thing: in the thick old thatch,/Where summer birds had been given hatch,/Had fed in chorus, and lived to fledge,/Some still were living in hermitage."

The rest of "A Considerable Speck" charts the transformations in the speaker's attitude toward the mite, and the awakening in him of a compassion that comprehends the plight of the speck as well as of humanity itself. The first action of the mite is to

> pause as with suspicion of my pen,
> And then [come] racing wildly on again
> To where my manuscript was not yet dry.

Already Frost invests the mite with an intelligence whose reconnaissance of its environment is at once sharp and shrewd.

Coming upon the poet's still-wet ink, the mite pauses once again and, after drinking or smelling, "again turn[s] to fly...." "With loathing," Frost slyly adds, endowing the mite with the incipient makings of a critic. The mite's display of detestation for the narrator's writing ironically enhances his opinion of the mite: "Plainly with an intelligence I dealt." This attribution of critical taste to the mite humanizes it, rendering it somehow comprehensible.

Despite the separation of several eons of evolutionary development, mite and poet manage nevertheless to communicate. They interact with one another in a subtle and provocative way. At first, they participate in a kind of cat and mouse game, each trying to comprehend and interpret the actions of the other:

> It ran with terror and with cunning crept.
> It faltered: I could see it hesitate;
> Then in the middle of the open sheet
> Cower down in desperation to accept
> Whatever I accorded it of fate.

As one advances, the other retreats; as one withdraws, the other proceeds. The animal's wariness of Frost bespeaks an awareness of him as a sentient, living creature, capable of meting out its destiny. The creature seems to negotiate with Frost for the terms of its existence.

Eventually, the mite's behavior inspires in Frost a recognition of a motive of self-preservation almost as profound as his own:

> It seemed too tiny to have room for feet,
> Yet must have had a set of them complete
> To express how much it didn't want to die.

The mite runs through a surprisingly wide range of emotion, a range that may be said to span the spectrum of human response to death -- from terror to panic to desperation, finally to complete helplessness and surrender. Because it displays all the primal passion with which living creatures try to evade the inevitable, the mite acquires the lineaments of a distinct personality. The sudden shifts in its behavior bespeak the wild impulsivity of a creature whose irrational mania for existence sufficiently resembles man's own as to be recognizable even to a so-called "rational" creature, such as the speaker himself.

Eventually, the doggedness and ingenuity with which the mite tries to evade death win from the narrator a certain recognition, even respect. He begins to see in the speck a feeling, living creature with drives as powerful as his own. By comprehending its actions and interpreting its behavior, Frost even imparts a rudimentary psychology to the mite.

And because the mite's range of emotion so closely mirrors his own, the speaker spares the mite. Bursting out in a disclaimer of coercive altruism:

> I have none of the tender-than-thou
> Collectivistic regimenting love
> With which the modern world is being swept[,]

The speaker is about to squash the mite, when another impulse intervenes:

> But this poor microscopic item now!
> Since it was nothing I knew evil of
> I let it lie there till I hope it slept.

With the phrase "till I hope it slept," Frost fully humanizes

the mite, identifying the trials of its existence with those of his own. Death becomes a blessing, a sublime liberation from the terror and turmoil of life, but Frost refrains from the blow that would deliver it. Instead, he performs an act of mercy vis-a-vis the mite that allows it to continue its existence unimpeded by Frost's own.

Ironically, Frost stands in the same relation to the mite as, we may imagine, the gods stand in relation to us -- exercising complete authority and discretion. Even though the poem rests the moment of encounter with Otherness on a perception of power rather than powerlessness vis-a-vis the Other, it ultimately concludes with the same point of view as Frost's other poems: an acceptance of the Other's autonomy based on a recognition of the limits of selfhood.

In its feeling, tone, style, and expression, "The Lost Follower" (CP, 358-59) is the consummate example of Frost's tact as a poet. It exhibits a decorum that becomes, in the course of the poem, almost the very ethos the poet indirectly seeks to define as an ideal of both poetic and personal deportment. The poem derives much of its quiet dignity from the speaker's (and, one imagines, Frost speaks here in his own voice) recognition and acceptance of the limits of his own power and perogatives vis-a-vis the subject of the poem. Whereas the "lost follower" rushes out to redeem humanity from social injustice and wrong, the poet-speaker, despite a profound knowledge of the destructive consequences of such a line of action and

significant emotional attachment to the "lost follower," understands the difficulty of doing anything to save his friend. It is not callousness that enforces this knowledge, but respect for the autonomy of the friend. What subverts the moral and, perhaps, poetic genius of the "lost follower" is not his devotion to humanity, but his overextended estimate of his own responsibility toward humanity and ability to transform it. The speaker, on the other hand, perceiving the danger to which the friend makes himself prone, nevertheless (and significantly in contrast to the "follower") comprehends the limitations of his own power.

In addition to working itself out on intellectual and personal levels, the theme of extension works itself out on the emotive level as well. On this level, the act of extension manifests itself as longing, hope, and expectation -- as a cathectic projection of the self beyond its own sphere and its investment in a foreign object. This form of extension, like the others, involves an element of risk, for desire inherently places the self in a vulnerable relation to the world.

The self can only avoid the inherent dangers of desire by suspending desire altogether. One of Frost's philosophical objectives, therefore, is to induce an ataractic state. This state of impassivity serves a protective function in which the self achieves partial invulnerability and even imperviousness; it has minimized its own dependency on the world and has increased its autonomy and control.

If Frost represents desire as an extension of the self, a vesting of the self in possibility, he represents the resistance of desire as a retraction from extension, an entrenchment of the self. Intermeshings with the world are endangering, withdrawal from such intermeshings, safe.

"The Strong Are Saying Nothing" offers the best example of resistance of desire as entrenchment. The last stanza provides the key passage:

> Wind goes from farm to farm in wave on wave,
> But carries no cry of what is hoped to be.
> There may be little or much beyond the grave,
> But the strong are saying nothing until they see.
> CP, 299-300

In contrast to the wind that goes abroad, the strong do not "vent" themselves in expression or prophecy. Such an extension of the self is associated with hoping. The strongs' refusal to vent themselves in hope is seen not only as self-defensive, but even as the source of their strength. Power dwells, significantly, in restraint. Consequently, the strong stay rooted in time and space, resisting the sudden deflations of desire. They seal themselves off from future expectations the way other Frost characters seal themselves off from nature.

iii

The Paradox of Perfection

The fact that Frost portrays the search for Truth metaphorically as the excursion into the Infinite illuminates the inherent uncertainty of the venture. To go in search of Truth is to forsake the safety of a defined environment, an

order, for the danger of an unarticulated realm. The association of the search for Truth with the Infinite also demonstrates Frost's conception of the boundlessness of Truth, its immeasurability. Man cannot encompass Truth within the limited structures of his mental categories. In using an image of limitless extension to portray Truth, Frost also suggests that Truth is beyond our intellective equipment. The search for Truth shall not culminate in any neat, easily apprehended perception or idea. Rather than providing the mind with a determinate form on which to focus, it continually disperses consciousness into endless, unspecifiable extension.

The perception of the Infinite (and of Truth as the Infinite) fundamentally invalidates the very basis upon which man's sense of meaning rests. Frost firmly maintains a distinction between human understanding and Truth. Those concepts of which man can make sense lie within the conditions of human cognition and coherence. Frost is aware, however, that there may be facts that cannot be grasped by human understanding.

In suggesting that the search for Truth leads one beyond comfortable moorings of thought and response, Frost also implies that Truth exists outside of human way-stations. To admit this possibility is to acknowledge that Truth might appear to man, were he to encounter it, incoherent. The Infinite symbolizes this incoherence. Being predicated on limit, order apprehends only a limited degree of Truth. It is no wonder, then, that

those who order their lives in Frost -- like the gaunt man in "The Figure in the Doorway" (CP, 292) -- lead lives of quiet desperation. They have closed themselves off from Truth.

Human consciousness does not create its conception of the world sui generis. Rather, it constructs its understanding of the world from its studious and diligent perceptions. In deriving his sense of order from an elaborate process of abstraction, extrapolation, deduction, verification, induction, and comparison, man makes use primarily of a sense of relation or of his perception of relationships between different objects.

Man's first experiences of the world are of its spatiality -- its spatial extension and the objects that inhabit it. Therefore, man's sense of relation, initially, is primarily spatial. Space provides the initial context and occasion for man's perception of relation and therefore of order. Space (or spatial relation) becomes the basis of man's sense of order.

Man derives a visual sense of relation through the articulation and interruption of blank, uniform space by color and form. And so, with all the senses, it is the interruptive, contrastive object or event that allows man to predicate and perceive relation. The means by which man perceives relation, limit, is itself spatially determined.

Space is not only the ground of man's sense of order, it also frames man's sense of order. Any extrapolation to a more abstract sense of order involves relation and since man's very concept of relation is essentially spatial, an abstract sense of

order must make reference to space. Since man's sense of order becomes the basis for all acts of knowledge, space itself becomes the frame for all such acts. Frost's portrayal of the ordering process as mensurative demonstrates his belief in the spatially oriented nature of knowing. Even the use of the image of frame -- a spatial image -- for the concept of the basis of knowledge, demonstrates the inescapability of spatial modes of knowing. To the extent that an epistemological construct is not referrable back to a paradigm of spatial relation, this construct must seem incoherent to men. As space is the frame of all acts of human knowledge, so assimilability to a paradigm of spatially coherent relation is the condition, and therefore the limit, of intelligibility. Frost's definition of order in terms of limit is, on an epistemological level, a metaphor for the limitations of his own spatializing consciousness.

Frost realizes the inevitable complications caused by a definition of order based on limit. His definition of order as that which can be encompassed corresponds to a definition of meaning as that which can be defined. To define (meaning "to delimit") has inexorably spatial implications -- yet another proof that consciousness is bound to space for its very frame of reference. To define meaning in terms of that which can be defined is to limit the meaning of meaning since every act of definition, insofar as it is spatially determined, implies acts of delimitation -- of exclusion as well as inclusion. To define meaning in terms of definition is therefore to exclude from the

realm of meaning that which cannot be (or has not yet been) defined. Human understanding therefore becomes the measure of meaning or, conversely, man defines meaning in terms of his understanding. Such a definition of meaning narrowly circumscribes it.

If we invoke the original source and paradigm of meaning (the meaning that subsumes all other meanings, and that is, thus, the most meaningful meaning) -- God -- we can see that a necessary condition of such meaning is that it be perfect. Perfection implies completeness. Completeness can be defined as the quality of being defined, delimited, and contained; or it can be defined as the quality of being all-inclusive, ubiquitous. But that which is perfect in the sense of being defined, delimited, and contained cannot be perfect in the sense of being all-inclusive and ubiquitous. Hence, to define God in terms of perfection is to uncover a paradox at the very heart of our conception of perfection (or of God). Similarly, to define meaning in terms of definition is to generate an imperfect notion of meaning. We cannot engender an inclusive definition of meaning based upon definition just as we cannot produce a perfect definition of God based upon perfection -- unless we say that the meaning of perfection is not circumscribed by its own definition. We cannot imagine a structuring principle -- a principle of realization or form -- that does not limit. Put differently, we cannot conceive a principle of limit, or limitation itself, that does not exclude. God must be complete

in both being contained and ubiquitous. All our definitions are imperfect: the definition of God based on the concept of perfection, of meaning in terms of definition, and of order in terms of limit.

Frost envisions the failure of his notion of order and fully perceives that it is limited, yet he cannot transcend it. He is bound to it by his mind's dependency upon space for its frame of reference. Man is confined to a limited notion of order and the image of containment, which represents order, symbolizes for Frost man's imprisonment in a false and imperfect notion of order and, thus, in a false and imperfect world in which order must exclude any cosmic Absolute.

The confinement of consciousness to an imperfect notion of order is analogous to the confinement of mind to a spatially derived frame of reference. Limited space not only represents order; it also represents the limitations of man's concept of order -- the confinement of mind to a spatially derived frame of reference. The limitations of man's consciousness are therefore manifest in the limitations of his sense of order.

Frost represents the desire to transcend limitations, both of his consciousness and of his sense of order, as an attempt to encompass the Infinite, to exhaust and transcend space. Just as defined space represents the confinement of consciousness to a spatially derived mode of reference, so the Infinite represents the mind's transcendence of this confinement. The impossibility of comprehending the Infinite becomes a metaphor for the mind's

dependence on space as its frame of reference. Insofar as Frost uses a spatial image (the Infinite) to convey the mind's transcendence of its spatial frame of reference, he implicitly demonstrates the mind's dependence on that frame. Frost, in effect, resorts to a spatial image to indicate the impossibility of the mind's transcending its own spatializing frame.

The conception of Truth and of the transcendence of our spatially conditioned consciousness as the Infinite suggests that what Frost ultimately seeks is a comprehensive understanding of the world. Such an understanding would include the entire expanse of external space. More than that, it would go beyond spatial modes of construal to apprehend the a-spatial Truth beyond all human categories. Frost's term for this comprehensive understanding is "completeness." Completeness is necessarily precluded by the understanding's reliance on limit -- on incompleteness. Whenever Frost wishes to intimate the Truth that lies beyond our limited mental abilities, beyond limit and order, beyond even Infinitude, he falls back upon the theme of completeness, which becomes Frost's equivalent for the nuominal and numinous Absolute -- the reconciliation of closure with Infinity.

The infrequency of the word "complete" or any of its related forms exerts increased significance upon those few places where it does appear. The word or concept of completeness appears at significant moments of discovery or insight, when Frost articulates his wish for the Absolute. They are analogous to

the "spots of time" passages in Wordsworth.

It is significant that here, where Frost posits the intellective discovery of the Absolute, he still continues to speak in spatially extensile terms. Once again, as Frost approaches the idea of man's transcendence of spatially oriented modes of apprehension, he affirms the irrefragibility and inescapability of these modes.

The Infinite clearly figures as the consummate image, but because it is necessarily unlimited, it can never comprehend itself nor can it contain all of Being. It is complete in the sense of being co-extensive with the All, but it is incomplete in the sense that it does not impose closure on the All: it is uncontained. Even the Infinite, ironically, fails to be complete and therefore fails to serve as Frost's ultimate metaphor for Truth.

The concept of completeness makes its most authoritative appearance in "A Star in A Stoneboat." A laborer, having found a star fallen from the sky, has placed it in a stoneboat and then used it, among other ones, to build a stone wall. The speaker, in order "To right the wrong that this should have been so," now searches stone walls to find the star and move it:

> From following walls I never lift my eye,
> Except at night to places in the sky
> Where showers of charted meteors let fly.
>
> 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;

Sure that though not a star of death and birth,
So not to be compared, perhaps, in worth
To such resorts of life as Mars and Earth--

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

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

Such as it is, it promises the prize
Of the one world complete in any size
That I am like to compass, fool or wise.
CP, 172-74

Significantly, the condition or criterion of "worldness" is not size, but completeness. In the first instance, the condition of worldness is also completeness; the star is a world because it possesses two poles. It possesses the coherence of a cosmos and, we may imagine, such coherence is determined by closure. Even though shrunken to the size of a boulder, the star remains complete. In the second case, the condition of worldness is complexity and multidimensionality -- completeness in the sense of fullness, of possessing all possible options and permutations.

We might think that the first condition -- coherence as defined by closure -- prevents the star from being a cosmos; if it is finite, then it is limited, closed, exclusive -- incomplete. Then, how can Frost ascribe to the same object the quality of completeness and the status of a world? The star becomes a world, we may imagine, because though a fragment of the physical universe, it is an isomorph of and synechdoche for it; it perfectly recapitulates the structure of the cosmos -- a

miniature or microcosmos. We may imagine that the only possibility of completeness for Frost lies in such figurative completeness.

Frost's conception of a world, therefore, is curiously monadic and analogous to his conception of an order -- autonomous, complete, contained, delimited, and defined. Frost's object is to compass such a world, to comprehend it. And this world, could it be compassed, were a prize. The word "promises" opens the poem out onto prospect -- the possibility of achieving perfection. But possessing such a world involves containment as well as closure. Coherence becomes wedded to closure. What Frost desires is the comprehension of an entire world or, even better, a universe.

The other poem in which the concept of completeness figures prominently is "The Lesson for Today." The poem teasingly, if lyrically, engages the issue of which age was more benighted: the Medieval or the Modern. Frost is particularly sensitive to the self-aggrandizing insistence that one's age is the most unfavorable for producing great art, aware of the subtle egotistical satisfaction afforded to failed artists by ascribing their failure to the deficiencies of the age. Arguing the uniform nature of all ages, Frost discredits the ideas of both historical progress and degeneration: all ages are essentially the same in terms of their propitiousness to individual aspiration.

In making use of extensile imagery, the poem affirms the

potency of spatial reference for all acts of knowing. The most emphatic assertion of this determinativeness occurs in the following lines:

> Space ails us moderns: we are sick with space.
> Its contemplation makes us out as small
> As a brief epidemic of microbes
> That in a good glass may be seen to crawl
> The patina of this the least of globes.
> CP, 350-55

Space becomes modern man's peculiar metaphysical and intellective destiny. It is the fundamental, irreducible reality, and as such tends by its own momentousness to render the reality of human existence pitiful and paltry. Speaking of the primacy of the whole over the part, Frost writes:

> As ever when philosophers are met,
> No matter where they stoutly mean to get,
> Nor what particulars they reason from,
> They are philosophers, and from old habit
> They end up in the universal Whole
> As unoriginal as any rabbit.

The "universal Whole" constitutes the inescapable reality that no amount of subterfuge, rationalization, or pretense can abrogate or deny. Further, in punning on "hole," Frost literally reconciles the two meanings of completeness (Infinity and closure).

The poem relates cognitive understanding to spatial extension, its awareness of their relationship pivoting on the word "comprehend":

> They've tried to grasp with too much social fact
> Too large a situation. You and I
> Would be afraid if we should comprehend
> And get outside too much bad statistics,
> Our muscles never could again contract:

We never could recover human shape,
But must live lives out mentally agape
Or die of philosophical distention.
That's how we feel--and we're no special mystics.

In terms of its metaphorical underpinnings, the word "comprehend" involves a spatialized awareness. To comprehend an idea or concept is to enclose it in one's mental grasp -- to encompass it. Hence, to "comprehend" a situation, as Frost demonstrates, is to "get outside" it. The metaphorical lineaments of the term illustrate that the act of understanding involves a separation from what one understands so that the agent of knowledge in the act of knowing is excluded from the object of its knowledge. Hence, knowledge must always involve a distance between the mind and its meaning, the term and its elucidation; mind cannot penetrate meaning, cannot become one with it. Frost's metaphorization deliberately develops the spatial referent in phrases such as "get outside of," "contract," and "distention."

Frost's use of spatializing metaphors in "The Lesson for Today" to refer to the act of knowledge finds its consummate expression at the end of the poem where, having turned his thoughts to the question of "how long a man may think to live," he conflates the temporal and the spatial:

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.

Frost sees time as a spatial entity; his figure for it is a linear projection, a graphic trajectory. His assertion of the

finitude of man's "time extension" makes us ask if there is any limit to the extension of time itself. Man's life is temporally limited, but is the life of time limited? One could conceivably derive from these lines a belief in time's infinitude. As Frost develops the spatial metaphor of human life as a kind of linear projection, he simultaneously develops the idea of its finitude: "We are all doomed to broken-off careers,/And so's the nation, so's the total race." Human life, in these lines, is a temporary interval -- a finite segment -- strung along the infinite continuum of time. The metaphor of "broken-off" suggests that the termination of human life, of man's "time extension," is sudden, irrevocable, drastic, and, most importantly, externally imposed. Frost might have chosen a different metaphor for the termination of human life, such as expiration, subsidence, decline, or even abortion; the fact that he chose violent, external imposition suggests that he wishes us to see death as an impairment. The term of breaking off implies that human life remains incomplete -- imperfect. It is as if Frost wishes to view human life as prevented from assuming the lineaments of completeness, not because it is finite, but because it is arrested prior to the moment when it might have achieved completeness. One could argue that the alternative to a broken-off career is one that is eternal. Yet it is also possible that Frost has in mind a career that is, though not infinite, nevertheless complete, fulfilled. The tragedy of human life, in this view, is not that it is finite, but that it

is not allowed to complete itself.

We can therefore speak of a third kind of completeness, one defined (not all-inclusive), but that achieves a kind of completeness from its internal coherence and cohesiveness. It hangs together, consolidated by a complex series of principles, laws, tensions, and continuities that, defining it as a limited whole, also define it as an integral order, an autonomous entity. In this way, even though the completed object is incomplete, it achieves a symbolic wholeness.

For Frost, this third kind of completeness becomes, finally, the only viable form of perfection that man may know. Man is intellectually defeated by nature's vastness and space's infinitude, but through certain forms of esthetic and intellectual activity, man can make and construct orders, objects, and artifacts whose symbolic and virtual completeness compensate for his inability to achieve a fully comprehensive point of view. Thus, Frost writes, in an effort at reconciliation with fate, "I take my incompleteness with the rest." Frost joins the common brotherhood, accepting his own inevitable defeat and limitation. Yet, punning on "the rest," Frost points to his underlying, undefeated consciousness of persistent value and heroism; through the making and articulating of order and orders, of poems along with other artifacts, man resists defeat and achieves, even if only provisionally, the trappings and accoutrements of wholeness.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Lawrance Thompson, ed., Selected Letters of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), March 25, 1935, pp. 417-19

[2] Both "To An Ancient" (CP, 382) and "A Cliff Dwelling" (CP, 392) extend their gaze backward to the prehistoric era of man. "Etherealizing" (CP, 394), "Why Wait For Science" (CP, 395), and "Some Science Fiction" (C, 465-66) extend their vision far into the future.

[3] The poems in which an eschatological perspective is prominent are: "It Bids Pretty Fair" (CP, 392), "Why Wait For Science" (CP, 395), "The Planners" (CP, 397), "Bursting Rapture" (CP, 398), "The Broken Drought" (CP, 399-400).

[4] Examples of poems that exhibit such nonchalance and esprit de corps include "Two Leading Lights" (CP, 390), "A Wish to Comply" (CP, 391-92), and "America Is Hard To See" (CP, 416-19).

[5] Like match-flames that flare up momentarily in the darkness and then as suddenly disappear, "A Wish To Comply" and "Away" (CP, 412-13) provide excellent examples whose endings are as indeterminate as their openings.

[6] Both "Away" and "A Draft Horse" (CP, 443-44) are conspicuous examples of an economy of language and movement that seems to "reduce" all of reality to purely symbolic dimensions (save for those obtrusive details that will be noted below).

[7] Thomas Mann, "Homage," in Franz Kafka, The Castle (New York: Random House, 1969), p. xvi

[8] Sometimes the act of extension occurs visually, as in "The Most of It" (CP, 338).

[9] "Kitty Hawk" (CP, 428-43, ll. 334-35)

[10] "Kitty Hawk" (ll. 201-02)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abel, Darrel. "Unfriendly Nature in the Poetry of Robert Frost." Colby Library Quarterly. 1981 Dec. 17 (4): 201-210

Baker, Carlos. "Frost on the Pumpkin," Georgia Review, XI (Summer 1957), 117-31

Boroff, Marie. Language and the Poet: Verbal Artistry in Frost, Stevens, and Moore. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press; 1979. 198 pp.

Brooks Cleanth. "Frost and Nature." Wilcox, Earl J., ed. Robert Frost: The Man and the Poet. Rock Hill: Winthrop College; 1981. 3:1-56.

Brower, Reuben. The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intentions. New York: Oxford University Press, 1963

Carlson, Eric W. "Robert Frost on `Vocal Imagination´: the Merger of Form and Content," American Literature XXXIII (January, 1962) 519-522

Ciardi, John "Robert Frost: The Way to the Poem," The Saturday Review, XLI (April 12, 1958), 13-15, 65.

Coffin, Robert P. Tristram. New Poets of New England: Frost and Robinson. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1938.

Cook, Reginald C. "Frost on Analytical Criticism," College English XVII (May, 1956), 434-438.

Cook, Reginald L. The Dimensions of Robert Frost. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc. 1958.

Cox and Lathem, ed. Selected Prose of Robert Frost. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1966

Cox, James M. ed. Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, N.Y.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1962

Cox, James M. "Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing," Virginia Quarterly Review, XXXV (Winter, 1959).

Cox, Sidney. A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost. New York: New York University Press, 1957.

Cox, Sidney. "The Courage to be New: A Reappraisal of Robert Frost," Vermont History, XXII (April, 1954), 119-126.

Eliot, T. S. "Gerontion" in T.S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909-1962. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich. 1970

Eliot, T. S. "Tennyson: In Memoriam," Robert W. Hill, Jr., ed., Tennyson's Poetry (New York: W. W. Norton and Co, Inc, 1971).

Fleissner, Robert F. "Frost and Keats: Sharers of Intensity." Notes on Contemporary Literature. 1981 March: 11 (2): 2-4.

Gould, Jean. The Aim Was Song. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1964

Hartman, Geoffrey H. Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1964.

Isaacs Elizabeth. An Introduction to Robert Frost. Denver: Allan Swallow, 1962

Lathem, Edward Connery ed., The Poetry of Robert Frost New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969.

Mann, Thomas. "Homage," in Kafka, Franz, The Castle. New York: Random House. 1969.

Melville, Herman. Moby-Dick. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. 1964

Montgomery, Marion. "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers" in Cox, James M. ed. Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, N.Y.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1962

Morse, Samuel French. "Robert Frost: Society and Solitude." pp. 131-143 in Naggel, James, ed.; Astro, Richard, ed. American Literature: The New England Heritage. New York: Garland, 1981.

Mulder, William. "Freedom and Form: Robert Frost's Double Discipline," South Atlantic Quarterly, LIV (July, 1955).

Munson, Gorham. Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense. New York, George H. Doran, 1927.

Newdick, Robert S. "Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense," American Literature, IX (November, 1937), 289-300.

Newdick, Robert S. "Robert Frost and the Dramatic," New England Quarterly, X (June, 1937).

Newdick, Robert S. "Robert Frost's Other Harmony," Sewanee Review, XLVIII (July-September, 1940).

Nitchie, George W. "Robert Frost and the Unwritten Epic," 39-

48 in Wilcox, Earl J., ed. Robert Frost: The Man and the Poet. Rock Hill; Dept. of English Winthrop College, 19981 iii, 156 pp. (Winthrop Studies on Major Modern Writers).

Ogilvie, John T. "From Woods to Stars: A Pattern of Imagery in Robert Frost's Poetry," South Atlantic Quarterly, LVIII (Winter 1959).

Parini, Jay. "Emerson and Frost: The Present Act of Vision." SR. 1981 Spring; 89 (2): 206-227.

Pearce, Roy Harvey. "Frost's Momentary Stay," Kenyon Review XXIII Spring, 1961, 258-73.

Poirier, Richard. Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Pritchard, William. Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered New York: Oxford University Press, 1984

Sergeant, Elizabeth Shepley. Robert Frost: The Trial of Existence. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1960.

Smythe, Daniel. Robert Frost Speaks. New York, Twayne, 1964.

Squires, Radcliffe. The Major Themes of Robert Frost. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963.

Thompson, Lawrance. Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1942.

--------, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1966

--------, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1970.

--------, ed. Selected Letters of Robert Frost. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1964.

--------, Lawrance and Winnick, R.H. Robert Frost: A One-Volume Edition. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. 1981

Thoreau, Henry David. Walden in Bradley, Beatty, and Long. The American Tradition in Literature, volume I. 3rd ed. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Inc. 1967

Winters, Yvor. "Robert Frost, or the Spiritual Drifter as Poet," Sewanee Review, LVI (Autumn, 1958).