

THE PESSIMISTIC SIDE OF ROBERT FROST

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PREFACE

Robert Frost has frequently been criticized as not being concerned with the problems facing man today. He has often been thought of as simply a poet of "good" poems--a picture he may have encouraged through his personal appearances. Some critics believe that Frost either could not or did not confront the modern situation; other critics believe that he comprehends the problems of the contemporary world and remains optimistic about the future. In many of Frost's poems, on the contrary, he reflects a pessimistic view of the modern world and modern man. The purpose of this study is to depict Frost's pessimistic side. I shall point out his skeptical ideas about nature, man, and God that appear in his poems.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost is often considered to be simply a writer of "good" poems that can be easily understood by readers. Admired and read for his presentation of an accurate picture of rural New England, Frost has become known as a "personality" as well as a poet. He is frequently set apart from the other modern poets because he does not seem to fit in the main current of modern poetry; readers do not think he deals with the "dark" side of human nature. They seem to believe that Frost could not or would not confront the problems of the modern world. Needless to say, some readers of Frost were shocked when at the celebration of the poet's eighty-fifth birthday Lionel Trilling referred to Frost as a "terrifying poet." However, a perceptive reader may find much in Frost's poetry that cannot be dismissed lightly. Not only will he find Frost concerned with the problems facing the individual today, but he will find that many of Frost's poems present a pessimistic outlook of life; others reflect a certain qualified optimism that cannot be interpreted to be hopeful.

The literary critics disagree about the value of Robert Frost's poetry; their criticism reflects a changing conception of him from a simple, bucolic poet to a profound writer. During the thirties there was an almost complete absence of criticism of Frost's work.

He was simply ignored or dismissed as being unworthy of serious consideration. There are many survivors of that era who still have difficulty believing that he is a poet, insisting he is really nothing more than a crackerbarrel versifier speaking with a pronounced New England accent.¹

Some of the earlier criticism of Frost seemed to recognize him as a poet but was mainly concerned with his personality to the extent of almost ignoring his art.² Although the early criticism offered attitudes toward and some insights into Frost's poetry, it would not be considered especially valuable criticism since it furnished a scholarly appraisal of neither his poetry nor his value as a poet.

However, such appraisal was forthcoming, and one of the first critics who offered it is Lawrance Thompson in Fire and Ice, in which he attempts to give a description of the whole of Frost's poetry. Thompson's book provides insights into Frost's forms, his content, and poetry in general. Although he does not classify Frost as either pessimistic or optimistic in his outlook toward life, Thompson believes Frost is aware of the problems of living in "such a hopelessly wicked old world as this."³ Later, in "A Native to the Grain

of American Idiom," Thompson labels Frost the "witness-tree" of Yankee optimism and confidence. He argues that

Fear of lostness or defeat gets counterbalanced, for Frost, by man's persistent and metaphorical demonstrations of difficulties overcome, starting and ending with the great problems as to 'how the limited can make snug in the limitless.'⁴

Frost, according to Thompson, believes in "the individual's God-given capacity to assert some limited degree of order and form and meaning on the chaos and confusion of immediate human experience."⁵ In another critical work on Frost, Robert Frost, Thompson discusses some of the "contraries" in the poet and surveys each volume of poetry written by Frost. Another critic Daniel Hodges McCalib, in "The World of Robert Frost: A Study of the Forms of Reality as Expressed in his Work," studies Frost's philosophical side. He argues that Frost is an "idealistically-tinged pragmatist." Another critic of Frost who wrote about this same time was Anna Mae Lyon. In "Recurrent Themes in the Poetry of Robert Frost" she discovers that Frost has a great range of themes (four major themes and four minor themes which are recurrent) and thinks that Frost writes upon these themes with "great sensitivity." Later, Robert Paul Jolly in "Robert Frost as a Dramatic Poet" argues that Frost has only two subjects, man-in-nature and men living together, and two techniques, the lyric and dramatic. Frost's modifications of poetic drama seem to Jolly an indication of his greatness as a poet.

Another great body of literary criticism of Frost's work that should not be overlooked is the large number of explications of individual poems. Although these articles do not make any comprehensive study of Frost's work, they have offered and continue to offer insight into his "thought" and discussion of his poetry in general. Moreover, the change in the critical approach to Frost's poetry is reflected in the interpretations given to individual poems.⁶

Much criticism of Frost, especially the many books written within the last ten years, reflects the prevailing division of opinion on the merit of his work and his place among modern poets. One group of critics finds Frost to be a valuable poet at times but believes that his limitations outweigh his strengths. For example, Cleanth Brooks, in his Modern Poetry and the Tradition, believes that Frost at his best is a good poet, but that

Much of Frost's poetry hardly rises above the level of the vignette of rural New England. . . . Frost's themes are frequently stated overtly; . . . the poet comes downstage to philosophize explicitly. . . . At his best, of course, Frost does not philosophize. The anecdote is absorbed into symbol. The method of indirection operates fully: the sense of the realistic detail, the air of casual comment, are employed to build up and intensify a serious effect.⁷

Malcolm Cowley, in agreement with Brooks, finds that Frost at his best has added to America's "little store of authentic poetry"⁸ but that he has also written many bad poems. He

believes Frost was "too much walled in by the past" and this has prevented him from reaching out toward society. Frost, according to Cowley, does nothing about the modern situation, remaining safely at the edge of the woods. Furthermore, M. L. Rosenthal, in The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction believes that Frost "echoes" dreary wisdom which is overly dependent "on a less and less meaningful past." Rosenthal states:

What oft was thought, and oft as well expressed. Despite his great virtues, you cannot read a great deal of Frost without this effect of déjà vu. Sententiousness and a relative absence of formal daring are his main defects. Even in his finest work, the conventionality of rhythm and rhyme contributes a certain tedium, temporarily relegated to a dim corner of the reader's consciousness.⁹

Similarly, Yvor Winters thinks that "Frost represents a morally irresponsible figure whose evasion of issues has rendered him incapable of meeting problems seriously or seeing them clearly."¹⁰ Because Frost fails to accept the poet's responsibility to tell the truth, he does not convey any wisdom. According to Winters, the poet's views "cut Frost off from any really profound understanding of human experience. . . ." ¹¹ Frost, concludes Winters, "is in no sense a great poet, but he is at times a distinguished and valuable poet."¹² Moreover, George W. Nitchie, in his Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost, presents what James M. Cox calls the "most coherent and responsible

statement of the case against Frost."¹³ According to Nitchie, "Frost tends to shy away from explicit statements of a theory of nature, or of man's relationship with nature."¹⁴ His "philosophy is improvised along a line of shrewd aphorisms instead of resting on a systematic and coherent body of thought; and its poetics, rather than showing commitment to the unity of metaphor, falls back on simile and whimsy."¹⁵ ". . . Frost has found 'no real basis on which to ground his life and work'."¹⁶ Although Nitchie believes Frost is a poet of some depth, he finds his work is "less serious and coherent than proper for a poet of the first rank."¹⁷ Another critic Roy Harvey Pearce, in his "Frost's Momentary Stay," believes that the value of Frost's poetry is that it is not quite "available." Pearce warns, however, that in reading Frost's poetry "we may find ourselves adrift in a world we, not Frost, have made."¹⁸

While these critics emphasize the limitations of Robert Frost, others demonstrate that his achievements far surpass his limitations. For example, Radcliffe Squires claims that Frost is only "modern" in the sense that he is not Victorian or Georgian; however, he is not "modern" because he is not like any of his contemporaries. According to Squires, the genius of Frost is the versatility of his poetry. In his poems he moves toward a theme; Frost may begin with a personal experience, but he broadens his poems so that they are not limited. On the other hand, Marion Montgomery believes

that Frost's best poetry is "concerned with the drama of man in nature. . . ." ¹⁹ In analyzing the relationship of man and nature in her article "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature Toward God," she discovers that Frost sees barriers everywhere and that man's recognition of these barriers is important for his sanity. Another critic, Thornton H. Parsons, claims that Frost is a philosophic poet; in his "The Humanism of Robert Frost: A Study in Parallels," Parsons places Frost within the tradition of humanism and discusses the parallels of Frost's humanism and that of Babbitt and Thoreau. On the other hand, Caroline Ford in The Less Traveled Road believes that

The essence of Frost's power lies in his combination of philosophical attitudes. His most profound truths are set in the middle of poems which strike one as ridiculous. His humor is surrounded by pathos. The ideas may be commonplaces but their new juxtaposition surprises sufficiently to arrest the attention, and make one realize their significance in a new light. ²⁰

In New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson, Robert Tristram Coffin points out the greatness of Frost as a "poet of people" and applauds his use of common people as they appear in life. According to Coffin, Frost does not blame the troubles of his people on the "capitalists or environment," but "on the way life is built and the way they are built." ²¹ However, his people are not "people of defeat and the sunset. They are people of the sunrise." ²² The strength

of Frost's poetry is that his "particulars everywhere run out to great universals."²³ Similarly, John F. Lynen believes Frost is an important modern poet because he is concerned with the modern problems. He thinks Frost confronts

the central facts of twentieth century experience, the uncertainty and painful sense of loss, are there and seem if anything more bleakly apparent in that their social and economic manifestations have been stripped away.²⁴

Although Lynen published his The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost the same year that Nitchie published Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost, he comes to the opposite conclusion that Nitchie does. According to Lynen, "Failure to recognize the modernity of Frost's thought is largely due to the fact that his verse lacks the traits of style which seem characteristic of modern poetry."²⁵ He claims it is time to recognize Frost "as the major figure in contemporary literature that he is He has explored wide and manifold ranges of being by viewing reality within the mirror of the natural and unchanging world of rural life."²⁶ In "The Strength of Robert Frost" Alfred Kazin points out that Frost's poetry is about the strength needed for living one's life. Likewise, Mark Van Doren believes that Frost is a philosophic poet and that his "subject is the world: a huge and ruthless place which men will never quite understand, any more than they will understand themselves. . . ."²⁷ However, he does not think Frost is pessimistic in his outlook toward the world;

"the universe in question is presented as a grim bleak place, but the longer one stares at it the warmer it seems, and the more capable of justifying itself beneath the stars."²⁸

According to Van Doren, Frost is read more and more because "he has so much to say"--so much to be found "behind" his poems, not "in" them. Robert Francis also comments on the ellipsis in Frost's poems. According to the Francis article "The Shared Solitude of Robert Frost,"

Robert Frost belongs to an older tradition in which the poet does not confess everything but communicates, or does his best to communicate, all that he sees fit to confess. . . . If the reader has to work to get the full meaning, it is not because of private symbols or esoteric allusions but rather because of compression or ellipsis inherent in the poem.²⁹

Another critic who believes Frost's achievements outweigh his limitations, Reginald L. Cook, states, in "The Stand of Robert Frost, Early and Late," that Frost's poems deal with the drama of human situations "Because the poet is interested in the way human beings take what has to be taken, whether with courage or fear, resourceful ingenuity or irrational defiance. . . ." ³⁰ Cook believes that Frost "sees without awe the tragic possibilities in nature. . . ." ³¹ As Cook points out in his more extended work, The Dimensions of Robert Frost, Frost "has not failed to see the outrageous spectacle of human pretension, the fallibility and vulgar errors of man." ³² He realizes that "the only credit we deserve is for what we do with our God-given intelligence

in the face of the inevitable."³³ Frost, according to Cook, does not become involved in a vain search for esoteric truth; instead, he desires to start the reader thinking about nature and the destiny of man. In spite of the indifference of the universe, Frost's man is not beset by forces he cannot overcome. Cook argues that "No matter how badly things have gone, Frost thinks there is a fractional advantage on man's side. The odds he quotes in favor of man's winning through are narrow--fifty and one tenth to forty-nine and nine tenths."³⁴ On the other hand, John Ciardi does not seem to find Frost quite so confident of man's ability to cope with life. As he points out in "Robert Frost, Master Conversationalist at Work," Frost believes that

We have plunged into the smallness of particulars and we are plunging into the hugeness of space--but not without fears that the spirit shall be lost. . . . But in taking us deeper and deeper into matter, science has left all of us with this great misgiving, this fear that we won't be able to substantiate.³⁵

In his later article "Robert Frost: American Bard," Ciardi states that Frost was basically "a poet of impassioned light-and dark."³⁶ Ciardi argues that "There is a darkness of doubt as well as a radiance of hope in his [Frost's] vision of America, and he will speak both truths to his people."³⁷ Reuben A. Brower also shows that Frost is concerned with how man confronts life, and he argues that for Frost life can only have meaning when viewed as belonging to the past.

However, as Brower points out in his book The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention, Frost's man must face life without the benefit of any "absolutes." Another critic, Philip Booth, states in "Journey Out of a Dark Forest," that although Frost may at one time have been the "Drumlin Woodchuck," as he matured he faced the problems of the "unknown."

Old poems like 'The Demiurge's Laugh,' 'The Road Not Taken,' 'Desert Places,' 'Come In,' and 'Directive' map, in sequence, the road Frost took into the dark woods, and record the serial ordeal he survived by surrendering himself to the conflicts such poems dramatize.³⁸

Accordingly, Frost's best poems are those that confront the conflicts between man and nature, mind and heart, science and spirit, "by exploring the dark woods that repeatedly symbolize the unknown. . . ." ³⁹ Similarly, Robert Norton Ganz, Jr., in "The Pattern of Meaning in Robert Frost's Poetry," finds in Frost's poetry the reflection of "the experience of living in an unsettled society and addresses itself to the problem of how, or to what extent, the modern world can achieve any sense that there is a wholeness in human experience through time." ⁴⁰ Frost, according to Ganz,

believes in the power of the individual to save himself, and in the power of love to breach in places, the wall that separates man from man. . . . He believes in a God; and he believes in the human capacity to endure a lifetime of uncertainty about Him.⁴¹

John Robert Doyle, Jr., also believes Frost is a major figure among modern poets. In his The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis he argues that Frost is a natural skeptic who frequently refuses to give final or absolute answers; "yet, despite his skepticism, he has not developed a negative attitude towards life."⁴² Doyle thinks that Frost believes man has the courage to meet the "actuality" of life and win over it.

Perhaps one of the most enthusiastic Frost supporters is Randall Jarrell, who argues in his Poetry and the Age that

The real complication, sophistication, and ambiguity of Frost's thought [What poet since Arnold has written so much about isolation, and said so much more about it than Arnold? what other poet, long before we had begun to perfect the means of altogether doing away with humanity, had taken as an obsessive subject the wiping-out of man, his replacement by the nature, out of which he arose?], the range and depth and height of his poems, have had justice done to them by neither his admirers nor his detractors. . . .⁴³

Jarrell believes that "Frost is that rare thing, a complete or representative poet, and not one of the brilliant partial poets who do justice, far more than justice, to a portion of reality, and leave the rest of things forlorn."⁴⁴ Jarrell is aware of the failure of the New Criticism to do Frost justice and he calls for a "re-vision" of Frost. Similarly, James M. Cox thinks Frost is a valuable poet; in his introduction to Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays he applauds

the modern criticism on Frost. In his "Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing" Cox claims "he [Frost] has forced a clearing in the woods"; he has braved "the alien entanglements of experience."⁴⁵ Likewise, Hyatt Howe Waggoner in The Heel of Elohim counters earlier criticism of Frost's reluctance to "go into the dark woods," to confront the predicament of the modern world, by explaining that Frost's move in a "disciplined acceptance" but not approval of the modern world--"a strategic retreat" in order to accept a "diminished thing." In addition, Peter Viereck in "Parnassus Divided" rates Frost as a "great New England tragic poet" who is gazing without dizziness from behind a "benign calm, the cosmic mask of a whittling rustic" in a "tragic abyss of desperation." Moreover, Lionel Trilling in "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode" labels Frost as a "terrifying poet" and claims "the universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe."⁴⁶ Trilling thought Frost "made plain to them [his readers] the terrible things of human life. . . ."⁴⁷ But, even as Trilling was exclaiming this, Robert Langbaum in "The New Nature Poetry" was stating that although Frost is aware of nature's destructiveness, seldom are his examples of it very frightening. According to Langbaum, "To consider nature purposively dangerous is also to commit the pathetic fallacy. Besides, nature in Frost never is so dangerous that his speakers cannot protect themselves against it."⁴⁸ In addition Langbaum says that

In the sheer power to render nature, Frost may well be our best nature poet since Wordsworth. Yet, it is because Frost's sense of nature is so like Wordsworth's that he does not play in our time the role Wordsworth played in his, that he leads us away from rather than to the center of the pre-occupation of the time.⁴⁹

Furthermore, James G. Hepburn in "Robert Frost and His Critics" claims that the reader, at the end of such poems as "Stopping by the Woods," "is nearer to being sleepy than to being frightened by or purged of the terrors of the universe."⁵⁰ Hepburn seems to join the "old core" of Frost admirers when he states that Frost is a lyric poet and that the aim of lyric poetry is "implication--song--not explication." At the same time, J. Donald Adams in his column in The New York Times Book Review was saying that Frost, no matter how terrifying Trilling may have found his poetry, "was not afraid to go home in the dark."⁵¹ However, Adams does claim that Frost is a tragic poet who makes a courageous acceptance of the modern world. "Frost simply sees the world as it is and accepts it. He isn't terrified by what he sees. . . ."⁵² Likewise, Elizabeth Isaacs in her An Introduction to Robert Frost finds Frost too much at home in the universe to be frightened by it. She ties Frost with an "informal existentialism" because many of his poems

find in the modern conception of man an essence of the tragic hero--whose very dignity comes from a reconciliation of the tragic insight with what is scientifically known. . . . This tragic insight seems to embrace a proud, deliberate self-affirmation that defeats mere determinism.⁵³

Frost, Isaacs states, "is still convinced with a kind of Calvinistic fortitude of the necessity of suffering, and he accepts it stoically with good nature as a part of man's human condition."⁵⁴ However, she concludes that "Still his is a poetry that ends with hope; the tragic wise hope of those who through the ages have outstared the abyss."⁵⁵

Although even the most recent critics of Frost cannot agree on the value of meaning of his work, the modern trend in criticism is to rate him as a major poet whose work has both value and depth. Most modern critics believe Frost deals with the problems which confront modern man.

In this paper it will be argued that Robert Frost is a poet with a skeptical view of the modern world and modern man--a view which depicts man's inability to know any ultimate truths. Although his pessimistic outlook of life is not reflected in all of his work, it is present in a large number of poems written throughout his career, and not tied to any one period. Frost, as a largely pessimistic poet, is often preoccupied with problems of despair and loneliness. As will be argued, Frost views the growing indifference of the modern world with concern and depicts man as being placed in a universe that he either cannot understand or does not put forth the effort to understand. This universe fails to show man any sympathetic understanding; moreover, man is frequently left to doubt the existence of a plan or design for the universe and, of course, if there is

no design, then there cannot be a designer. Likewise, if there is a "design of darkness," then there would be a demoniacal designer; or if there is an incomplete, incoherent or defective plan, then perhaps an imperfect designer. However, if an omnipotent designer does exist, he too is unsympathetic or indifferent to man because he makes no attempt to guide man through life or to become involved with the success or failure of man's life. Instead, he leaves man to make his own decisions with seemingly no guide but chance to enable him to make the "right" choices; Frost's man must learn to cope with a world that is filled with uncertainties.

CHAPTER II

FROST'S NATURAL WORLD

"In the sheer power to render nature, Frost may well be our best nature poet since Wordsworth."¹ However, like Wordsworth's, Frost's central concern in describing nature is not simply to present the beauty he finds in the natural world. "For Frost, nature is really an image of the whole world of circumstances within which man finds himself."² Frost's main purpose in presenting nature is to depict its³ relationship to man and his to it. "Whenever Frost talks directly to or directly of natural objects or creatures, we feel that he is really looking at man out of the corner of his eye and speaking to him out of the corner of his mouth."⁴ Perhaps one of the most important ideas Frost wishes man to understand about nature is that, contrary to past beliefs or superstitions, nature is unsympathetic to him; it remains indifferent to him and his struggles.

One of the first steps to making man realize nature's apathy is to discredit the pantheistic philosophy of nature; therefore, in "The Demiurge's Laugh" (1913) Frost seems to be trying to disqualify the pantheistic view. In the poem the man runs into the woods pursuing the "spirit" of nature.

It was far in the sameness of the wood;
 I was running with joy on the Demon's trail,
 Though I knew what I hunted was no true god.⁵

The man "rejects the notion that nature itself is divine or that a comforting progressive principle is built into it."⁶ But, while in the forest the man does hear a laugh from somewhere.

The sound was behind me instead of before,
 A sleepy sound, but mocking half,
 As of one who utterly couldn't care. (p. 35)

Thus, if there is a "spirit" within nature, rather than being kindly toward man it is only mocking. The spirit is indifferent to the needs of the man.

I shall not forget how his laugh rang out.
 I felt as a fool to have been so caught,
 And checked my steps to make pretense
 It was something among the leaves I sought. (p. 35)

Therefore, the man who set out in search of something within nature only meets with mockery for having desired communion with nature. The poem ends by "taking nature as being. . . less than divine, in fact less than human, and remote from human concerns; and assuming that 'the way of understanding' our relationship with the outer world 'is partly mith [sic]!'"⁷

Frost frequently warns man against projecting into nature emotional reactions to his own human problems. For instance, "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" (1923) cautions man not to expect nature to grieve for him. The poem begins

with a description of a farm whose house has been destroyed by fire; only the barn remains to mark the spot of the lost farm.

The barn opposed across the way,
That would have joined the house in flame
Had it been the will of the wind, was left
To bear forsaken the place's names. (p. 300)

Man's welfare seems to be left to the whim of nature because nature also had within its power the ability to destroy the barn but did not--it simply was not "the will of the wind." The speaker of the poem, however, seems to entertain the idea that the birds miss the presence of the people who used to live on the farm.

Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh
From too much dwelling on what has been. (p. 300)

But, as the man looks about him, he notices that nature has replenished itself, with apparent unconcern as to whether man is capable of doing the same.

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

For them there was really nothing sad.
But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
One had to be versed in country things
Not to believe the phoebes wept. (p. 300)

Thus, nature perpetuates itself but does not seem to notice if man does the same. It does not weep over the disappearance

of the people from the farm. Frost cautions "against attributing to nature or its creatures emotional complexities of grief or regret for the life that has vanished with the burned farm house. . . ." ⁸ He seems to discover the natural world to be "impersonal, unfeeling, and at best animal creation. . . ." ⁹

Frost portrays man's growing realization of cosmic nature's indifference to him in "Stars" (1913). In the poem the speaker looks up at the stars and remarks how they seem to stare down at man.

As if with keenness for our fate,
 Our faltering few steps on
 To white rest, and a place of rest
 Invisible at dawn,--

And yet with neither love nor hate,
 Those stars like some snow-white
 Minerva's snow-white marble eyes
 Without the gift of sight. (p. 12) ¹⁰

"The speaker is stirred by his awareness that the stars do not share man's complex emotional life." ¹¹ The stars continue to stare down like "marble eyes" seeing nothing as man struggles on. "Underneath the indifferent stars, mankind falters on toward he knows not what, for his place of rest is 'Invisible at dawn--'." ¹² The poem depicts the inscrutability and remoteness of nature, its utter unconcern for the struggles of "faltering" man. ¹³

In the meditation "The Most of It" (1942) Frost explores the themes of the indifference and inscrutability of nature

along with the loneliness of human nature. The man in the poem, just as the man in "The Demiurge's Laugh," goes out into "nature," seeking a personal reply from it to his call; he wants nature to give him some sign of its love or concern for human life. "Man is never completely certain that the earth, the natural world, returns his love."¹⁴ Indeed, frequently he is forced to doubt the existence of such sympathy.

He thought he kept the universe alone;
 For all the voice in answer he could wake
 Was but the mocking echo of his own
 From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
 Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
 He would cry out on life, that what it wants
 Is not its own love back in copy speech,
 But counter-love, original response. (p. 451)

The man hears only the "mocking echo" of his own voice from the landscape but longs for some personal response. He does not simply want a reflection of his own love; instead, he desires "counter-love, original response." However, he does not receive an answer in a form that he can understand.

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. (p. 451)

Man never receives an answer to his quest unless it is the buck. There is such a gulf between man and nature that man could not recognize a sign of love if nature were to give him one; "the universe never gives us either a black or a

white answer, but only a black-and-white one that is somehow not an answer at all. . . ."15 However, the buck of the poem was "the most of it"--all that nature had to give in response to the love of man. After nature had given this buck, "that was all." In answer to man's call, nature could simply return the echo of his voice or give that which belonged to it in the form of the buck. Although the answer given by nature, if it is an answer, is not what man expected, he will have to "make the most of it." But, if the buck is the sign from nature, it does not indicate love or concern for man because it simply passed him by and was gone. Therefore, the man in the poem does not find the "counter-love, original response" he is seeking; nature either cannot or does not give this type of sympathy to man. The poem "represents a momentary insight into the vast and brute indifference of nature. . . ."16 Frost's "The Most of It" and "The Second Coming" by Yeats are strikingly parallel, despite the latter poem's being cast as a vision and the extreme materiality of Frost's poem. Both poems involve the manifestation of an enigmatic embodiment to man and both speculate on the meaning of this embodiment. Frost's poem may imply a rejection of Christianity by Frost. Since God is traditionally conceived of as Love and the man was seeking "counter-love," it could be assumed that the man was in quest of God or at least some sign of God's presence within the universe so that the man could be certain that he did not keep the universe alone--that God was still the

controlling force in man's world. Although God at one time sent Christ as the embodiment of Himself to reassure man of His love, the man in "The Most of It" receives only the buck. However, there is perhaps an implied contrast between the buck and Christ. Both are embodiments--the one of the Word, the other of the inscrutability and indifference of nature. A certain amount of mystery surrounds the origin of each--the buck simply "crashed" into the water and swam across. Just as Christ is God incarnate, so the buck is nature "imbuted." But, the buck does not reflect God's love toward man that was shown by Christ. Moreover, the buck is indifferent to the presence of the man since it simply "forced the underbrush" and was gone. This brute embodiment is inscrutable to man; he cannot even be sure that it is a sign or, if it is, he is unable to comprehend it.

Frost again depicts the breach between nature and man in "A Minor Bird" (1928). Here, however, the fault for the lack of communion seems to be more man's than nature's. The man in the poem becomes irritated at a bird that sits beside his house and sings all day. As he attempts to chase the bird away, he realizes that there must be something wrong with him because he does not want the bird around.

The fault must partly have been in me.
The bird was not to blame for his key.
And of course there must be something wrong
In wanting to silence any song. (p. 316)

Hence, the fault for the breach between man and nature is at least partially man's responsibility. He is out of harmony with the natural world.

Frost discusses the idea of the simplicity of nature as opposed to the complexities of man's world in several poems, among which is "Directive" (1947).

Back out of all this now too much for us,
 Back in a time made simple by the loss
 Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off. . . .
 (p. 520)

Nature is the simplifier who, undisturbed, removes the signs left by man.

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

. . .

Then for the house that is no more a house,
 But only a belilaced cellar hole,
 Now slowly closing like a dent in dough. (pp. 520f.)

Thus, "nature, the great simplifier, is manifestly not disturbed by her ironing out of man's complicating interferences."¹⁷ The poem depicts the isolation of man; he is alone because nature does not share his regret for the lost house, farm, or town. Frost again warns man, as he did in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," against attributing to nature emotional complexities like grief for the life that was vanished. But, the warning is more frightening here as "Directive" foretells of the destruction of more than simply one farm; it depicts

the destruction of a town and implies that if the whole human race were destroyed, nature would not be concerned. In the poem, however, both the guide and his fellow traveler are left to witness the indifference of nature to the success or failure of mankind.

Frost implies that somehow in the pursuit of our intricate, frenetic lives we forget elemental natural verities, and that only by 'being versed in country things' shall we be saved: by understanding that birds do not weep over decayed farms and towns; and by recognizing a more supremely different truth, a genuinely skeptical view as opposed to orthodoxy, that man is but one in the grand natural cycle and his passing is of no more consequence than the drying up of Hyla Brook, the slow decay of an abandoned rick of firewood, or the death of a hired man.¹⁸

After man has gone, nature simply erases the signs of his presence. Even if modern man eventually destroys himself,¹⁹ nature will not weep but simply cover up the signs of his having been--as the "slowly closing like a dent in dough."²⁰ From man's viewpoint, no poet could be more pessimistic than one who foreshadows the possible extinction of man and the indifference of nature to such an event. Moreover, Frost even casts aside the traditional anthropocentric assumptions of man's superior place among the animals and points out that the annihilation of man would be no different from the eradication of any other species or organism--i.e., "the nature involved in. . . 'Directive' . . . or 'The Need of Being Versed in Country Things' seems as satisfied with trees,

flowers, and birds as it was with men."²¹ Thus, nature is indifferent to mankind--to his well-being or even his existence.²²

Sometimes nature does not seem to be willing to wait for man to destroy himself; instead, it attempts to do so itself. For example, in "Sand Dunes" (1928) Frost depicts the destructive force of nature.²³ Although nature is openly hostile toward man, he is able to withstand its attack. The poem "expresses Frost's belief in the ability of the human mind to cope with the forces of nature and to emerge undefeated from natural catastrophe."²⁴ In the poem nature does not wait for man to come to it, but rather seeks him out.

They are the sea made land
To come at the fisher town,
And bury in solid sand
The men she could not drown. (p. 330)

Nature, however, is unsuccessful in its attempts to destroy man.

She may know cove and cape,
But she does not know mankind
If by any change of shape,
She hopes to cut off mind. (p. 330)

Man is not fooled by nature's disguises; through the use of his mind, he can be superior to it.

Again, he [Frost] presents a vivid picture of a natural force that threatens human life, then a vigorous statement of man's adequacy to think and adapt, to be undominated because he has strength of mind, a different kind of strength from that of Nature.²⁵

Although the poem is pessimistic in its presentation of nature's hostility, it does not show nature's conquest of man; "the poem ends with hope, for man remains free to think. This hope is based not on the pollyanna of easy optimism but on the tragic wisdom of those who through the ages have not only stared into the abyss but have outstared it."²⁶ Man can withstand the attacks of hostile nature through the use of his mind.²⁷

Frost treats the theme of the disappearance of man in an extended dramatic monologue "The Census-Taker" (1923). In this poem, nature seems to have been destroyed along with man.

An emptiness flayed to the very stone.
I found no people that dared show themselves,
None not in hiding from the outward eye.
The time was autumn, but how anyone
Could tell the time of year when every tree
That could have dropped a leaf was down itself
And nothing but the stump of it was left
Now bringing out its rings in sugar of pitch; (p. 216)

The poem presents a vision of emptiness and decay,²⁸ but nature does not seem to grieve over the decay--the absence of life.

'The place is desert and let whoso lurks
 In silence, if in this he is aggrieved,
 Break silence now or be forever silent.' (p. 217)

However, the man hears nothing in answer to his cry. Only the man seems sympathetic with the situation.

The melancholy of having to count souls
 Where they grow fewer and fewer every year
 Is extreme where they shrink to none at all.
 It must be I want life to go on living. (p. 217)

The poem "entertains the possibility that the balance between destruction and creation, or death and life, might one day break down."²⁹ If such were to occur, man cannot expect nature to be grieved; it remains indifferent as Frost has warned in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" and "Directive." Only man seems concerned that life "go on living."³⁰

In "My Butterfly" (1913) Frost is concerned about the precariousness of the life of the winged creature and implies an analogy between the place of the butterfly within nature and the place of man within the universe. Just as the well-being of the butterfly is determined by nature, man's position in life is governed by God.

Thou didst not know, who tottered, wondering on high,
 That fate had made thee for the pleasure of the wind,
 With those great careless wings,
 Nor yet did I. (p. 41)

"If man's place is as precarious as that of the delicate and fragile-winged creatures, what is the balance that keeps them both alive against and within the great complex of nature?"³¹

Frost seems to realize that just as fate controls the butterfly, so God, although not necessarily the Christian God, controls him.

And there were other things:
It seemed God let thee flutter from his gentle clasp:
Then fearful he had let thee win
Too far beyond him to be gathered in,
Snatched thee, o'ereager, with ungentle grasp. (pp. 41f.)

Although man is free to a certain extent, he must not stray beyond the limits set by God. If man exercises too much free will and strays too far, God will pull him back "with ungentle grasp."

Ah! I remember me
How once conspiracy was rife
Against my life-- (p. 42)

Man longs for more knowledge of the universe than he is allowed to have; he longs for more freedom than he has and feels "hemmed in" when he cannot fulfill his desire for freedom. However, while in this distraught state, man sees the butterfly carried along by a "reckless zephyr"--an unconcerned wind.

I found that wing broken today!
For thou art dead, I said,
And the strange birds say.
I found it with the withered leaves
Under the eaves. (p. 42)

Thus, the butterfly was killed--perhaps because it dared "to stray too far"--by the reckless wind which held its fate in balance. Likewise, man's fate depends on the will or whim of God, and if man dares to challenge the authority of God--"to stray too far"--he also may be destroyed.

In another poem, "Desert Places" (1936), a scene of desolation within nature causes Frost to contemplate man's growing loneliness--loneliness due to the "desert places" within him more than mere indifference of the outer world.³²

"The speaker of 'Desert Places,' confronted by wintry desolation and an infinite and empty universe, is more profoundly moved by the infinite desolation that exists within himself. . . ." ³³ First, the speaker describes the desolation of the snow covered world, producing an atmosphere of despair. Then, he indicates his own relationship to the desolation he sees about him.

I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares. (p. 386)

As he continues, the snow-covered field becomes a symbol of his own loneliness.

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. (p. 386)

As terrible as the present loneliness may seem, man's desolation will not diminish; rather, it will increase. The "blankness,"

the unenlightened quality of his mind, cannot have expression since it has no thought to express. Therefore, "it does not matter what happens to the man now or what he does, for nothing can have any further meaning."³⁴

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars--on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places. (p. 386)

The distance between the stars is not frightening when compared with the "desert places" in the mind of man. Although the man refuses to be frightened by the thought of the empty space in the outer world,

the gesture is a bit flamboyant and opens up a worse form of terror by bringing fear where the poet lives most alone. . . . The relatively serene 'vantage point' of many poems is replaced by a perilous balance attained in the act of knowing what one faces, and of 'taking' it without support of the absolutes. . . .³⁵

Once man has realized the desolation possible to human experience, he cannot be "scared" by that of nature.³⁶

CHAPTER III

FROST'S MAN

Because of Frost's use of the rural background--the pastoral mode, he is frequently mistaken for a nature poet. In reality, though, Frost's greatest concern is man. As Frost once stated in an interview, "I have only written two poems without a human being in them."¹ In his poems Frost is concerned with the way man faces life and the nature of the life that he must live. Often his poems present man's frustration caused by his inability to cope with the problems that confront him. Faced with decisions, Frost's man sometimes either cannot or does not make a choice, or he makes the wrong decision. Furthermore, man's growing knowledge of the universe leaves him with the problem of readjusting his values--especially his relationship to this vast world. He also questions his relationship with his fellow man; frequently, he discovers he is isolated from other human beings, and in his isolated state, Frost's man searches for meaning for life.

For Frost, man can very nearly be defined as a choice-making animal; he fulfills himself in the act of choosing, deliberately and, at his best, with a sense of consequences.²

For example, in "The Trial by Existence" (1913) Frost presents man as choosing to live on earth, but he does not seem to know why man would make such a choice. While in heaven, man seems to discern some "good," some reason for sacrificing life in paradise for that on earth.

And none are taken but who will,
Having first heard the life read out
That opens earthward, good and ill,
Beyond the shadow of a doubt. . . . (p. 29)

Man knows what he can expect of this earthly life, yet he still chooses to live. Frost points out, however, that

The tale of earth's unhonored things
Sounds nobler there than 'neath the sun. . . . (p. 29)

The life man chooses is one of pain, through which he must travel without the knowledge that he chose it of his own free will.³

But always God speaks at the end:
'One thought in agony of strife
The bravest would have by for friend,
The memory that he chose the life;
But the pure fate to which you go
Admits no memory of choice,
Or the woe were not earthly woe
To which you give the assenting voice.' (p. 29)

The poem recognizes that the suffering in life is always in terms of what man is; it is a result of something implicit in his constitution or in his choices:

. . . life has for us on the wrack
Nothing but what we somehow chose. (p. 30)

Thus, human purpose is "both self-generated, since we choose our destinies and determined. . . since the choice is offered us by a benignly cryptic divinity whose objectives we do not understand. . . ." ⁴ The poem shows man's "willed acceptance of a world we never made, a world we can neither alter nor understand." ⁵ But, it is a world through which man must pass

. . . wholly stripped of pride
In the pain that has but one close,
Bearing it crushed and mystified. (p. 30)

Hence, "man must meet death destitute even of pride. . . ." ⁶

Frost again portrays man as faced with a choice in "The Road Not Taken" (1916), but this choice appears to be simply a matter of which road to take:

The problem of choice is in a way even more elementary, since neither self-interest, moral obligation, nor even curiosity provides a real basis for preferring one road to the other. ⁷

At first glance, the traveler imagines one road to be "less traveled," but in reality both have been equally "worn"; both seem to be suited to the traveler's need. Yet, the speaker in the poem realizes that he must make a choice since he cannot travel both roads and that his decision will have consequences. ⁸ After he has made his choice, the speaker is able to give a sigh of relief because

I took the one less traveled by
And that has made all the difference. (p. 131)

The poem does not seem to be totally pessimistic since the traveler may have made the "right" choice; on the other hand, the reader can see that it is not really optimistic because the choice was so arbitrary--the traveler could have chosen the "wrong" road easily. According to Yvor Winters, this is one of the weaknesses of the poem for

Frost. . . is mistaking whimsical impulse for moral choice, and the blunder obscures his understanding and even leaves his mood uncertain with regard to the value of the whole business. He is vaguely afraid that he may be neither wrong nor right.⁹

However, Frost is trying to point out to the reader that many of the choices, both important and small ones, which man must make in life are placed before him without any indication of which he should choose; not all questions are moral ones, as Winters appears to believe. It is the arbitrariness of the situation and the inevitable consequences which will follow the decision which concern Frost. Moreover, man seems to be here on earth without any particular design or guide since he could have taken either road, and his choice of the "right" or "wrong" road seems to be merely accidental. Man may not even know if his decision was good or may not find out if he made the "right" choice until it is too late for him to change his decision.

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back. (p. 131)

Whether or not the decision is between a moral right and wrong, it still involves consequences which affect the traveler's life. Therefore, the poem reflects Frost's idea of man as a responsible being whose welfare is governed by his ability to make the "right" choices in life.¹⁰

Frost once more shows man in the act of making a choice in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (1923); however, here the choice is between the desire of the man to remain in the woods and the obligation of going on. "There are many reasons why he should not stop; common-sense reasons which seem to occur even to the traveler's little horse."¹¹

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. (p. 275)

On the other hand, man is capable of interests not comprehensible to the lower animals, and it is this ability which sets him above them;¹² for this man the woods have an appeal--maybe because to him they represent some aesthetic value, some form of escape, or perhaps the attraction of death (death-wish).¹³ Regardless of what the attraction of the woods may be, the choices that confront the man are: he may remain watching the "woods fill up with snow"; he may enter the woods that

appeal so strongly to him, or he may return to the world of obligations.

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. (p. 275)

The darkness of the woods is delicious--but treacherous. The beauty which cuts itself off from action is sterile; the peace which is peace of escape is a meaningless and, therefore, a suicidal peace. There will be beauty and peace at the end of the journey, in terms of the fulfillment of the promises, but that will be an earned beauty stemming from action.¹⁴

Thus, the need to fulfill his obligations wins out over the sensuous appeal of nature. Even so, the reader cannot be certain that the traveler in the poem has made the "right" choice since Frost has declared in an earlier poem "Reluctance" (1913), that it is "treason of the heart to yield to necessity and compromise desire. . . ." ¹⁵

Ah, when to the heart of man
 Was it ever less than treason
 To go with the drift of things,
 To yield with a grace to reason,
 And bow and accept the end
 Of a love or a season? (p. 43) ¹⁶

Although in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" the man

rejects nature's impersonal appeal in favor of purpose, . . . the carefully vague last stanza refuses to indicate whether such purpose is self-generated or determined.¹⁷

In "Come In" (1942) Frost once more places man on the edge of the woods, trying to decide whether or not to enter them. Man again faces the conflict between the appeal of nature and his human responsibilities.

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

But no, I was out for stars:
I would not come in.
I meant not even if asked,
And I hadn't been. (p. 446)¹⁸

He will not 'come in,' because in reality he has not been asked, because the call has come from his own wistful, self-indulgent 'literary' imagination rather than from a profound communion with the living soul of nature.¹⁹

Whereas in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" the man becomes vaguely aware of the impersonality of nature, in "Come In" he seems to comprehend that nature is actually oblivious to his existence, or at least that there is no means of communication between man and nature. The thrush's song was not in the language of man; it was not in terms of his world.

He has no illusions about his place in the natural world. What there is to accept, he accepts; what is not there, he does not pretend to see. He is in complete control of his human integrity.²⁰

Frost's man realizes the indifference and inscrutability of nature.²¹

Similarly, in "The Bearer of Evil Tidings" (1936) Frost shows a man again having to make a choice between two roads-- between responsibility and desire. The speaker in the poem is an individual who has been chosen to take the message to Belshazzar of his forthcoming overthrow. However, the messenger realizes that

. . . evil tidings
Were a dangerous thing to bear.

So when he came to the parting
Where one road led to the throne
And one went off to the mountains
And into the wild unknown,

He took the one to the mountains. (p. 16)

Hence, the speaker in the poem shirks his responsibility to deliver the message and decides instead to remain with the people who live on the mountain. He rationalizes his failure to fulfill his obligation by simply saying:

Why hurry to tell Belshazzar
What soon enough he would know? (p. 417)

The messenger makes his choice because of a lack of integrity or a lack of the necessary personal courage to fulfill his responsibility.

In another poem Frost portrays the interrelationship of men and the way in which the choices made by each person may affect another individual. For example, in the dramatic narrative "The Housekeeper" (1914) he shows one individual

making a decision to leave an unbearable situation caused by the decision of another person. Estella, the woman who has lived with John for fifteen years, suddenly decides to leave him and marry another man. The reason behind her going is not that she had been mistreated in any way because John is "kinder than the run of men." (p. 106) Rather, it is only that "The strain's been too much for her all these years. . . ." (p. 106) The logic she uses to reach her decision is quite simple.

She thinks if it was bad to live with him,
It must be right to leave him. (p. 105)

Although her decision eases the strain on her, it increases the unhappiness of John since he was greatly angered by her leaving.

All is, he's made up his mind not to stand
What he has got to stand. (p. 105)

John is unable to accept the results of his own failure to marry Estella. He cannot understand why she could not see the situation as he did--

Better than married ought to be as good
As married--that's what he has always said. (p. 106)

However, "in life what ought to be is by no means always what is."²² Thus, John's decision not to marry Estella

results in her decision to leave him; the choice of each has an effect on the life of the other.

Likewise, in the dramatic narrative "The Fear" (1914) Frost again depicts a woman who has left one man for another; however, it is the woman's inability to accept her own act of choice without a feeling of guilt that produces the dramatic situation. She projects her guilt outward and imagines the presence of threatening forms. She is frightened by the presence of any strangers. Frost also portrays a woman unable to accept her choice in "The Discovery of the Madeiras" (1942). The woman leaves her homeland with her lover, but while on the voyage she begins to think about her act. Either because she thinks that what she has done is wrong or because she cannot make the final choice to go on with her lover,

She withdrew back in self-retreat
Till her heart almost ceased to beat.
Her spirit faded as far away
As the living ever go yet stay.
And her thought was she had had her pay. (p. 463)

As a result of her illness, the captain of the ship leaves both her and her lover on an island. Instead of getting well, the woman only becomes worse.

For slowly even her sense of him
And love itself were growing dim.
He no more drew the smile he sought.
The story is she died of thought. (p. 463)

Therefore, in determining his own fate through his choices, Frost's man sometimes destroys himself.

However,

Frost's most harrowing presentations of it [the inescapable consequence of having to choose] are those in which the crucial act of choice does not take place, is somehow frustrated or compromised by external circumstances, by bad luck, by habitual responses, or by failure of integrity.²³

For instance, in the extended dramatic monologue "A Servant to Servants" (1914) Frost presents "a woman already insane once and drifting there again, with the consciousness that her drab, monotonous life is bringing it upon her."²⁴ The speaker in the poem realizes that she is "all gone wrong"; although she attributes part of the cause for her insanity to heredity--"it runs in the family," she places the main blame on the heavy daily drudgery which she must face.

. . . He thinks I'll be all right
With doctoring. But it's not medicine--

It's rest I want--there, I have said it out--
From cooking meals for hungry hired men
And washing dishes after them--from doing
Things over and over that just won't stay done. (p. 83)²⁵

The woman confronts her approaching madness with a certain stoical integrity or resigned acceptance of a fate she cannot change. "Frost presents a situation for which there is no defense beyond 'taking it,' although recognition is a kind of fragmentary courage."²⁶

I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going:
Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I? (p. 86)

"The speaker is going mad, knows she is going mad, and knows that she can do nothing about it but wait for it to happen."²⁷

The woman is faced with a disaster over which she has no control; therefore, the act of choice cannot be made. She simply resigns herself to the approaching insanity brought on by the monotonous life from which she cannot escape.²⁸

In another poem, Frost once again portrays an individual who fails to make the necessary choice; this time the failure seems to be due to a lack of initiative. In "The Sound of Trees" (1916) Frost pictures a man listening to the trees and projecting his own attitudes into them. The speaker apparently has some desire to leave his home and frequently talks about doing so.

They are that that talks of going
But never gets away. (p. 195)

The man simply procrastinates--he forever delays the time for making the decision to actually go.

I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice
Some day. . . . (p. 195)

Yet, even as he says this, he seems aware that that someday will never come.²⁹

One of the problems confronting modern man is that of reevaluating his attitude toward himself and the universe. The knowledge of science has made man aware of the vastness of the universe and, in comparison, his own littleness.³⁰ In "On Going Unnoticed" (1928) Frost portrays man's apparent insignificance in such a large, impersonal universe. The poem begins by depicting man in an effort to communicate with the "leaves" above him.

As vain to raise a voice as a sigh
 In the tumult of tree leaves on high.
 What are you in the shadow of trees
 Engaged up there with the light and breeze?

Less than the coral-root you know
 That is content with the daylight low. . . . (p. 309)

Therefore, man is no more than something around the roots of the giant trees; he is hidden within their shadow. Man cannot experience the "daylight"--enlightenment or knowledge--that the leaves know. Instead, he must be content with the light which filters down to him; however, he seems to desire more than this because he attempts to raise his voice up to the leaves. Occasionally whatever is above him consents to send down a "leaf."

You grasp the bark by a rugged pleat,
 And look up small from the forest's feet.
 The only leaf it drops goes wide,
 Your name not written on either side. (p. 309)

But, the man in the poem does not gain any knowledge from this

condescension on the part of the "leaves" because the leaf was not really meant for him.

You linger your little hour and are gone,³¹
 And still the woods sweep leafily on,
 Not even missing the coral-root flower
 You took as a trophy of the hour. (p. 309)

Frost realizes that "the individual man is small, lost, and unimportant in the midst of a vast and changing universe."³² As a matter of fact, he is so unimportant that his disappearance would not even be noticed by the vast universe.³³

Man, realizing his own insignificance in such a vast universe, strives to find some purpose for his existence. Frequently, Frost writes about man's search for a meaning or value for his life--something upon which to base his life. "Man longs for reasons, ultimately for a reason. . . ." ³⁴ But, he does not seem to know exactly what he is searching for nor even where to look.

In the meditation "For Once, Then, Something" (1923) Frost portrays man's looking down a well searching for this "something." "It may even recall an echo of that aphorism attributed to Democritus: 'Of truth we know nothing, for truth lies at the bottom of a well'." ³⁵ Although the man in the poem does not discover truth, he achieves the satisfaction of having at least one momentary glance at something from the depths. He discerns something white beneath the surface of the water but does not know what that something is.

. . . What was that whiteness?
 Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.³⁶
 (p. 276)

Perhaps truth is no more than a "pebble of quartz," or maybe
 he only imagined he saw something--

I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
 Through the picture, something white, uncertain,
 Something more of the depths--and then I lost it. (p. 276)

The speaker in the poem

remains uncertain whether the unidentified white-
 ness at the bottom of the well is or is not really
 more important, more real, than his own godlike
 reflection at the surface--whether, in fact, there
 is anything more final than his own equally un-
 certain image looking back at him.³⁷

On the other hand, this whiteness, if it does exist, could
 be more important than his own reflection. This something
 could be "truth," some sign or knowledge given to man by
 nature or God--some force outside of man. But the whiteness
 does not remain visible long enough for the man to under-
 stand it or even to be certain that he saw anything. The
 speaker of the poem must assume part of the responsibility
 for not being able to see beyond his own image because he
 is "always wrong to the light" (p. 276); "his own failure
 of vision has caused him to let his own image get between
 him and the ulterior object of his quest. . . ." ³⁸ Perhaps
 as a rationalization of his own imperceptiveness, the man
 at the well projects into nature the intentional destruction
 of his vision--"Water comes to rebuke the too clear water."

(p. 276) Then too, nature, or some force, may not want man to have this knowledge--possibly out of fear that such knowledge would enable man to penetrate its inscrutability. As Frost says in "A Passing Glimpse" (1928),

Heaven gives its glimpses only to those
Not in a position to look too close. (p. 311)

"It seems as though there might be some intelligence which intended that this human being and others should never have more than a glimpse."³⁹ Or, as Frost states it:

We dance around in a ring and suppose,
But the secret sits in the middle and knows. (p. 495)

Although man feels the need for "something," he seeks it from a universe that remains indifferent, or perhaps even antagonistic, to his search, and he must go away frustrated because he fails to receive an understandable answer to his quest.

In "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" (1936) Frost again shows man's searching for something--for some ultimate truth, but in this poem Frost "stands for a moment outside the race he belongs to, and sees his own and other man's yearnings for the ungraspable phantom of life as something strange and possibly ridiculous."⁴⁰ The poem, which presents man's effort to see into matters that he cannot comprehend, is uncertain about man's real concern for this knowledge. The people in the poem

. . . turn their backs on the land.
They look at the sea all day. (p. 394)

Whatever the people are searching for, they expect to find in the sea--the source of the "ultimate identity or loss of identity we long for."⁴¹

When we choose between land and sea, the human and the inhuman, the finite and the infinite, the sea has to be the infinite that floods in over us endlessly, the hypnotic monotony of the universe that is incommensurate with us--everything into which we look neither very far nor very deep, but look, look just the same.⁴²

Although "The land may vary more" (p. 394)--that is, may be more interesting since the people can understand it--the people turn their backs to it in order to seek knowledge which comes from some unknown infinite source. "The attraction of mind to the unknown cannot be resisted, the intent look, 'the mental thrust' will not be barred, the probing and questioning goes on. . . ." ⁴³ Even though the sea does give occasional insights into the infinite, "The water comes ashore" (p. 394)--just as in "On Going Unnoticed" an occasional leaf falls from the tree and drifts down toward man--the people are incapable of understanding much.

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep? (p. 394)

Although the people cannot possibly understand the infinite, they still stare at the "sea."⁴⁴ "What we do know [the land] we don't care about; what we do care about [the sea] we don't know; we can't look out very far or in very deep; and when did that ever bother us?"⁴⁵ Frost seems to be saying that man, because of his own imperceptiveness--his "nearsighted" mind--cannot understand the infinite, but then he does not really care anyway.⁴⁶

Frost once more portrays man's search for some meaning in life in "Acquainted With the Night" (1928), but he moves from his usual rural setting to an urban background.

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

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain. (p. 324)

When the man in the poem walks "out in rain--and back in rain" surrounded by the uncertainty of night, the world in which he walks is one of indifference, impersonality, and "otherness." The barrier which exists between men is such that the man cannot seek help from the watchman.

There when the nocturnal walker, who ranges to the edge of the city, meets 'the watch on his beat,' he feels mysteriously guilty for having looked so far into the night and 'drops' his eyes, 'unwilling to explain.'⁴⁷

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

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

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
 I have been one acquainted with the night. (p. 324)

The other people of the city are apathetic to the man's quest because the cry he heard was not for him; it did not call him "back or say good-by." "The poem is a dramatization of man's aloneness."⁴⁸ It shows "man's psychic alienation from the world in which he must live and move and have his being."⁴⁹ It also shows his frustrated search for meaning for his life since the "night" does not seem to be followed by a day--some form of enlightenment. "I have been one acquainted with the night" connotes the idea that man simply regards his walk as an experience; he does not become dejected by his unfulfilled quest. "The dark, the doom, the not knowing can be accepted by the mind, but the heart rebels."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, "No self-pity emerges from the lines, no self-praise for having accepted life. Self-knowledge there is and a simple embracing of a phase of human experience."⁵¹ The mind of man seems to accept the indifferent world in which he walks.⁵²

The search of Frost's man is not limited solely to knowledge about life, but extends to concern about what he

can expect after death. For example, in the poem "In a Disused Graveyard" (1923) man's fear of the uncertainty that follows death is noticed by the stones which remark:

How no one dead will seem to come.
What is it men are shrinking from? (p. 269)

Similarly, in "The Witch of Coös" (1923) the speaker states "there's something the dead are keeping back." (p. 247) The idea of the uncertainty that awaits man beyond the grave is treated more explicitly in "The Strong Are Saying Nothing" (1936).

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. (p. 391)

The strong because they are strong work with what
they have and do not evade what is before them by
undue consideration of difficulties, of dangers,
or of what may be available in the future.⁵³

Man must accept life without the comfort of knowing what lies ahead of him--"What is hoped to be." Just as the sight of the dead leaves in "Reluctance" prompts man to ask "Whither?", Frost's man again contemplates the possibilities of what will follow death. "Daylight returned and seasons returned; but what of human life which moved briefly from the apparent nothingness before birth to the apparent nothingness after death."⁵⁴ Although the men in the poem are too skeptical to believe in anything they have not seen, they will not completely deny the possibility that there is something beyond the grave.

Frost is not only interested in man as an individual, but also in his relationship with other men. Although a certain amount of independence is good and even desirable, man should not strive to be so totally independent that he becomes isolated from other men. Frost is concerned about man's inability to feel honest interest in the life of a fellow human being. For example, in the poem "Snow" (1916) Frost questions the idea of charity toward man. The traveler in the poem is trying to return to his home during a blizzard and finds it necessary to stop about mid-way in his journey to rest a while at a neighbor's, the Coles. The Coles are not able to dissuade the traveler, Meserve, from making the remaining portion of the trip that night as Meserve seems to feel that he must prove that he has the courage to face the challenge of the storm; or, perhaps, as Mrs. Cole suggests, he is hoping to succeed in his fight against the storm in order to claim it was a miracle. In any event, he set out once again in the storm. After his departure the Coles find they cannot rest until they know he has returned home safely. Yet, they wonder after Meserve has left their home if they have not wasted their time with concern for him.

'I thought you'd been too much concerned.'

'You think you haven't been concerned yourself.'

'If you mean he was inconsiderate
 To rout us out to think for him at midnight
 And then take our advice no more than nothing,
 Why, I agree with you. But let's forgive him.
 We've had a share in one night of his life.
 What'll you bet he ever calls again?' (p. 194)

The Coles feel an obligation to be interested in their neighbor's welfare as he travels through the storm, yet they accuse him of being "inconsiderate" because he makes them have this obligation. Thus, the common bonds between men are so severed that man cannot feel honest concern for another human being or else he is simply irritated by the presence of such concern.

Although man may occasionally have some humanitarianism, such feeling is usually temporary. For instance, in "The Exposed Nest" (1916) Frost discusses man's extension of a brief concern for others. In this poem the interest in the baby birds in a nest, which has been left exposed to the sun, arouses sympathy within two people. These people place protective grass around the nest to prevent the birds from being killed by the heat from the sun's rays.

All this to prove we cared. Why is there then
 No more to tell? We turned to other things.
 I haven't any memory--have you?--
 Of ever coming to the place again
 To see if the birds lived the first night through,
 And so at last to learn to use their wings. (pp. 136f.)

Hence, "even though man may trouble himself for someone or something other than himself, his altruism is only temporary; each man's primary interest is himself. . . ."55

Similarly, in "The Tuft of Flowers" (1913) Frost again shows man's finding at least a temporary interest in his fellow man. The poem begins with a statement of man's loneliness; however, this man, who desires companionship, is

finally able to attain it. At first, the speaker of the poem finds himself alone even though he is working in the field with another man.

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

'As all must be,' I said within my heart,
'Whether they work together or apart.' (p. 31)

Then, because the man realizes that an appreciation of nature's beauty is common to both men, he feels a comradeship with the other man.

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

. . . .

'Men work together,' I told him from the heart,
'Whether they work together or apart.' (p. 32)

Thus, the sight of some unmown flowers reduces the man's feeling of isolation. Whether this common interest will enable the two men to continue their companionship or if it is only a passing sympathy is not indicated. But, since the statement that

Men work together . . .
Whether they work together or apart

comes from the man's heart, it may be only the heart's rebelling--refusing to accept the impersonality of the world, a fact that his mind has already accepted.⁵⁶

Frost's concern for the loneliness of man is especially directed toward man in old age, when he seems to feel his isolation the most. For example, in "Provide, Provide" (1936) Frost depicts, with sardonic humor, old age as being so desolate that he suggests that man "buy" friendship. The poem begins with a description of the struggle man has to try to maintain his position in life--so that he can "die in state." Since man cannot simply achieve success and remain there, he must face the possibility of a fall.

Too many fall from great and good
For you to doubt the likelihood. (p. 404)⁵⁷

Because man does not know what lies ahead of him, he must learn to cope with daily life on his own terms.

Some have relied on what they knew;
Others on being simply true.
What worked for them might work for you. (p. 404)

Or, he may have to find his own method for handling the problems of life.

No memory of having starred
Atones for later disregard,
Or keeps the end from being hard.

Better to go down dignified
With boughten friendship at your side
Than none at all. Provide, Provide! (p. 404)

Thus, in the poem "it is the Wisdom of this World which demonstrates to us that the Wisdom of this world

isn't enough."⁵⁸ As man grows older, he will find that he is not prepared for that which besets him. In other words,

expediency won't work. . . but since you will try it, since you will provide for the marrow, then provide hard for it, be really expedient, settle yourself for life in the second-best bed around which the heirs gather, the very best second-best bed.⁵⁹

Perhaps the most depressing presentation of the isolation of old age is in Frost's "An Old Man's Winter Night" (1916). In the poem, the man with "snow upon the roof," (p. 135) finds only desolation and receives his only feeling of importance by "scaring" the night by beating on a box. "The only way the old man can make his peace with the night is by going through his homely and half-magical routines."⁶⁰ However, his attempt is futile--"like everything else he does, it is terribly inadequate."⁶¹

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. (p. 135)

The old man's eyes would have expressed only blankness had it not been for the closeness of the lamp whose light they reflected.⁶²

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. (p. 135)

The man huddles close to the light in an attempt to preserve some security against the engulfing darkness of the night. He is frightened by the possibilities of what may await him in the night--after death.

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. (p. 135)

Poems such as "An Old Man's Winter Night" and "Provide, Provide"

express an attitude that, at its most extreme, makes pessimism seem a hopeful evasion; they begin with a flat and terrible reproduction of the evil in the world and end by saying: It's so; and there's nothing you can do about it; and if there were, would you do it?⁶³

Frost frequently depicts man's having to accept life or a particular situation which is not fitted to his desire, and he does not allow man to become emotional about the problem.⁶⁴ For example, in "Storm Fear" (1913) the people in the cellar must face the possibility of freezing during the night. However, just as the woman in "A Servant to Servants" faced her approaching insanity stoically, the people in "Storm Fear" unemotionally confront the possibility of freezing.

The end [of the poem] seems to be flat and faint despair, unrelieved by any lift to hope or to a more tremendous horror. The heart must accept the hardness as it is, without the thrill of melodrama. But in the intervening monologue we hear the speaker making his way to this acceptance by systematically checking off facts and estimating chances of survival.⁶⁵

I count our strength,
 Two and a child,
 Those of us not asleep subdued to mark
 How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length--
 How drifts are piled,
 Dooryard and road ungraded,
 Till even the comforting barn grows far away,
 And my heart owns a doubt
 Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
 And save ourselves unaided. (p. 13)

Therefore, the speaker, just as the men in "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," does not refute the vague possibility of survival, but he does not become optimistic about his chances.⁶⁶

Similarly, "In Time of Cloudburst" (1936) Frost portrays man's adjusting to a world he did not make but in which he must live. In this poem, Frost depicts the 'endless repetition' that confronts man. Unlike the woman in "A Servant to Servants," the man in the poem does not allow the repetition to drive him insane.

May my application so close
 To so endless a repetition
 Not make me tired and morose
 And resentful of man's condition. (p. 369)

'Man's condition,' when one gives close attention to an 'endless repetition,' is pretty terrible, and the piously hopeful prayer acknowledges something quite unbearable. . . . The only relief offered by this irony is in holding our lips tight and reciting the formula; the defense, such as it is, lies in the expression, in seeing clearly what one is saying and saying it with perfect control.⁶⁷

In another poem "Out, Out--" (1916), Frost depicts man's accepting the incidents in life--in this case, the death of a boy. In the poem a boy is cutting wood and starts to quit in order to eat dinner.

. . . at the word, the saw,
 As if to prove saws knew what supper meant
 Leaped out of the boy's hand, or seemed to leap--
 He must have given the hand. However, it was,
 Neither refused the meeting. But the hand! (p. 171)

The saw almost severed the hand from the arm; at least, it was so badly cut that the doctor had to amputate the hand. The poem seems to attribute to some force of the outer world the possibility of intentional harm to the boy. Moreover, "That which seemed to the bystander a great personal injustice was to nature just another stroke of the saw."⁶⁸ The boy, either as a direct result of the accident or as a result of his own lack of desire to live after being disfigured, died while the doctor was operating on him.

And then--the watcher at his pulse took fright.
 No one believed. They listened at his heart.
 Little--less--nothing!--and that ended it.
 No more to build on there. And they, since they
 Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs. (p. 172)

What at first glance seems to be heartlessness or apathy on the part of the bystanders is in reality their only means of accepting the tragedy; "the way to take the diminished thing is not to care too much, to turn back to one's affairs."⁶⁹

Frost also treats the theme of acceptance in the sonnet "Acceptance" (1928). In this poem he shows that nature accepts what must be accepted and that man should do so too.

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. (p. 313)

Therefore, "things of nature take a fatalistic attitude toward their existence. Nothing in nature protests against the happenings which may overtake them."⁷⁰ Man should learn from nature that events will happen as they do and there is nothing he can do but accept them.

'Now let the night be dark for all of me
Let the night be too dark for me to see
Into the future. Let what will be, be.' (p. 313)

Man cannot see into the future to tell what lies ahead of him. Moreover, the words "night" and "dark" connote that what lies ahead for man will not be good, but this does not matter. Whatever it is, he must simply accept it.⁷¹

CHAPTER IV

FROST'S GOD OR DESIGNER

Sometimes Frost finds himself involved with metaphysical problems, and although he frequently retreats into whimsy rather than give explicit answers to the questions, his poems dealing with these problems present a conception of Providence and truth. In some of his poems, Frost questions the existence of a design or plan for the seemingly chaotic world in which man must live. If there is a design, then he contemplates the type of designer. Of course, if he fails to discover a design, then he doubts the existence of a designer, or if he finds an incomplete plan, then an imperfect designer would exist. Perhaps, man in his desire for order has created the idea of an omnipotent force that rules over the world in order to give his life purpose or meaning. Frost's poems also examine the "truths" by which man seems to shape his life. In many poems, Frost concerns himself with the design or lack of design and the type of deity, if one exists, who rules over the world in which man must live.

Frost's modern man must learn to cope with the problems of life without any absolute truths to help guide him. In an extended dramatic monologue "The Black Cottage" (1914),

Frost discusses the value of "truth" to man. The setting of the poem is a decaying cottage within the woods. "An abandoned house is rotting. The older generation is dead, the younger has decided to seek its fortune elsewhere."¹ The cottage represents a life which is untouched by the fads or changing beliefs of the modern generation.

I mean by the world's having passed it by--
 As we almost got by this afternoon.
 It always seems to me a sort of mark
 To measure how far fifty years have brought us. (p. 75)

The woman who had lived in the cottage had accepted certain beliefs and creeds, refusing to alter them in any way. She held fast to her beliefs in spite of any opposition she faced from the forces of "change."

Her giving somehow touched the principle
 That all men are created free and equal.
 And to hear her quaint phrases--so removed
 From the world's view today of all those things.
 That's a hard mystery of Jefferson's.
 What did he mean? Of course the easy way
 Is to decide it simply isn't true.
 It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.
 But never mind, the Welshman got it planted
 Where it will trouble us a thousand years.
 Each age will have to reconsider it. (pp. 75f.)

The woman had accepted the idea that all men are created equal and she would not alter her belief. She continued to repeat the principle in the "quaint phrases" of her past. Modern man, however, does not find it quite so easy to accept the ideas of the past without question. Frequently, he discards

the ideas of the past and replaces them with beliefs more in harmony with the "modern view." If man has trouble understanding the ideas of the past, he simply labels them as untrue-- thus, covering his own lack of perceptiveness. Some beliefs, though, have been so deeply "planted" that they cannot be discarded so readily; man is forced to at least reconsider them as possible truths. The pressure of change within the modern world is so strong that even the minister, who is the speaker of the poem, feels its effect on the church doctrines.

Do you know but for her there was a time
 When to please younger members of the church,
 Or rather say non-members in the church,
 Whom we all have to think of nowadays,
 I would have changed the Creed a very little? (p. 76)²

The minister rationalizes his consideration of changing the Creed by pointing out that some of the beliefs seemed "too pagan to our liberal youth." Besides, man is not sure of the veracity of his principles.

And well, if they weren't true why keep right on
 Saying them like the heathen? We could drop them
 Only--there was the bonnet in the pew. (p. 77)

Thus, the woman's presence prevents the minister from modifying the Creed to suit the modern generation. But, his pondering on the subject causes him to wonder, "When is truth true?"³

I'm just as glad she made me keep hands off
 For, dear me, why abandon a belief
 Merely because it ceases to be true.
 Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt

It will turn true again, for so it goes.
 Most of the change we think we see in life
 Is due to truths being in and out of favor. (p. 77)

The meaning of these lines is somewhat ambiguous.

The lines may mean that truth is fixed and eternal and hence will keep bobbing up again and again in spite of fashionable error;⁵ or they may equally well mean that any belief works as well as any other, is as good as if it were true, and that consequently there is nothing to be gained by abandoning one's own beliefs in favor of someone else's.

In addition, the passage may mean "that religious beliefs (or any beliefs, for that matter) are valuable not as absolute truths, but only insofar as they are useful."⁶ Thus, Frost's man must confront the modern situation without the security of having absolute truths on which to base his life and decisions.

Frost's poetry frequently depicts the desolation and terror within man's life, but in one particular meditation, "Bereft," (1928) the terror of loneliness is greater than in some other poems. In this poem man is alone within a hostile world; nature is seemingly set on harming him.

Out in the porch's sagging floor,
 Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
 Blindly struck at my knee and missed. (p. 317)⁷

The poem moves from this scene of threatening images and desolation within nature to greater loneliness. "The man

knows that it must be known abroad that he is alone. To him the loneliness of the season and the death intention of it find counterpart in his own despair."⁸

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. (p. 317)

Thus, the man realizes that he must confront the perils of life--the threats of nature--on his own. Moreover,

What looks like the most obvious sort of relief
or defense--an ending with a typical Tennysonian
lift to higher things--turns out to be the
ultimate threat. To be left 'in my life alone'
is terror enough, more awful to be left alone
with--God!⁹

Hence, man seems more frightened by the prospect of being found alone with God than by simply being alone. The poem portrays the idea that God could be neither a comfort nor a help to man as he confronts hostile nature. Instead, He would only be an additional terror for man in his desolation.

In the sonnet "Once by the Pacific" (1928), Frost again depicts the destructive forces of nature; the purpose of the picture, though, is the discussion of some foreboding danger for mankind. Man seems to be faced with some trial--some test for him.

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. (p. 314)

Therefore, man seems to be faced with an era of evil and finally the destruction of his world. Moreover,

No evil is quite so frightening as the one which is anticipated in an unknown form. For that which is known, man can prepare; but the unknown gains horror through its creation of uncertainty.¹⁰

Thus, mankind, like the Job of A Masque of Reason, is faced with a trial surrounded by uncertainty.

Great waves looked over others coming in
 And thought of doing something to the shore
 That water never did to land before.

The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
 The cliff in being backed by continent. . . . (p. 314)

Thus, once more nature, as in "Sand Dunes" (1928), seems set on the destruction or harm of mankind. "Wave after wave, feral nature beats upon the land and works into the human spirit, prophetically foreshadowing not only a natural but a human capacity for destruction."¹¹ Although the shore has a cliff to back it up and the cliff a continent, man must brave the trial--whatever form it may take--alone. Hence, the poem "drives forward on its irresistible tidal wave the poet's message of disaster."¹²

In an extended dramatic monologue, "The Lesson for Today" (1942), Frost dwells on the uncertainty that surrounds man's life; however, he seems to be satirizing man's exaggeration of the darkness which encompasses him.

If this uncertain age in which we dwell
Were really as dark as I hear sages tell, (p. 471)

men should simply return to earlier times and examine the problems that man confronted then. In the poem Frost does not deny that man has problems to confront in the modern world but so has man had in each generation. Man cannot bury himself in self-pity and sit idly by complaining of the hardships that beset him. Nor must he, like Miniver Cheevy, constantly regret that he had not been born in another age. Rather, he must face his problems as mankind throughout history has done.

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. (p. 473)

Hence, the modern man's gravest problem is his need to adjust his perspective to a vast universe in which he is a mere speck. Man, however, has faced similar problems in preceding ages.

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. (p. 473)

Man's problems today are really no different from those of his predecessors.

But these are universals, not confined
To any one time, place, or human kind.
We're either nothing or a God's regret. (p. 474)

Man, who is constantly exaggerating his own importance, must learn today, as he has had to learn in the past, to accept his insignificance within the universe.

There is a limit to our time extension.
We all are doomed to broken-off careers,
And so's the nation, so's the total race.
The earth itself is liable to the fate
Of meaninglessly being broken off. (p. 475)

Man is subject to the limitations of time, as is all that he knows--his world. He is subject to a "fate," a power outside his universe, that will end his life when it chooses, that will destroy his world. Frost foretells of the destruction of the world--the being meaninglessly broken off. Man must accept these limitations--"I take my incompleteness with the rest." (p. 476) The poem "dwells on the insignificance of human reason and human nature and on the routine absence of justice."¹³ Frost's man must accept the situation--the conditions under which he must live.¹⁴

Another limitation of man is his inability to know or to understand the infinite. In an extended dramatic monologue, "The Star-Splitter" (1923), Frost questions man's ability to discover anything about infinity and even seems to ridicule

man's attempts. In the poem Frost approaches nature, the stars, as "the visible face of outer reality as a source of revelation concerning the forces that govern us from outside."¹⁵ In the poem Brad spends his life trying to discover more about the infinite, only to discover that he could learn nothing about the stars.

So Brad McLaughlin mingled reckless talk
 Of heavenly stars with hugger-mugger farming,
 Till having failed at hugger-mugger farming,
 He burned his house down for the fire insurance
 And spent the proceeds on a telescope
 To satisfy a life-long curiosity
 About our place among the infinities. (p. 218)

Brad spent so much time worrying over metaphysical problems that he was a failure in the practical world. The reason he selected a telescope as his instrument for attaining knowledge was that

'The best thing that we're put here for's to see;
 The strongest thing that's given us to see with's
 A telescope.' (p. 219)

Ironically, Brad does not accomplish what he sets out to learn, but both he and the speaker in the poem gain some knowledge of themselves, of each other, and of social requirements.

If one by one we counted people out
 For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long
 To get so we had no one left to live with.
 For to be social is to be forgiving. (p. 219)

However, Brad's spending time looking through a telescope is valueless as far as enabling him to achieve any clearer understanding of man's relationship with infinity.

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? (p. 221)

Thus, this man's search for knowledge about infinity is as frustrating as the search for truth by the man at the well curb in "For Once, Then, Something" and the people on the shore in "Neither Out Far, Nor in Deep." ". . . Frost wonders just how much knowledge about the infinite can be gained in such a way. Man, he says, has looked and looked, but after all does he know any better where he is or how he stands in relation to infinity?"¹⁶ Therefore, Frost seems to doubt the value of such a search into the infinite, such a devotion of one's life to metaphysical problems.¹⁷

In another poem "All Revelation" (1942) Frost again wonders about man's ability to know about the force outside of his life. He questions man's "revelations," suggesting that they might simply be a product of his own mind.

A head thrusts in as for the view,¹⁸
 But where it is it thrusts in from
 Of what it is it thrusts into
 By the Cyb'laean avenue,
 And what can of its coming come,

And whither it will be withdrawn,
 And what taken hence or leave behind,
 These things the mind has pondered on
 A moment and still asking gone.¹⁹
 Strange apparition of the mind! (p. 444)

The "revelation" that man has is gone before he can understand it, just like the whiteness at the bottom of the well in "For Once, Then, Something." Again, man is left uncertain of even the existence of what he thought he saw; it may have been merely an "apparition of the mind." However, as in "For Once, Then, Something" the man's glimpse comes in answer to his search, so in "All Revelation" the vision comes "In answer to a mental thrust." (p. 444) Moreover, man realizes the possibility that he has simply created this "revelation" in his own mind.

" 'All revelation has been ours' might be taken to suggest that man endows nature with whatever meaning it has."²⁰ Man has created within his own imagination his "revelations" about his universe and the forces which control it.

Are our intuitions of order self-generated illusions, valid only in the pragmatic sense that they enable us to get along more comfortably in a world we never made, or are they legitimate revelations of unity and design that exist independently of our awareness of them? . . . it is not at all clear that either nature or God is concerned with man's designs, that there are any moral imperatives other than those man makes for himself.²¹

Once again involved with metaphysical questions in "Too Anxious for Rivers" (1947), Frost seems to question the source of creation for the universe and man's life. When man looks

about him, he becomes inquisitive about the origin of his world, and he discovers parallels between nature and his own life.

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 an empty? (p. 322)

Man's logic tells him that this river cannot arise from nowhere, flow through his valley, and simply stop without having some place to empty into. In the same way, man's life cannot just exist--it must have had a place of origin, some place of creation. Likewise, it could not abruptly cease without something for it to "flow" into. The sight of the river causes man to question the source of his own life and wonder what lies beyond the "mountain"--beyond that which he can foresee in his life.²²

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 mercy the dark closes round us
So broodingly soon in every direction. (p. 522)

Man, like Job later in A Masque of Reason, must realize that he should not question the creator or creation of the universe. As Frost says in "Fear of God" (1947), God's mercy, his acts toward man, may not bear too critical an examination and it is perhaps to man's benefit not to pry too deep. Maybe it is more merciful for man to be kept in ignorance about what lies

ahead of him in life or after death. Perhaps such knowledge would be too depressing, too unbearable for him since, as in "Once by the Pacific," what awaits him in life may be evil or harm. Maybe there is no creator, and only chaos lies beyond the mountain.

And how much longer a story has science
 Before she must put out the light on the children
 And tell them the rest of the story is dreaming? (p. 522)²³

Science, man's great source of knowledge about his world, is helpless to fully explain the source of his world or his own creation and life. Man confronted by many versions of the source of creation must confront life without knowing from whence he came, what lies ahead of him in life, or what awaits him after death. He must at least entertain the possibility that this uncertainty which surrounds his life may be a blessing--a protection from the horror of the truth.

Frost again portrays man's attempting to understand the universe in which he lives and questioning the existence of a plan for the universe in the sonnet "Design" (1936). The sight of a white spider, a white moth, and a white heal-all is the cause of the poet's contemplation of whether or not the universe is planned and if, therefore, it has a designer.

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
 On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
 Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth-- (p. 396)

"This is a poem of finding evil in innocence, a song of experience. . . ."24 White, which usually symbolizes innocence and purity, takes on a reversed concept because it is so freakish in this instance. The terms "white satin cloth," which are so closely linked with the picture of the innocence and purity of a bride, are here connected with the dead moth held by the spider.

And this little albino catastrophe is too whitely catastrophic to be accidental, too impossibly unlikely ever to be a coincidence: accident, chance, statistics, natural selection are helpless to account for such designed terror and heartbreak, such awful symbolic perversion of the innocent being of the world.²⁵

The spider, moth, and heal-all have become "assorted characters of death and blight." (p. 396) A feeling of death-horror "derives from the awful silence, the grotesque acrobatics of the little circus act Frost says he has come upon. . . ."26 In addition, these creatures are present for a Witches' Sabbath or Devil's Mass--not the Witches' Sabbath of superstition, but rather some ritual of everyday life. After presenting the description of these abnormal characters, Frost raises the question of what each of them had to do with being created as it was.

What had the flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all? (p. 396)

These lines express

as well as anything ever has the arbitrariness of our guilt, the fact that Original Sin is only Original Accident, so far as the creatures of this world are concerned. And 'the wayside blue and innocent heal-all' is, down to the least sound, the last helpless, yearning, trailing-away sigh of too-precarious innocence, of a potentiality cancelled out almost before it began to exist.²⁷

What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?--
If design govern in a thing so small. (p. 396)

The partly ambiguous, summing-up 'What but design of darkness to appall' comes as something taken for granted, a relief almost, in its mere statement and generalization, after the almost unbearable actuality and particularity of what has come before.²⁸

The poet wonders if there really is a designer for the universe who plans such incidents. It seems too much of a coincidence for all of these freakish things to be found together for the meeting not to have been planned. The poet also entertains the possibility that this meeting could be the result of an evil designer--"design of darkness." "If a watch, then a watch-maker; if a diabolical machine, then a diabolical mechanic--Frost uses exactly the logic that has always been used."²⁹ But, then perhaps the incident was simply the result of an accident. Maybe there is no plan for the universe at all, or perhaps the designer of the universe does not consider and plan for such things as a mere moth.

'In large things, macroscopic phenomena of some real importance,' the poem says, 'the classical mechanics of design probably does operate-- though in reverse, so far as the old Argument

from Design is concerned; but these little things, things of no real importance, microscopic phenomena like a flower or a moth or man or planet or solar system. . . are governed by purely statistical laws of quantum mechanics of random distribution, are they not?'³⁰

Frost does not attempt to give an answer to the situation he presents in the poem, but the fact that he raises the question of a design for the universe indicates he may have doubted the existence of such a plan. Also, he introduces the idea that man must accept his own insignificance within the vast universe and realize the egocentricity of his assumption that a benevolent God would plan for him while ignoring a moth or other creatures within the universe. Moreover, this force outside of man may not be friendly toward him at all; instead, if it exists, it may actually be hostile to his wellbeing.³¹

However, if there is a force outside of man which is responsible for the creation and control of the universe, Frost's man does not have a clear conception of it.³² In A Masque of Reason (1945),³³ Frost returns to the Biblical story of Job in order to characterize the deity who "rules" over the seemingly chaotic world of man. Frost's modern Job commits the same error as Job of the Old Testament; "He believes that divine action cannot be just unless it comes within the purview of human reason and human standards of justice."³⁴ Job's quest in the story is "to find, if possible, in God a conformity with human reason."³⁵ But, the God within the masque is a vastly diminished Being from that

presented in the Biblical story. For example, even His arrival upon the scene lacks the spectacular quality associated with godliness in the Old Testament. God first appears before Job and his wife within the Burning Bush; however, when he tries to come out of the Bush, He becomes entangled within the branches and must struggle with them in order to free himself--a rather clumsy and comic entry for a deity. Then too, once free from the Bush, God does not mount a golden, heavenly throne; rather, He sits upon a prefabricated, plywood one, which collapses on Him. Thus, although the basic plot of Frost's poem and the Biblical story is similar, their concepts of God are extremely different; the God presented in the masque has lost many of His divine characteristics and seems to have gained many human qualities.

After God is seated upon His throne, He begins to explain to Job and his wife why He has come.

I've had you on my mind a thousand years
 To thank you someday for the way you helped me
 Establish once for all the principle
 There's no connection man can reason out
 Between his just deserts and what he gets.
 Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.
 'Twas a great demonstration we put on.
 I should have spoken sooner had I found
 The word I wanted. You would have supposed
 One who in the beginning was the Word
 Would be in a position to command it.
 I have to wait for words like anyone.
 Too long I've owed you this apology
 For the apparently unmeaning sorrow
 You were afflicted with in those old days.
 But it was of the essence of the trial
 You shouldn't understand it at the time.
 It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning.

And it came out all right. I have no doubt
 You realize by now the part you played
 To stultify the Deuteronomist
 And change the tenor of religious thought.
 My thanks are to you for releasing me
 From moral bondage to the human race.
 The only free will there at first was man's,
 Who could do good or evil as he chose.
 I had no choice but I must follow him
 With forfeits and rewards he understood--
 Unless I like to suffer loss of worship.
 I had to prosper good and punish evil.
 You changed all that.³⁶ You set me free to reign.
 You are the Emancipator of your God,
 And as such I promote you to a saint. (pp. 589f.)

Here, "the poet is presenting the familiar 'modern' idea that God needs man to help Him work things out."³⁷ God as presented in the masque is a semi-powerful God who can "rule" the universe only after man has helped to set Him free--a God who seemingly must adjust His behavior to suit His worshipers, to meet the demands of "trial by market." On the other hand, if God is to salvage any of His dignity and power, He must not be bound by rules which require Him to reward or punish in accordance with the standards of man. If He is to retain His divinity, He must not be held in "moral bondage to the human race"--to the "Deuteronomist" who is forever quoting the Law. Furthermore, if God is free to rule as He wishes and if He is to be a deity--that is, something more than human--then man must realize his own inability to comprehend God. Man must understand that if there is an infinite being it is necessarily beyond the scope of the finite mind. In other words, if man is to have an omnipotent God, he must be willing to accept

the inscrutability of this power. That is, if man continues to attempt to force his God and the plan of the universe to fall within the limits of his reason, he will have chaos and a diminished deity; if he accepts the inscrutability of God and His design, he may retain an omnipotent deity and a purposeful world. Thus, for man to keep his God, he must learn that there may not be a logical relationship "between his just deserts and what he gets." Therefore, just as the men in "Trial by Existence" could not have the memory that they chose the life to comfort them while they live on earth, so Job is not allowed to understand the trial in his life at the time he is undergoing it because such knowledge would make the trial no trial at all--"It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning."

Hence, there is no logic that man can find in the order of the world. Moreover, as the play points out, only man would even expect such reason to exist.

There isn't any universal reason,
And no one but a man would think there was. (p. 593)

As God tells Job's wife,

. . . the discipline man needed most
Was to learn his submission to unreason. . . . (p. 593)

Job, like modern man, finds that something within him still desires to reason out a logical order for the world in which he must live.

You'd be the last to want me to believe
 All Your efforts were merely lucky blunders.
 That would be unbelief and atheism.
 The artist in me cries out for design.
 Such devilish ingenuity of torture
 Did seem unlike You, and I tried to think
 The reason might have been some other person's
 But there is nothing You are not behind. (p. 598)³⁸

Thus, in A Masque of Reason, as in "Design,"

the artist in man cries out for convincing evidence
 of a kindly design in the workings of the universe,
 but finds none, unless there is design in the very
 lack of design, and fate must seem unmeaning to
 have meaning.³⁹

Man is not permitted to see into the cosmic scheme. "The
 barrier between creator and created is maintained."⁴⁰
 Therefore, man's search for order or design in life is not
 satisfied.

Job, in his frustration, is disturbed by what he believes
 is mockery on the part of God.

I fail to see what fun, what satisfaction
 A God can find in laughing at how badly
 Men fumble at the possibilities
 When left to guess forever for themselves. (p. 598)

In his depressed state, Job pictures God as a cryptic deity
 who leaves man to travel through life without any assistance
 and then finds his clumsy attempts to cope with the problems
 of life humorous. Perhaps, God's inscrutability is really a
 disguise for His lack of power.

The chances are when there's so much pretense
 Of metaphysical profundity
 The obscurity's a fraud to cover nothing. (p. 598)

Thus, Job entertains the idea that God's "pretense" that man's mind is incapable of comprehending Him is simply a means of hiding the fact that God really has no design or order for the universe--that in reality He cannot or does not control it.

Man is left in doubt; he is not assured that there is a design to the universe, yet he cannot seem to accept the idea of no design.

We don't know where we are, or who we are.
 We don't know one another; don't know You;
 Don't know what time it is. We don't know, don't we?
 (pp. 598f.)

Hence, man cannot understand himself, his fellow man, the world in which he lives, or the creator of the world. He is simply left to stumble through this world, which he neither made nor understands, by a God who seems to be enjoying the joke He has played on man.⁴¹ However, something within Job still insists that there must be more than a chaotic world.

It comes down to a doubt about the wisdom
 Of having children--after having had them,
 So there is nothing we can do about it
 But warn the children they perhaps should have none.
 You could end this by simply coming out
 And saying plainly and unequivocally
 Whether there's any part of man immortal. (p. 599)⁴²

If there is nothing within man that is immortal--if he has no soul--then all of the pain he suffers in life is purposeless.

Therefore, it would be mere cruelty to have children--to impose such a meaningless world on other individuals. Unless man's suffering proves to be a trial for him--a means of "earning" immortality, then life is futile and to perpetuate it would be senseless.

Except as a hard place to save his soul in,
A trial ground where he can try himself
And find out whether he is any good,
It would be meaningless. (p. 600)

Thus, having passed through his deepest despair, Job arrives once more at the conclusion that there must be divine order to life for it to have purpose; therefore, God must have had some reason for punishing him.

God, in answer to Job's persistent questioning, finally gives him a second reason for his trial.

I was just showing off to the Devil, Job,
As is set forth in chapters One and Two.
(Job takes a few steps pacing.) Do you mind?
(God eyes him anxiously.) (p. 600)

Since this is all the answer God will give him, Job must be satisfied with God's off-handed reply. Although Job now has a reason for his trial, in receiving this answer he must accept a diminished God.

'Twas human of You.⁴³ I expected more
Than I could understand and what I get
Is almost less than I can understand.
But I don't mind. Let's leave it as it stood.
The point was it was none of my concern. (p. 600)

Therefore, Job seems to conclude that he should not have dared to examine God's motives so closely. In the masque, "The message is the necessity of man like patient, reverential Job to learn submission to unreason."⁴⁴ If man continues to insist upon a design and designer that come within the scope of his reasoning, he will lose his belief in a meaningful universe and will find himself once more surrounded by chaos. Also present in the masque is the idea "that Job's ordeal was a presumptuous act upon God's part to restore divine prestige."⁴⁵

In addition, the masque is concerned with man's anthropomorphic views of God. Frost seems to believe that if a God exists He must be more than human; therefore, man's anthropomorphic God is ridiculous.

In this picture of God. . . he [Frost] is showing us not lack of reason or justice in God, but rather man's stubbornness and lack of understanding. . . . As it has been the human error to read man into nature, so is it the human error to read man into God: and Frost's poem, satirical in its shrewd observation on this human fallibility, is concerned with this problem.⁴⁶

When man tries to make his God fit within the scope of his own reason and logic, he limits the power of God. God does not react toward man in a human way. It has been the tendency throughout history for man to attribute to God any characteristics he thought should be part of a God. Naturally, these characteristics tended to be mainly human traits. In the

masque Frost ridicules such a view of God as is pointedly shown in such statements as:

It's God.
I'd know Him by Blake's picture anywhere. (p. 588)⁴⁷

In the companion piece to A Masque of Reason, A Masque of Mercy (1947), Frost questions the "justice" of God and concludes that man should not desire only "justice" from God. The setting of the play is a modern New York City book store into which Jonah has fled to escape God. He chose to hide in a book store because he thinks he will find a Bible there which he can use to protect himself from God--

To find out how to get away from God?
Which is what poeple use it for too often (p. 610)

Jonah is hiding from God because he does not want to prophecy the destruction of New York City; he has lost confidence in God's willingness to punish the unrighteous. Jonah does not want to be publicly let down by God's not fulfilling his prophecy.

I've lost faith in God to carry out
The threats He makes against the city evil.
I can't trust God to be unmerciful. (p. 614)

But, as Paul points out, man should not desire only justice from God. Since man cannot live up to the almost impossible idealism of the Sermon on the Mount, pure justice would only condemn him. Paul attempts to explain to the others how little justice really matters in the end.

You are the universal fugitive,
 Escapist as we say, though you are not
 Running away from Him you think you are
 But from His mercy-justice contradiction.
 Mercy and justice are a contradiction.
 But here's where your evasion has an end.
 I have to tell you something that will spoil
 Indulgence in your form of melancholy
 Once and for all. I'm going to make you see
 How relatively little justice matters. (p. 615)

Thus, man does not fear God, but rather the contradiction of His mercy-justice. If God rules by justice--by law--man could better understand Him and what to expect out of life; that is, if he were good, he would be rewarded and if he were bad, he would be punished. However, with the contradiction, man does not know how God will respond to his actions; he is left in doubt. According to Paul, though, man should be glad that God is not solely just because man is unable to keep even the Law. Furthermore, Paul explains that the realization of truth begins with the understanding that God is not always "just."

Johah, I'm glad, not sad to hear you say
 You can't trust God to be unmerciful.
 There you have the beginning of all wisdom. (p. 619)

Paul believes it is mercy, not justice, from God that will save man because he cannot possibly live up to the example of life given by Christ.

Paul's constant theme. The Sermon on the Mount
 Is just a frame-up to insure the failure
 Of all of us, so all of us will be
 Thrown prostrate at the Mercy Seat for Mercy. (p. 631)

Therefore, God gave man the example of life in the Sermon on the Mount in order to be sure all men would have to depend on His mercy for their salvation--that is, no man could claim his right to heavenly reward on the basis of justice. God does not seem to intervene with mercy for man's sake; instead, God seems to demand man's dependence on his mercy for His own sake.⁴⁸ Later, as Keeper continues his explanation of Paul's philosophy, he points out that the Sermon on the Mount is a "beautiful impossibility."

An irresistible impossibility
 A lofty beauty no one can live up to
 Yet no one turn from trying to live up to. (p. 631)⁴⁹

Or, as Paul himself says of the Sermon on the Mount:

Yes, spoken so we can't live up to it
 Yet so we'll have to weep because we can't.
 Mercy is only to the undeserving.
 But such we all are made in the sight of God.

Here we all fail together, dwarfed and poor.
 Failure is failure, but success is failure.
 There is no better way of having it.
 An end you can't by any means achieve
 And yet can't turn your back on or ignore,
 That is the mystery you must accept. (p. 632)

Thus, there is no way that man can be "deserving" of justice alone; instead, the mercy of God is his only means of salvation. Frost "has a thorough skepticism about that tame revenge, justice, and a cold certainty that nothing but mercy will do for us."⁵⁰ Keeper finally comprehends what Paul is saying.

And I can see that uncertainty
 In which we act in a severity,
 A cruelty, amounting to injustice
 That nothing but God's mercy can assuage. (p. 641)

Therefore, the same arbitrary God who doles out life in "Trial by Existence," causing man to go through life "crushed and mystified," here forces man into the necessity of depending entirely on His mercy--robbing him of the assurance that he will receive justice.

We have to stay afraid deep in our souls
 Our sacrifice, the best we have to offer,
 And not our worst nor second best, our best,
 Our very best, our lives laid down like Jonah's,
 Our lives laid down in war and peace, may not
 Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight.
 And that they may be is the only prayer
 Worth praying. May my sacrifice
 Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight. (pp. 641f.)⁵¹

Thus, after all man's attempts to do what is "right," in the end he may find that they have not been enough. "We cannot even be certain that the objectives we devote ourselves to are the right ones."⁵² However, man must confront this fact with courage, and even though he knows his best efforts may not be good enough, he must still continue to try. "To feel this Fear of God and to go ahead in spite of it, Frost says, is man's principal virtue, courage."⁵³

We both have lacked the courage in the heart
 To overcome the fear within the soul
 And go ahead to any accomplishment.
 Courage is what it takes and takes the more of
 Because the deeper fear is so eternal. (p. 642)

The position here seems close to the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, but we are not allowed even the cold comfort provided by the complementary doctrine of arbitrary election. All we have is

the courage in the heart
To overcome the fear within the soul
And go ahead to any accomplishment,

a kind of capacity for heroism or for getting by, for enduring or for making adjustments, with no certainty that the capacity is at last significant to anything but our own atomic existence.⁵⁴

Therefore, just as man in A Masque of Reason must learn his submission to unreason, man in A Masque of Mercy must learn to confront life without even knowing whether or not his acts--the best he has to offer--will be acceptable to God.⁵⁵ In other words, "In his [Frost's] view, the darkness that surrounds our moral life requires that God be more than a legalistic judge. Mercy is needed to validate his justice. . . ." ⁵⁶ This mercy, however, is of such an unsettled nature that it leaves man in greater fear than the threat of justice.⁵⁷ The idea behind the two masques

is that man. . . is being tested to prove whether or not he can carry on moral life disinterestedly, without the certainty of a reward, and also. . . whether he can go ahead to any accomplishment without the certainty that what he does is right.⁵⁸

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

From these poems one can see that Robert Frost is a poet who reflects a pessimistic view of the modern world and modern man in a large quantity of his work. In fact, many of Frost's poems

express an attitude that, at its most extreme, makes pessimism seem a hopeful evasion; they begin with a flat and terrible reproduction of the evil in the world and end by saying: It's so; and there's nothing you can do about it: and if there were, would you ever do it?¹

The modern problem, as depicted in Frost's poems, is man's seeming inability to cope with the indifferent universe in which he must live.

Man, long accustomed to a universe centered on himself, cannot easily adjust to the vast, indifferent world which science has uncovered for him. He finds that his life has been stripped of many of the "truths" which guided man in the past, and he must revamp his values. Frost's work reflects concern about the apathy that is frequently shown by modern man toward his problems. It also reflects concern about the growing isolation of man--his inability to

communicate with his fellow man. As Marion Montgomery stated, "Each man is, in a sense, a stranger in this world, and so he remains."²

Furthermore, man finds himself surrounded by a universe that shows no sympathy toward him. Frost's man learns he must accept the indifference of the natural world to his plight. In addition, he becomes aware that nature sometimes adds to his problems by being openly hostile toward him. Moreover, man who is accustomed to turning for guidance in time of need to an anthropomorphic God suddenly discovers that this power seems to have withdrawn from his life--or perhaps it never existed. Whether this force was a creation of man's imagination--an apparition of his mind, whether man has simply lost the ability to communicate with it--since he is always wrong to the light, or whether this force only allows man brief glimpses of it that he cannot comprehend, man does not know. But, in any case, no longer does a benign deity offer man a "helping hand," aiding him in making the "right" choices in life. Thus, man realizes that he is isolated--surrounded in life by an indifferent world, an unconcerned God, and an apathetic, self-centered fellow man. This isolation becomes especially terrible as man confronts the loneliness of old age. But, perhaps the most frightening awareness comes when man turns to look for comfort from within himself and uncovers the greatest desolation and terror--his own emptiness, his own "desert places."

However, Frost's man still seems to crave a purposeful universe--one that provides some meaning for his life, some logical reason for his suffering. He searches for this meaning--from the sea, among the stars, in the dark beyond the city lights, and even within a well; the result of his quest is always the same--frustration from receiving no understandable answer. In his search for order or design within the universe, Frost's man discovers only chaos or "design of darkness." Of course, if there is no plan then there can be no planner, or if there is a "design of darkness" then there must be an evil designer. Finding that his search revealed only lack of order, man retreats to the comforting conclusion that human limitations prevent him from comprehending the controlling force for the world but that it must exist for life to have meaning.

Frost's poems depict a God who falls short of the ideals of perfection and omnipotence that Christian theology dictates. At times this deity even seems to desire to see man suffer. He is the being who hands out life to man yet robs him of the comforting knowledge that he chose such a life of his own free will. Moreover, God demands man's complete dependence on His mercy; He does not give man guidance in living his life. Furthermore, in the end man may discover that in spite of all his efforts, the very best he had to offer in life is not enough to satisfy the arbitrary God upon whose mercy he is dependent. It should be noted that the concept of God

reflected in Frost's work is rather ambiguous. For example, although Frost ridicules the anthropomorphic view of God in some poems, in others he seems to be working from this same concept of God. The deity presented in Frost's poetry is sometimes a force completely separate from man's world; yet, on the other hand, this force occasionally seems to be part of nature or else works through nature. It may be that this ambiguity is a result of Frost's own uncertainty about God.

Frost's poetry presents the belief that man must accept the conditions that surround his life. He must not waste effort in self-pity; rather, he must accept the world as it is and have the courage to go on to some accomplishment. He must be one of the "strong" who continue to work while realizing that they may receive no reward or even the satisfaction that they are doing the right thing. He must make the necessary decisions in life, knowing that his choice will have consequences yet not knowing if there is any "right" or "wrong" to the choice. "At their best, . . . Frost's people possess a hard core of personal integrity that enables them to confront reality without wincing."³

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NOTES

CHAPTER I

¹James M. Cox, ed., Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962), p. 5.

²e.g., William Rose Benét, "Wise Old Woodchuck," Saturday Review of Literature, XIV (May 30, 1936), 6; Sidney Cox, Robert Frost: Original "Ordinary Man" (New York, 1929); Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (New York, 1919); Gordon B. Munson, Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense (New York, 1927); David B. Owens, "The Philosophy and Style of Robert Frost" (unpub. M.Ed. thesis, The Pennsylvania State College, 1937); Richard Thornton, Recognition of Robert Frost (New York, 1937)

³Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice (New York, 1942), p. 230.

⁴Lawrance Thompson, "A Native to the Grain of the American Idiom," Saturday Review of Literature, XLII (March 21, 1959), 55. Ciardi ["Robert Frost, Master Conversationalist at Work," Saturday Review of Literature, XLII (March 21, 1959)] also points out Frost's awareness of the vastness of the universe, but he seems less convinced of Frost's belief that man can overcome the sense of lostness.

⁵Thompson, "A Native to the Grain of the American Idiom," p. 56.

⁶e.g., Margaret Blum, "Robert Frost's 'Directive': A Theological Reading," Modern Language Notes, LXXVI (June, 1961), 524f.; Ben W. Griffith, "Frost's 'The Road Not Taken'," Explicator, XII, Item 55; W.R. Irwin, "The Unity of Frost's Masques," American Literature, XXXII (November, 1960), 302-312.

⁷Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill, 1939), pp. 111-113.

⁸Malcolm Cowley, "The Case Against Mr. Frost," Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 37. Originally published in The New Republic (September 11, 1944), 312f.; (September 18, 1944), 345-347.

⁹M. L. Rosenthal, The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction (New York, 1960), pp. 112f.

¹⁰James Cox, Collection, p. 7. John F. Lynen attempts to refute this idea by arguing that Frost's selection of symbols from the natural world often misleads readers to believe that he is not modern. See discussion of Lynen on page eight.

¹¹Ivor Winters, "Robert Frost: or, the Spiritual Drifter as Poet," Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 75. Originally published in The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises, 1957.

¹²Winters, p. 82.

¹³James Cox, Collection, p. 9.

¹⁴George W. Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost (Durham, N.C., 1960), p. 7.

¹⁵James Cox, Collection, p. 10.

¹⁶Nitchie, p. 187.

¹⁷Reuben A. Brower, "Something for Robert Frost," New England Quarterly, XXXIV (June, 1961), 249.

¹⁸Roy Harvey Pearce, "Frost's Momentary Stay," Kenyon Review, XXIII (Spring, 1961), 259.

¹⁹Marion Montgomery, "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature Toward God," Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 138. Originally published in The South Atlantic Quarterly, LVII (Summer, 1958), 339-353.

²⁰Caroline Ford, The Less Traveled Road: A Study of Robert Frost (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), p. 49.

²¹Robert P. Tristram Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson (New York, 1964), p. 70.

²²Coffin, p. 73.

²³Coffin, p. 60.

²⁴John F. Lynen, "Frost as Modern Poet," Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 190. Originally published in The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost, 1960.

²⁵Lynen, p. 191.

²⁶Lynen, p. 196.

²⁷Mark Van Doren, "Robert Frost's America," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXXVII (June, 1951), 33.

²⁸Van Doren, p. 33.

²⁹Robert Francis, "The Shared Solitude of Robert Frost," The Forum, CVIII (October, 1947), 193.

³⁰Reginald L. Cook, "The Stand of Robert Frost, Early and Late," English Journal, XLVIII (May, 1959), 234.

³¹Cook, "The Stand of Robert Frost, Early and Late," p. 234.

³²Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York, 1958), p. 213.

³³Cook, Dimensions, p. 144.

³⁴Cook, Dimensions, p. 144.

³⁵John Ciardi, "Robert Frost, Master Conversationalist at Work," Saturday Review of Literature, XLII (March 21, 1959), 17.

³⁶Elizabeth Isaacs also shows interest in the light-and-dark or, as she terms it, "cheer and gloom" contrast in Frost's work.

³⁷John Ciardi, "Robert Frost: American Bard," Saturday Review of Literature, XLV (March 24, 1962), 53.

³⁸Philip Booth, "Journey Out of a Dark Forest," New York Times Book Review (March 24, 1962), p. 1.

³⁹Booth, p. 1.

⁴⁰Robert Norton Ganz, Jr., "The Pattern of Meaning in Robert Frost's Poetry" (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1958), p. 145.

⁴¹Ganz, p. 196.

⁴²John Robert Doyle, Jr., The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (New York, 1962), p. 210.

⁴³Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York, 1955), pp. 35f. Original edition, Knopf, New York, 1953. Jarrell's brackets.

⁴⁴Jarrell, p. 61.

⁴⁵James M. Cox, "Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing," The Virginia Quarterly Review, XXXV (1959), 80.

⁴⁶Lionel Trilling, "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode," Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 157. Originally published in Partisan Review, XXVI (Summer, 1959), 445-452.

⁴⁷Trilling, p. 158.

⁴⁸Robert Langbaum, "The New Nature Poetry," American Scholar, XXVIII (Summer, 1959), 327.

⁴⁹Langbaum, p. 331. Reuben A. Brower believes that although there are many similarities between Frost and Wordsworth, there are also a great number of differences in their treatment of nature. For his discussion on this point, see his book The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York, 1963), pp. 40-55, 75-91.

⁵⁰James G. Hepburn, "Robert Frost and His Critics," New England Quarterly, XXXV (1962), 274.

⁵¹J. Donald Adams, "Speaking of Books," New York Times Book Review (June 11, 1961), p. 2.

⁵²J. Donald Adams, "Speaking of Books," New York Times Book Review (April 12, 1959), p. 2

⁵³Elizabeth Isaacs, An Introduction to Robert Frost (Denver, 1962), p. 160.

⁵⁴Isaacs, p. 158.

⁵⁵Isaacs, p. 161.

CHAPTER II

¹Langbaum, p. 331.

²Lynen, p. 177. Lynen continues by stating that "The relationship between man and nature represents the whole problem raised by the opposition of mind and matter, of man's actual experience with its feelings, purposes, and intuitions of value and a scientific scheme of reality in which everything is reducible to matter and process."(p. 177)

³Frost seems to conceive of nature as an impersonal force most of the time, yet sometimes he personifies it and refers to nature as "she."

⁴Montgomery, p. 141.

⁵Robert Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York, 1949), p. 35. Subsequent references to Complete Poems of Robert Frost will appear parenthetically in the text.

⁶Ganz, p. 49.

⁷Ganz, p. 50. Ganz continues by arguing that "In many later poems Frost takes the incongruity between the human and the natural realms, the fact that there is 'something wrong' between them, as comic. It is as if God played jokes and raised false hopes for the purpose of disappointing man, and teaching him to realize by means of laughter the limits of his ability to find rational explanations for his world." (p. 50) Only one other critic, Ford, discusses Frost's tendency to see man's plight as comic.

⁸Nitchie, p. 18. Frost's poetry furnishes numerous examples of his belief in the indifference of nature to the problems of man.

⁹Montgomery, p. 141.

¹⁰An analogy might be suggested here with the sightless eyes of T. J. Eckleberg that stare unceasingly out over the Valley of Ashes in Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby and with the empty eyes of the Confederate soldier in the middle of the square in Faulkner's The Sound and The Fury. In all three instances the eyes look out upon the chaos of man's life, but they look without the gift of sight. In addition, an analogy might be drawn between the sightlessness of the stars and the classical conception of justice--a woman blindfolded.

¹¹Nitchie, p. 22.

¹²Anna Mae Lyon, "Recurrent Themes in the Poetry of Robert Frost" (unpub. M.S. thesis, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, 1948), p. 105.

¹³Gorham Munson must have overlooked this poem when he remarked in Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense (New York, 1927) that Frost "spends no time dilating on the aloofness or indifference of nature to man." (p. 103)

¹⁴Montgomery, p. 138.

¹⁵Jarrell, p. 45.

¹⁶Winters, p. 78. Winters suggests that "Frost's buck has much the same kind of symbolic grandeur as the apocryphal beast in 'The Second Coming,' by Yeats, and he has the advantage of greater reality. . . ." (p. 79)

¹⁷Nitchie, p. 20.

¹⁸Robert Peters, "The Truth of Frost's 'Directive'," Modern Language Notes, LXXV (1960), 31.

¹⁹Randall Jarrell believes the poem does depict the destruction of man; he states that "Directive" shows the coalescence of three of Frost's obsessive themes, those of isolation, of extinction, and of the final limitations of man--is Frost's last word about all three. . . ." (p. 46)

²⁰This poem seems to contradict Reginald L. Cook's statement ["The Stand of Robert Frost, Early and Late," English Journal, XLVIII (May, 1959)] that Frost "sees without awe the tragic possibilities in nature. . . ." (p. 234)

²¹Nitchie, p. 26.

²²Much criticism of this poem deals with the idea of some possible religious meaning, based mainly on the cup image in the last lines of the poem.

I have kept hidden in the instep arch
Of an old cedar at the waterside
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,
So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.
(I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)
Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion. (p. 521)

According to George Nitchie, "His [the reader's] real objective is, by drinking at the brook that provided the house with water, to pass through his awareness of lost energy and social waste into a condition in which such waste does not matter. In a way 'Directive' is really a ritual of initiation into the company of those who share Frost's role as the man who knows how little such waste really matters." (p. 144) In the "Pod of the Milkweed" (1962) Frost says that "waste was of the essence of the scheme." [Robert Frost, In the Clearing (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, 1962), p. 14.]

Another critic Robert Peters ["The Truth of Frost's 'Directive'," Modern Language Notes, LXXV (1960)] argues that the poem deals with a religious experience in an existential sense. "Frost makes no reference to a deity; his view is that of a world in which man endures with whatever fortitude of mind and spirit he alone can muster against his own impermanence. . . . In Frost's spectrum, the damned are the conventional, shut from any full knowing of their potential worth as individuals of independent act and conviction; the saved are the unorthodox, childlike in their response to nature, who accept the full rewards and obligations of a private integrity and a self-reliant courage." (p. 32)

Randall Jarrell seems to think that the poem is essentially an experience of sloughing off religion--realizing that orthodox religion was a part of the "playhouse." He states that the poem presents". . . Frost's understanding that each life is pathetic because it wears away into the death that it at least half welcomes--that even its salvation, far back at the cold root of things, is make believe. . . ." (p. 48) On the other hand, Reuben A. Brower [Constellations] believes that the poem deals with an "experience with traditional Christian overtones." (p. 238)

²³In an interview with Bela Kornitzer [Robert Frost (produced by Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1958)], Frost stated that "Nature is always cruel."

²⁴Laurence Perrine, "Frost's 'Sand Dunes'," Explicator, XIV, Item 38.

²⁵Thornton H. Parsons, "The Humanism of Robert Frost: A Study in Parallels" (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1959), p. 83.

²⁶Peter Viereck, "Parnassus Divided," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXXIV (October, 1949), 78.

²⁷ Robert Ganz argues that the last stanza of the poem indicates Frost's faith "in the ability of human nature to sustain itself against the destructive forces of outer and inner nature without the armor of dogma." (p. 146) On the other hand, Yvor Winters believes this same stanza expresses the idea that "man can think better if he frees himself wholly from the past." (p. 64) According to Malcolm Cowley, Frost himself was unable to do this--i.e., he was "too walled in by the past" to confront the modern situation.

²⁸ Reuben A. Brower [Constellations] points out that "the man humorously begins counting the nonexistent inhabitants and . . . his thoughts gradually fall into a rhythm that hints at panic. . . ." (p. 19) However, later Brower argues that "the note of panic was checked as in other poems by the thought that this is just another game, and by the self-amusement of the conclusion to the poem. . . ." (p. 103)

²⁹ Ganz, p. 98.

³⁰ George Nitchie argues that "in the last line, it is clear that he speaks not only for himself, but for nature--clear not only because it is largely self-evident but also because in a good many other poems nature does want life to go on living." (pp. 23f.) Nitchie bases his argument on nature's replenishing of itself.

³¹ Isaacs, p. 66.

³² Frost once told some of his students that to give an individual that "terribly abandoned feeling" leave him "to the horrors of his own thoughts and conscience." ["The Manumitted Student," New Student, VI (January 12, 1927), cited in Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 216.]

³³ Nitchie, p. 67.

³⁴ Brooks, p. 105.

³⁵ Brower, Constellations, pp. 109f.

³⁶ Some critics do not agree that the poem ends in despair. For example, Reuben A. Brower [Constellations] argues that "The outright 'nothing to express' at the end of the stanza prepares for the nasal scorn. . . in 'They cannot scare me. . . .' The scary place is thrust off 'there' by the emerging man of wit, by the mind that won't give way to 'absent-spiritedness'." (p. 109)

Similarly, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren [Understanding Poetry (3rd., New York, 1960)] think that "It is not an impression of mere despair, for the man, we feel, has

not been overcome by his own 'desert places,' but has mastered them." (p. 106) They base their argument on Frost's use of "scare" rather than "terrify"; however, it does not seem that one would even need to be "scared" of a situation or problem he had "mastered." Nor does the word "scare" seem to imply a "game" as Robert Langbaum suggests when he claims that Frost "turns into a kind of consolation that perception of an internal void which would be for another poet the most terrifying perception of all." (p. 329) However, although few readers may be terrified, most readers would fail to feel "consoled" after reading the poem.

CHAPTER III

¹Bela Kornitzer, Robert Frost (produced by Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1958).

²Nitchie, p. 158.

³Frost asks in the brief verse "A Question" (1942) if life is really worth all the pain man must suffer.

A voice said, Look me in the stars
And tell me truly, men of earth,
If all the soul-and-body scars
Were not too much to pay for birth. (p. 493)

⁴Nitchie, p. 43.

⁵Nitchie, p. 222.

⁶Lyon, p. 107.

⁷Nitchie, p. 17.

⁸Reuben A. Brower [Constellations] calls the poem "a powerful image of the choice of life." (p. 231)

⁹Winters, p. 63.

¹⁰Some critics interpret the poem as satire of man. For example, James M. Cox ["Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing," The Virginia Quarterly Review, XXXV (1959)] believes that "The poem, in addition to demolishing the cliché of life's crossroads, is a vision of as well as a warning against that wise old farmer poet whose retrospective summary of his past may attribute a wisdom to former actions which was never there." (p. 76)

Similarly, Ben Griffith, Jr. ["Frost's 'The Road Not Taken'," Explicator, XII, Item 55.] finds that "The repetition of the pronoun 'I' seems to emphasize the egotism of man as he praises a choice based on whim when reason was insufficient--a choice for which he deserves no credit." Griffith states that "the only interpretation which can be

held consistently throughout the poem is that Frost (as he often does) is playing the role of Everyman as he spoofs man's tendency to make a whimsical choice between two equal imperatives and to praise his choice later as have made 'all the difference'."

On the other hand, Lawrance Thompson [Robert Frost] argues that the poem is a characterization of a man "who habitually wastes energy in regretting any choice made: belatedly but wistfully he sighs over the attractive alternative rejected." (p. 10)

¹¹Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 25.

¹²Robert Penn Warren [The Writer and His Craft (Ann Arbor, 1954)] finds that this (the second) stanza is an extension of the idea in the first stanza--that is, the horse is an extension of the man in stanza one. Both exist on the practical level, "the level of the beast which cannot understand why man would stop on the darkest evening of the year, to stare into the darker darkness of the snowy woods." (p. 222)

¹³Many critics become involved with the question of whether or not the poem contains a death image. For instance, Leonard Unger and William Van O'Connor [Poems for Study (New York, 1953), pp. 597-600; reprinted in Robert A. Greenberg and James G. Hepburn, eds., Robert Frost: An Introduction (New York, 1961)] believe that the woods "suggest the peacefulness of death." In addition, they believe that the obligation the man feels may simply be his commitment to life. "He is committed to life, in all its diversity and death will come in time. . . ." (p. 20)

Similarly, Reuben A. Brower [Constellations] states that "The dark nowhere of the woods, the seen and heard movement of things, and the lullaby of inner speech are an invitation to sleep--and winter sleep is again close to easeful death." (p. 35) Along this line, Frost in "Into My Own" (1913) suggests that the woods "stretched away unto the edge of doom." (p. 5)

On the other hand, James G. Hepburn ["Robert Frost and His Critics," New England Quarterly, XXV (1962)] claims that "even if the poem does make a choice of social responsibility over estheticism or the death-wish, it makes the choice so slightly, so undramatically, that to discuss the choice as the essence of the poem is to distort the poem. It is a poem of undertones and overtones rather than of meaning." (p. 376)

Furthermore, "In a public lecture at the State University of Iowa, April 13, 1959, Frost stated explicitly that the poem 'is not concerned with death'." [K. L. Knickerbocker and H. Willard Reninger, Interpreting Literature (revised edition, New York, 1963), p. 310.]

¹⁴Warren, pp. 222f.

¹⁵Nitchie, p. 163.

¹⁶Reginal Cook [Dimensions] suggests that "The interest [in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"] is the quarrel with those commitments. . . . His revolt is based on that, that all life goes false by its commitments." (pp. 79f.)

¹⁷Nitchie, p. 44.

¹⁸According to James G. Hepburn ["Robert Frost and His Critics," New England Quarterly, XXXV (1962)], "Although the narrator refuses to come into the dark and lament, the poem is a lamentation, and the narrator's refusal is a lamentation." (p. 370)

¹⁹Robert Ornstein, "Frost's 'Come In'," Explicator, XV, Item 61.

²⁰Doyle, p. 196.

²¹Much controversy in the criticism of Frost is concerned with whether or not he was a "profound" writer--that is, whether or not he confronted the problems of the modern world, as symbolized by his entry or failure to enter the "dark woods." Essentially the argument has three sides--those who think that Frost, perhaps because of a failure of "nerve" or because of his ties with the past, failed to enter the woods; those who believe that Frost only desired to remain on the perimeter of the woods, this being an important exertion of will; and those who think that he did enter the woods.

For example, according to Robert Langbaum, Frost stayed at the edge of the "dark woods" and, thus, his poetry is not likely to be a favorite of serious readers "because Frost does not call into play our faculties; he does not make poetry of our ideas. . . . Frost's moments of awareness are accidents that could happen to any one in any age." (p. 331)

On the other hand, Hyatt Howe Waggoner [The Heel of Elohim (Norman, 1950)] argues that "If Robert Frost has refused to 'come in' to the dark which he has so constantly and clearly perceived, it is not because he has perceived without understanding, but because he has preferred the way of hardening himself to an unpleasant reality to that of either succumbing to it or, as he would have it, deluding himself about it." (p. 59)

Moreover, James M. Cox ["Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing," The Virginia Quarterly Review, XXXV (1959)] remarks that "Frost sees the drama of existence as man's willingness to risk himself before the spell of the dark woods.

For him self-reliance becomes self-possession, and the victory lies not in the march forward into the wilderness but in the freedom he feels while patrolling the boundary of consciousness." (p. 80)

However, Philip Booth ["Journey Out of a Dark Forest," New York Times Book Review (March 25, 1962)] states that Frost did not begin to resolve the conflicts of modern life "until he surrendered himself to the dark woods that were both magnetic and dangerous." (p. 1) According to Booth, "Into My Own" "from the beginning directed whoever would understand him to follow him into the dark woods." (p. 1) Booth believes that Frost's greatest poems "are those which confront conflict by exploring the dark woods that repeatedly symbolize the unknown, even as, at their darkest, they contain the final unknown of death." (p. 1)

²²Doyle, p. 125.

²³Nitchie, p. 163.

²⁴Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (New York, 1919), p. 107.

²⁵Reuben A. Brower [Constellations] points out Frost's use of "expressive breaks" which help the progress of the poem "These are speaking silences: the weariness and numbness, the terror and hopelessness, the grim past and the future too little and too well foreseen--all this and much more is caught in the seeming ineptitudes of the monologue." (p. 170)

²⁶Brower, Constellations, p. 173.

²⁷Nitchie, p. 17.

²⁸In the dramatic dialogue "The Witch of Coös" (1923) Frost again depicts a woman going insane or already insane, but the cause this time is the "intolerable burden of concealment" [Thompson, Robert Frost, p. 12.] of the murder committed by her husband--i.e., her decision not to reveal the story. But, on one stormy night the woman discovers that she no longer cares enough to hide the family secret and she tells "the tale of her own unfaithfulness and her guilty payment for it through the years." [Isaacs, p. 136.]

²⁹Other poems involving choice are: "Love and a Question," "Into My Own," "The Wind and Window Flower," and "The Hill Wife."

³⁰As Frost points out in his conversation with John Ciardi ["Robert Frost, Master Conversationalist at Work" Saturday Review of Literature, XLII (March 21, 1959)] "We have plunged

into the smallness of particulars and we are plunging into the hugeness of space--but not without fears that the spirit shall be lost. . . . But in taking us deeper and deeper into matter, science has left all of us with this great misgiving, this fear that we won't be able to substantiate." (p. 17)

Or, as Lawrance Thompson ["A Native to the Grain of the American Idiom," Saturday Review of Literature, XLII (March 21, 1959)] expresses it, one of the greatest problems facing man is "how the limited can make snug in the limitless." (p. 55)

³¹The wording of this line is reminiscent of

. . . a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. . . . (Macbeth, V, v, 24-26)

Perhaps, then, Frost meant to imply that man's life is no more than

. . . a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (Macbeth, V, v, 26-28)

³²Winters, p. 77.

³³This poem anticipates "Directive" (1947) in which nature completely eradicates all signs of man's presence.

³⁴Hyatt Howe Waggoner, The Heel of Elohim (Norman, 1950), p. 44.

³⁵Thompson, Robert Frost, p. 16.

³⁶Lawrance Thompson [Robert Frost] uses this poem to point out Frost's heretical views by relating the poem to Frost's epigram

They say truth will make you free.
My truth will bind you slave to me.

"The initial assertion directly quotes from the familiar words of Jesus in John 8:32. But the covering assertion implicitly inverts the meaning of those familiar words by suggesting that the acceptance of any so-called ultimate 'truth' can be viewed as a limiting action and therefore as a form of enslavement. It would seem that, for Frost, the ultimate truth does indeed lie at the bottom of a very deep well; that he refuses to find that kind of truth subsumed within the dogma of Christian belief. (p. 17) Thompson, in discussing the contraries in the poet, says that Frost may here be viewed as a "nonconforming Puritan nonconformist."

³⁷Nitchie, p. 182.

³⁸Thompson, Robert Frost, p. 16.

³⁹Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 30.

⁴⁰Ganz, p. 165.

⁴¹Nitchie, p. 47.

⁴²Jarrell, p. 38.

⁴³Brower, Constellations, p. 151. Brower believes the poem is concerned with "the attraction of intelligence to 'the waste' it cannot master." (p. 150)

⁴⁴Similarly, in "Escapist--Never" [Robert Frost, In the Clearing (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, 1962), p. 27.] Frost depicts man as wasting his life in always trying to "seek" something.

His life is a pursuit forever.
It is the future that creates his present.
All is an interminable chain of longing.

⁴⁵Jarrell, p. 39.

⁴⁶Since the meaning of the last two lines of the poem depends on the tone attributed to them, some critics interpret them differently. For example, Laurence Perrine ["Frost's 'Neither Out Far Nor In Deep'," Explicator, VII, Item 46.] argues that "Its [the poem's] tone is one, not of scorn for man's foolishness in attempting to solve the unsolvable, but of admiration for man's perseverance in the effort to add to a stock of knowledge which can never be complete." (p. 46)

Also, Lawrence Thompson ["A Native to the Grain of the American Idiom," Saturday Review of Literature, XLII (March 21, 1959)] says that for Frost "the greatest reward of daring is still to dare, initially through individual assertion of energy and skill buttressed by a combination of self-belief and God-belief." (p. 55) However, it seems more consistent with the rest of the poem to interpret the lines as a satirical remark about man.

⁴⁷Ganz, p. 155.

⁴⁸Doyle, p. 171. According to Reuben A. Brower [Constellations], "Frost's walker is isolated. . . in utter personal, moral, and historical homelessness." (p. 127)

⁴⁹Nitchie, p. 92.

⁵⁰Waggoner, p. 48.

In "There Are Roughly Zones" (1936) Frost again refers to the inability of man to be content with the knowledge he has of the world.

What comes over a man, is it soul or mind--
That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?
(p. 401)

However, in man's quest for "wrong and right" he has not learned that "There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed." (p. 401) Although he has not learned to understand these "zones" in which he conducts his search, he does not give up his quest; his continued attempt can be blamed on a certain "limitless trait in the hearts of men." (p. 401)

In "Wild Grapes" (1923) Frost also discusses the inability of the heart to accept some of the facts about modern life.

I had not taken the first step in knowledge;
I had not learned to let go with hands,
As still I have not learned to with the heart,
And have not wish to with the heart--nor need,
That I can see. The mind--is not the heart.
I may yet live, as I know others live,
To wish in vain to let go with the mind--
Of cares, at night, to sleep; but nothing tells me
That I need learn to let go with the heart. (p. 243)

Something within the man causes him to continue to search, just as the people in "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" continue to look at the sea.

⁵¹Doyle, p. 171.

⁵²This poem suggests a common concern of Hemingway and Frost. The juxtaposition of light and dark within the poem--the man leaves the "city light" to walk in the night--is reminiscent of Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" (1927). An even stronger parallel can be seen in "An Old Man's Winter Night" (1916), in which the old man within the cellar clings to his candle staring out into the night. Moreover, the people in "The Night Light" (1947) are so afraid of the night that they feel the need to burn a light beside their beds to keep the gloom away, yet knowing that "The darkest of it [is] still to dread." (p. 529) Then too, there is the speaker in "Were I in trouble with night tonight." (p. 530) "Like Hemingway's universal symbol of

the old man who wanted to stay in a clean, well-lighted place, Frost has yearned for light. . . . Science has given us light of a kind, but it has taken away the light we most desire, leaving us only a 'flickering, human pathetic light' that we strive to maintain 'against the night'." [Waggoner, p. 44.]

Also, similar to Hemingway is Frost's presentation of "simple images of complete loneliness in night rain as opposed to the semi-security of light and people." [Isaacs, p. 106.] Like Hemingway's Frederic Henry in A Farewell to Arms, the man of "Acquainted With the Night" walks alone in the night rain; he neither complains of his isolation nor allows himself any self pity. According to Reginald Cook [Dimensions], "the poem communicates a feeling of confidence that attends the initiated." (p. 108)

Reuben A. Brower [Constellations] also speaks of the idea of initiation in relation to another Frost poem "Directive." "The metaphorical overtone of act as 'rite' entered the poem with the hint of initiation. . . ." (p. 238) Similarly, George Nitchie finds "Directive" really to be "a ritual of initiation. . . ." (p. 144) In addition to "Directive" and "Acquainted With the Night," "The Strong Are Saying Nothing" and "Acceptance" imply the idea of the initiated.

⁵³Doyle, p. 212.

⁵⁴Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 179.

⁵⁵Robert Paul Jolly, "Robert Frost as a Dramatic Poet" (unpub. M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, 1951), p. 25.

⁵⁶See footnote number fifty.

⁵⁷In "The Night Light" (1947) Frost says

It is on me by night or day,
Who have, as I suppose, ahead
The darkest of it still to dread. (p. 529)

What lies ahead in life for man will very likely be worse than his present life. Man must be strong to face the future, especially as he approaches the loneliness of old age.

⁵⁸Jarrell, p. 41.

⁵⁹Jarrell, p. 41.

⁶⁰Brower, Constellations, p. 112.

⁶¹Brower, Constellations, p. 112.

⁶²The same blankness of expression is discussed later by Frost in "Desert Places" (1936) in which it is the result of an empty mind--"With no expression, nothing to express." (p. 386) According to George Nitchie, "An Old Man's Winter Night" is about a man who is already dead--"What we live by is precisely the capacity to make crucial choices; once we reach the point of having only petty choices to make, we are to all practical intents and purposes, dead." (p. 164)

⁶³Jarrell, pp. 27f.

⁶⁴As Elizabeth Isaacs states, "He is still convinced with a kind of Calvinistic fortitude of the necessity of suffering, and he accepts it stoically with good nature as a part of man's human condition." (p. 158) Another poem depicting this stoic acceptance of unpleasant realities is "The Self-Seeker" (1914).

⁶⁵Brower, Constellations, pp. 111f.

⁶⁶Robert Langbaum argues that "we know that the despair is a passing mood, that in the morning they will have the strength." (p. 328)

⁶⁷Brower, Constellations, p. 117. Frost seems to disapprove of those individuals who cannot or will not simply accept what must be accepted, like John in "The Housekeeper."

⁶⁸Ford, p. 27.

⁶⁹Waggoner, p. 46.

⁷⁰Lyon, p. 124.

⁷¹David Owens ["The Philosophy and Style of Robert Frost" (unpub. M.Ed. thesis, The Pennsylvania State College, 1937)] suggests that the tone of the last line is not pessimistic--simply hopeful; that is, "he [the man] wishes that he could trust in life, trust that tomorrow the sun will rise as usual, as the birds can." (p. 12a)

CHAPTER IV

¹Doyle, p. 32.

²Perhaps Frost intended to imply a criticism of modern churches which seem to be attempting to remove from their

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doctrines anything which would prove offensive to their members, not to introduce anything that is too controversial into the sermons. Frost seems to criticize the churches for being too concerned with retaining a large membership-- a trial by market of their doctrines. See discussion of A Masque of Reason on page 18.

³Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 147.

⁴According to David B. Owens ["The Philosophy and Style of Robert Frost" (unpub. M.Ed. thesis, The Pennsylvania State College, 1937)], "Mr. Frost is an idealist in that he believes that behind our transient human institutions there is eternal truth. Sometimes we are out of harmony with it; but if we wait, the harmony will return." (p. 21) However, a belief in eternal truths seems inconsistent with other statements by Frost. For example, in a later poem "The Peaceful Shepherd" (1928) Frost seems to find that past creeds or governing values have not been satisfactory guides for man and he needs to discover a new set of values.

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. (p. 319)

⁵Nitchie, p. 182.

⁶Robert Paul Jolly, "Robert Frost as a Dramatic Poet" (unpub. M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, 1951), p. 37. For a further discussion of pragmatism in Frost, McCallib or, more specifically, Brower [Constellations], pages 84-86, may be consulted.

⁷Robert Langbaum argues that "To consider nature purposively dangerous is also to commit the pathetic fallacy. Besides, nature in Frost never is so dangerous that his speakers cannot protect themselves" (p. 327) However, in "Bereft" nature is presented as openly hostile toward man and the man is left alone to combat its attacks.

⁸Lyon, p. 36.

⁹Brower, Constellations, p. 114.

¹⁰Doyle, p. 172. Doyle continues, pointing out that in this poem, as well as in "Acquainted with the Night" and "Desert Places," "knowledge and courage emerge. . . knowledge of what being alive is likely to bring and courage to meet the actuality of life and win." (p. 174)

Similarly, another critic Reginal Cook [Dimensions] finds the tone of the poem hopeful because "The Trial, we infer, will be enduring but not unendurable." (p. 143)

¹¹Cook, Dimensions, p. 146.

¹²Vivian C. Hopkins, "Robert Frost: Out Far and In Deep," The Western Humanities Review, XIV (1960), 256. On the other hand, Reuben A. Brower [Constellations] seems to diminish the terror of the poem when he remarks that "the malevolence there was only potential. . . ." (p. 103)

¹³W. R. Irwin, "The Unity of Frost's Masques," American Literature, XXXII (November, 1960), 312.

¹⁴Yvor Winters argues that the poem is a "satirical comment upon that school of contemporary criticism which holds that the modern poet is condemned to mediocrity because of the degeneracy of the age. . . ." (p. 94)

¹⁵Ganz, p. 150.

¹⁶Lyon, p. 108.

¹⁷Robert Norton Ganz suggests that the poem "finds some virtue in the search, in spite of the mind's weakness." (p. 160)

¹⁸Reuben A. Brower [Constellations] suggests that "The 'head thrust in' may also be a birth image, another metaphor of the mind's entering into the not yet known real world." (p. 140)

¹⁹According to Reuben A. Brower [Constellations], the questions the mind is pondering are: "where does mind come from, what does it learn? what impression does it make on the real world? But the mind has barely faced the questions before attention shifts--or death comes--and action of mind is over." (pp. 140f.)

²⁰Thompson, Robert Frost, p. 24. However, Thompson reconsiders in his argument and interprets the poem as showing that there is order within nature--"the one who discovered beneath the plain surface the underlying meaning and wonder of inner crystals did not create either the outer or inner surface. . . whatever kind of revelation man

here makes or achieves, through the uses of sense and skill, implies at least some kind of precedence of order and of design in nature." (p. 24) This line of the poem has also been interpreted by some critics to mean that all possible revelation has been granted to man.

²¹Nitchie, pp. 48f. Later Nitchie argues that Frost may find that "our sense of a meaningful universe is the product of solipsism." (p. 131) However, there is not adequate evidence from Frost's other work to support any theory of his belief in solipsism.

Reuben A. Brower [Constellations] argues that "All Revelation" is far removed from solipsism. According to Brower, "Frost moves easily in the same intellectual climate. . ." (p. 149) as William James. "Frost too is certain that something exists outside mind, but he also believes mind 'builds out' reality." (p. 149) In addition, Brower argues that "Still we do achieve 'revelation,' and all the revelation we have is won by 'the mental thrust' that brings out the order in the unknown." (p. 142)

²²Lawrance Thompson [Robert Frost] finds a purely religious expression in these lines--the river is life; the mountain, death; and the "sea" (this word is Thompson's, not Frost's), life-beyond-life. However, the mountain could represent any obstacle which prevents man from seeing what lies ahead for him in life.

²³This line of the poem might be interpreted as a retreat by Frost into solipsism, as Nitchie suggests in his discussion of "All Revelation." See footnote number twenty-one.

²⁴Brower, Constellations, p. 105. Brower says that the poem suggests that "It may after all be absurd to see so much in a flower, a moth, and a spider." (p. 106)

²⁵Jarrell, p. 42.

²⁶M. L. Rosenthal, The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction (New York, 1960), p. 112.

²⁷Jarrell, p. 44.

²⁸Jarrell, p. 44.

²⁹Jarrell, p. 42.

³⁰Jarrell, p. 45.

³¹Lawrance Thompson [Robert Frost] believes that "if this sonnet is considered in relation to the other poems, it suggests not so much a mood of depressed brooding over 'the design of darkness to appall' but rather a grim pleasure in using such a peculiar exemplum for challenging and upsetting the smug assurance of complacent orthodox belief concerning who steers what where, and how." (p. 19) However, other critics such as Elizabeth Isaacs, Reuben A. Brower, and George Nitchie are in accord with Jarrell in their interpretations of the sonnet.

³²At times, Frost's views seem similar to those of his contemporary Paul Tillich. Tillich [The Protestant Era (abridge edition, Chicago, 1957)], like Frost, believes "that the man of today no longer possesses a world view in the sense of a body of assured convictions about God, the world, and himself." (p. 192)

³³Frost's selection of this title for his poem is ironic since the main idea in the masque is that reason will not enable man to understand himself or his God. In fact, man's reason only reveals to him the utter lack of reason--lack of order--within the universe. The prevailing tone of this work, and its companion piece A Masque of Mercy, is one of irony.

³⁴Irwin, p. 308.

³⁵Irwin, p. 309.

³⁶At this point, Frost seems to have discarded the generally accepted concepts of good and evil and, as Yvor Winters points out, he fails to provide a replacement. "There is no understanding of good and evil in themselves, or the metaphysical questions involved. Good is submission to an anthropomorphic and undignified God and is made to seem preposterous. Evil is made equally preposterous, and for similar reasons." (p. 72)

³⁷Sister Mary Jeremy Finnegan, "Frost's 'Masque of Mercy'," Catholic World, CLXXXVI (February, 1958), 357-361.

According to Lawrance Thompson [Robert Frost], Frost depicts a "suffering God, limited and thwarted in his plan to realize his divine purpose so long as man is indifferent and uncooperative." (p. 31) In addition, Thompson believes that "Also echoed throughout the masque is the related Bergsonian concept of a continuously creative process which develops the universe." (p. 31) However, Thompson believes Frost modifies these ideas by his belief in the limited power of man to understand God.

³⁸In a brief verse "Pertinax" (1936), Frost says:

Let chaos storm!
Let cloud shapes swarm!
I wait for form. (p. 407)

³⁹Ganz, p. 141. However, Ganz continues by arguing that "Nevertheless, 'something has to be left to God,' [from "Good-by and Keep Cold," p. 281] man has to have trust in a working out of events that he does not control and cannot understand. Frost's wisest characters know they do not keep the universe by themselves; they do not work out a philosophy that makes man independent of his fate." (p. 141) But, one would wonder just what he should "leave" to a God that seems to be as much "human" as He is divine.

⁴⁰Montgomery, p. 145.

⁴¹Frost says later in In The Clearing (1962),

Forgive O Lord, my little jokes on Thee
And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me. (p. 39)

⁴²The reading of these lines suggests a parallel with the treatment of the same idea by Edwin Arlington Robinson in his more seriously philosophical poem "The Man Against the Sky."

Why pay we such a price, and one we give
So clamoringly, for each racked empty day
That leads one more last human hope away,
As quiet friends would lead past our crazed eyes
Our children to an unseen sacrifice?
If after all that we have lived and thought,
All comes to Nought,--
If there be nothing after Now,
And we be nothing anyhow,
And we know that, --why live? (ll. 299-308)

⁴³Other human qualities attributed to God are His having to "wait for words" rather than commanding them and His seeming anxiety over Job's approval of His actions. Possibly, Frost intends to satirize the implied idea of man's anthropomorphic view of God.

⁴⁴Reginald L. Cook, "The Stand of Robert Frost, Early and Late," English Journal, XLVIII (May, 1959), 240.

⁴⁵Cook, "The Stand of Robert Frost, Early and Late," p. 240.

⁴⁶Montgomery, p. 142.

⁴⁷Other critics seem somewhat dubious about the value of this masque to readers of Frost. The criticism of the verse-play involves much controversy over the seriousness of the poet--with the balance swayed toward discounting the importance of the work. One group of critics regards the masque as being of no real value to a serious reader.

For instance, Randall Jarrell, a generally enthusiastic Frost supporter, states that A Masque of Reason "is a trivial, frivolous, and bewilderingly corny affair, full of jokes inexplicable except as the contemptuous patter of an old magician perfectly certain that he can get away with anything in the world. . . ." (p. 32)

Likewise, Lawrance Thompson [Robert Frost] believes that "Considered as a work of art, A Masque of Reason is too largely composed of talk-talk, and too little dependent on action, to give it dramatic merit." (pp. 33f.) However, Thompson does think that "The masque. . . provides further evidence that no matter how much Frost may have thought he rejected the received assumptions of his religious heritage, he has indulged that posture of rejection, through his art and thought, to realize a difference which was never too pronounced." (p. 34)

On the other hand, there is a group of critics who seem to regard the poem as the product of the cynicism of Frost's old age. Yvor Winters is typical of this group when he states that "Frost, the rustic realist of North of Boston, appears in his old age as a standard exemplar of irresponsible Romantic irony. . . ." (p. 71) Furthermore, he argues that "in reading the poem one can only be appalled at Frost's willful ignorance, at his smug stupidity." (p. 72)

Similarly, "E. S. Forgotson concluded, after reading A Masque of Reason, that Mr. Frost had 'joined the ranks of those whom religious persons dub, in feeble ad hominem style, 'cynics,' and who have no other prospect before them than a program of relaxed lamentation'." [Flossie Leanora Johnson, "A Study of the Critical Evaluation of Robert Frost" (unpub. M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1952), p. 113.]

Another critic F. W. Dupee ["Frost and Tate," The Nation, CLX (April 21, 1954)] finds the masque is a judgment of God. "The skepticism is all right with this reviewer; but it gives rise in the poem to extravagances of whimsy which suggest that Frost is after all a little worried of the consequences of his doubt and wants to whittle it down to the size of a joke." (p. 464)

⁴⁸According to W. R. Irwin ["The Unity of Frost's Masques," American Literature, XXXI (November, 1960)] "the implication, presumably. . . that God needs to punish for his own maintenance of power, rather than for the good of man, denies divine omnipotence." (p. 310)

⁴⁹To some critics, this remark seems to be a statement of Puritan doctrine. For instance, Vivian C. Hopkins ["Robert Frost: Out Far and In Deep," The Western Humanities Review, XIV (1960)] says that "The Puritan concept that man must strive, even when his effort seems useless, has never been better experienced than in the Keeper's comment on the Sermon on the Mount." (p. 262)

⁵⁰Jarrell, p. 32.

⁵¹The passage seems to contradict Frost's statement that "God is that which a man is sure cares, and will save him, no matter how many times or how completely he has failed." [Sidney Cox, Robert Frost: Original "Ordinary Man" (New York, 1929), p. 36.]

⁵²Nitchie, p. 152.

⁵³Jarrell, p. 33.

⁵⁴Nitchie, p. 153.

⁵⁵According to Lawrance Thompson [Robert Frost], "the dominant thematic concern of A Masque of Mercy may be said to pivot once again on the limitations of human knowledge as it involves different responses to different kinds of fear, starting and ending with the wisdom-unwisdom of man's fearing God." (p. 35)

⁵⁶Ganz, p. 99.

⁵⁷Frost again deals with the idea of God's "mercy" toward man in the meditation "The Fear of God" (1947). Once more Frost emphasizes the seeming arbitrariness of God's acts.

If you should rise from Nowhere up to Somewhere,
From being No one up to being Someone
Be sure to keep repeating to yourself
You owe it to an arbitrary god
Whose mercy to you rather than to others
Won't bear too critical examination. (p. 538)

Thus, the success or failure of man in life is in the hands of an arbitrary being who seems unconcerned about the welfare of man. Man's fate is insecure because his success may fluctuate depending solely on the whim of God.

⁵⁸Ganz, p. 100.

CHAPTER V

¹Jarrell, pp. 27f.

²Montgomery, p. 148.

³Nitchie, p. 187.

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