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THE POETIC PRINCIPLE IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT
FROST.

THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA, PH.D., 1979

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THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

THE POETIC PRINCIPLE IN THE POETRY
OF ROBERT FROST

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
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THE POETIC PRINCIPLE IN THE POETRY
OF ROBERT FROST

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THE POETIC PRINCIPLE IN THE POETRY
OF ROBERT FROST

CHAPTER 1

THE POETIC PRINCIPLE:
DEFINITION AND APPLICATION

Sometimes I have my doubts of words altogether. . . .
They are worse than nothing unless they do something;
unless they amount to deeds as in ultimatums or
battlecries. They must be flat and final like the
show-down in poker, from which there is no appeal.
My definition of poetry (if I were forced to give
one) would be this: words that have become deeds.

--Frost, as quoted by Louis Untermeyer
in The New Era in American Poetry (1919)

Critical study of a theoretical question often generates its own special excitements and frustrations. This is especially the case when one tries to define what it is that makes poetry poetic. Poets and scholars alike assume that there are such things as "poetic" qualities; yet when they attempt to formulate more precisely what these qualities are, their answers are usually impressionistic or oblique. For instance, we have only to recall Emily Dickinson's definition of poetry as that which takes the top of her head

off, or John Stuart Mill's distinction between a prose that is "heard" and a poetry that is "overheard," to see how one has to resort to metaphorical language before he can even begin to discuss the nature of poetry.

Since the Romantic reassessment of literature and language, however, most readers and writers of poetry are in general agreement about one thing: a poem has a curious "inner life" of its own. Welling up from within a poem are resonances, densities, that inform the factuality of our everyday world and form the essence of our ideas. Such densities are not merely poetic--they are poetry, and they emanate from the inner world of the imagination and the spirit. But these qualities are frequently ignored as they solidify, or pass into, the more comprehensible realm of thought. What is not obscure, if we are sufficiently attentive, is a process which makes the poem poetic by realizing these innermost qualities. This process--poetic realization itself--is characterized by a constant movement inward and downward. This is the poetic principle. It is this process which effects the transformation from a factual to an inner reality, from public spectacle to private vision.

The task of locating and identifying this process in poetry, though, becomes more difficult when the poetry under consideration is as familiar as Robert Frost's. Most of us

have grown up learning such anthologized favorites as "Stopping by Woods," "Mending Wall," and "The Death of the Hired Man"--poems whose reassuring qualities are aided by Frost's grandfatherly public image. Yet this sort of familiarity keeps us at a distance, both from his work as a whole and from the workings of the poetic principle in individual poems. There is a worldly assurance that informs Frost's poetry; a genuineness which constitutes one of the cardinal virtues of his work. This quality, however, is also responsible for the tendency many readers have to take his poems at face value. Frost's poetry has a richness which is exciting; but certain subtleties which give rise to this richness are often, like America, hard to see; and those of us who disregard them must content ourselves with a paler interpretation of his poetry, and a corresponding impoverishment of his stature. Yet this richness is as far removed from bare philosophical statement as it is from the superficial realism of "local color"--two attributes by which Frost's work is identified, and for which it is praised. The activity that the poetic process performs in his poetry, then, is actually twofold. First, the poetic principle's inward movement enables these inner densities to manifest themselves. Second, it enables us to recognize and appreciate the figures that Frost's poems create in fulfilling themselves--or, as Frost himself describes the esthetic experience, "the curve that [the poem]

takes, the shape, the run, the flow."¹

There is a paradox, however. The poetic principle's inward movement and relevatory method, though never surreptitious, frequently go unnoticed. This is partly because both academic and general readers have learned to expect other things from poetry. By way of illustration, The Poetry of Robert Frost is a perennial book club selection, and it is not hard to see why the general reader, who is usually wary of "serious" poetry, feels comfortable with it. Frost's poems have subjects; they come from a recognizable literary tradition; and, perhaps most important, they do not seem to take themselves too seriously, a quality which links Frost to other popular poets such as James Whitcomb Riley, Edgar Guest, and, in our own day, Phyllis McGinley. This whimsicality makes a poem like "Mending Wall" palatable, but at the same time does not obscure the fact that the opening line has none of the facile nostalgia and sentimentality of Riley's "When the frost is on the punkin." Although a "deep" poet, Frost is also a poet of surfaces, voices and appearances, qualities tailor-made for a public nurtured primarily on realistic fiction. Thus a businessman can glance at "Mending Wall" while waiting for a plane, appreciate the delicacy of the speaker's predicament, chuckle over the ending, and go about his business. "Mending Wall" will have remained for him a relatively unchallenging, but still genuine, poem, as Frost himself will have remained the rumpled Yankee sage capable of the tangy

yet disarming "I'm not confused, I'm just well-mixed."²

Conversely, for many academic readers, especially those of us who consider ourselves students of modern literature, Frost's whimsy is all too often an obstacle to be overcome if we are to see him as a "serious" poet. (Another obstacle is, of course, his very popularity.) We know well enough that Frost is a "dark" poet, since we have read our Lionel Trilling; but we have also read our Ivor Winters, and in part agree with him that Frost's cuteness creates a self-protecting irony which results in a lack of ultimate commitment. Such a lack, we feel, whether it be in regard to ideas, emotions or moral issues, lessens the impact of the poetry for us. Being modern readers, we appreciate an angst that is near the surface, whether it be in the form of a primal Howl or the fretful aridity of The Waste Land. We find it more difficult to empathize with Frostian self-possession.

Furthermore, as moderns we have learned to appreciate poetry that is intentionally obscure, subjective, or, on a more technical level, radically experimental. And at first glance Frost's poems have none of these qualities. Whatever else it is, "An Old Man's Winter Night" is neither an arcane literary puzzle nor an exclusively personal, irrational vision. As students of poetry we readily admire the economy, the precision, the texture, the bare literalness of "the roar

/ Of trees and crack of branches, common things"; but at the same time we note a baldness, a flatness, which pervades the poem--qualities which the traditional blank verse and narrative structure only accentuate. What we are left with, then, is an anomaly. On one hand we have a technically traditional poem with little of the traditional excitement (e.g., lush diction, fulsome rhetoric). On the other, we have a poem which, for all its "anti-poetic" qualities, is not anti-poetic in a "modern" way, the way in which the spare, springy free verse and immediately sharp imagery of William Carlos Williams is modern.

There is another, more pervasive reason for the poetic principle's interiorizing process going unnoticed. In keeping with Frost's flat, non-ornamental style, the process itself, though it occurs in a straightforward manner, develops gradually and undramatically, working through realities that may be overly- (or even tediously-) familiar to us. A poem which demonstrates quite well the workings of the poetic principle is "The Black Cottage," one of Frost's earlier and lesser-known efforts. Since the poem is especially effective in illustrating the beginning of the poetic process, it merits our examining it in some detail.

"The Black Cottage" concerns two men who rediscover, in a variety of ways, the deserted cottage that is their chief

topic of conversation:

We chanced in passing by that afternoon
To catch it in a sort of special picture
Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees,
Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass,
The little cottage we were speaking of,
A front with just a door between two windows,
Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black.
We paused, the minister and I, to look.
He made as if to hold it at arm's length
Or put the leaves aside that framed it in.
"Pretty," he said. "Come in. No one will care."
The path was a vague parting in the grass
That led us to a weathered windowsill.
We pressed our faces to the pane. "You see," he said,
"Everything's as she left it when she died.
Her sons won't sell the house or the things in it.
They say they mean to come and summer here
Where they were boys. They haven't come this year."³

The spectacle of such a "forsaken" house occasions a long, meditative speech by the minister. In an associative manner reminiscent of Wordsworth's speakers, he comes to view the scene metaphorically, even symbolically: "It always seems to me a sort of mark / To measure how far fifty years have brought us" (ll. 45-46). Nor is this all. By the conclusion of the poem the minister has touched on, not only the cottage's late inhabitant, but also the Civil War, the Declaration of Independence, and the Apostles' Creed--by which time he has ironically reversed his earlier, "progressive" sentiment:

"...why abandon a belief
Merely because it ceases to be true.

Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes.
Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favor.
As I sit here, and oftentimes, I wish
I could be monarch of a desert land
I could devote and dedicate forever
To the truths we keep coming back and back to."

(11. 105-114)

He seems oblivious to this inconsistency, however, as he continues to wax eloquent:

"So desert it would have to be, so walled
By mountain ranges half in summer snow,
No one would covet it or think it worth
The pains of conquering to force change on.
Scattered oases where men dwelt, but mostly
Sand dunes held loosely in tamarisk
Blown over and over themselves in idleness.
Sand grains should sugar in the natal dew
The babe born to the desert, the sandstorm
Retard mid-waste my cowering caravans--
There are bees in this wall." He struck the clapboards,
Fierce heads looked out; small bodies pivoted.
We rose to go. Sunset blazed at the windows.

(11. 115-127)

What we notice first is the bare, factual quality of the poem, the way in which the minister assumes (but does not hold) stage center, the shifts in subject, the persistent presence of the old lady, and the unsettling conclusion. These are qualities which I would think are readily accessible to anyone in one or two readings. This is the businessman's "Black Cottage," and, were we general readers, lines 105-110,

which culminate in the aphoristic "Most of the change we think we see in life / Is due to truths being in and out of favor," would undoubtedly capture our attention.

However, "The Black Cottage" is a much subtler performance than this initial impression would lead us to believe. The minister's "the truths we keep coming back and back to" illustrates a curious process that began with the opening lines of the poem. The two men "chance" upon the "sort of special picture" the cottage makes in being "framed" by foliage. (The word "chance," charged with its nuances of happenstance and surprise, is important, for the poem is, among other things, about circumstantial revelation, insight unexpectedly arising from the too-familiar.) From there they proceed to the picture-like pane of glass, which frames their perception of a "crayon portrait on the wall" (l. 23). This crude reproduction of the father, however, is merely a copy of still a fourth picture, an "old daguerreotype" (l. 24), which presumably no longer exists. Nor is this all, for this photograph, itself recalled by the crayon drawing, conjures up a mental image of the actual man, whose likeness it was. We know for a fact that the father no longer lives, although the fact itself is hazy: "He fell," says the minister, "at Gettysburg or Fredericksburg, / I ought to know--it makes a difference which . . ." (ll. 31-32). What we have is the dizzying effect of looking through the wrong end of a telescope

at a series of ever-smaller pictures. This amazing process has taken place in only thirty lines, and it has been effected so unobtrusively--and yet so baldly; that is the uniqueness of Frost's achievement--that we do not readily see what a tour de force it is. Subtly, yet irrevocably, Frost has departed from established and factual to interior, intangible experience. What is most surprising about this inward process is that it works through such familiar phenomena as abandoned cottages or woodpiles, through oven-birds or trees. "We rose to go. Sunset blazed on the windows." This is familiar, and grand, and a little threatening.

The poem's final mention of windows reminds us of the earlier, darkened windows, the crayon portrait and the other "special pictures" of the opening lines. Slowly the realization dawns: the poem is its subject, a framed picture entitled "The Black Cottage," against whose panes we can figuratively press our faces and perceive an intricate succession of images and ideas. Furthermore, the poem, like the cottage, is unobtrusive; only by "chancing" on it in a certain attitude will we "catch" its strangeness.

W. H. Auden has said of another of Frost's poems, "The Code," something which applies equally well to "The Black Cottage": "Only a mature and disciplined poet could keep every line so deliberately flat, and yet achieve a poetic

effect."⁴ It is easy enough to grant him Frost's "flatness," and it is not hard to see how this quality de-emphasizes the interior direction that the poem is taking. Not only does the poem abound with monosyllabic words which are often cool towards their iambic meter, but many of them are, in Yeatsian terminology, "dull, numb" words.⁵ Taken in toto, they lend a mundane quality to the poem. For example, there is the minister's "Her sons won't sell the house or the things in it." It is difficult to imagine a barer, more straightforward utterance. But the most striking thing about this line is not that it is entirely monosyllabic, or even that the words are so thoroughly domesticated. Rather, it is a declarative statement of fact--literal, unvarnished, and public, as the conversational context emphasizes.. Technically, Frost achieves this flat, mundane quality which Auden has noted by radically altering his metrical pattern. Reading the line as the voice demands we come up with an initial iambic foot, followed by a spondee, two anapests and a second spondee. Needless to say, this pattern is more rhythmically scrambled--and volatile--than one found in a regular iambic pentameter line. In addition, the sounds in the line are not the musical sounds that many readers consider "poetic." There is only one long vowel (significantly, it occurs in "won't," which is also stressed), and it is cloistered by a plethora of short ones: "sŏns," "sĕll,"

"thě" (twice), and "things ĩn ĩt." These are certainly the tonalities and rhythms of everyday speech, and they not only recall but realize Frost's "I like the actuality of gossip, the intimacy of it."⁶ This sort of intimacy, however, is not the more rarified intimacy of meditation.

At first, successive readings merely reinforce this grainy objectivity--an effect that not only obscures, but is even abetted somewhat by the poem's inward movement. As our attention shifts from public spectacle (the cottage), to public experience (both narrator and minister view the cottage), to the "intimacy of gossip" contained in the minister's remarks, we begin to realize how objectively dramatized "The Black Cottage" is. The narrator never interacts verbally with the minister, who has in effect a monologue. The minister, though, is seen through the eyes of the narrator, who further objectifies the poem by treating the whole incident as a past event. Moreover, Frost's speaker provides no comment on either the setting or the minister. The closest he comes to indicating his own feelings is through his dramatization of his companion in lines 9-11:

He made as if to hold it at arm's length
Or put the leaves aside that framed it in.
"Pretty," he said. "Come in. No one will care."

Any clue we have lies primarily in the "as if" phrase, which

conveys only the barest hint of an attitude--and even here the minister counters what nuances there may be with his own speech. There is something in the pose he adopts, like that of an art critic examining a painting, combined with what he says, that creates the self-consciousness and vague complacency capable of the patronizing remark about the old woman that he utters later: "What are you going to do with such a person" (l. 80)?

Even more important is the way the speaker sustains the narrative through his descriptions of the house and setting which frame the poem. It is only on rereading--a rereading which the poem's initial clarity discourages--that we see how absolute those descriptions are. "Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees, / Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass" gives us the "special picture" without comment; but the quality of that picture is something else again. We begin to notice how functional the adjectives are--it is the accuracy of the speaker's observation that not only justifies but demands them. Far from being words which merely attempt to lend "beauty" to the line or to flesh out the meter, they show us how it is only a cherry tree, an ancient cherry tree, that can be "tar-banded." The second line has little of the esthetic solace of the "tender curving lines of creamy spray" of Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters"; it has, however, another sort of density. Even as the "rank lodged grass" puts the

final flattening touches to the line, the phrase conveys the texture of the grass, its appearance, the luxuriance of its growth (all these meaning stemming from "rank"), and how long it has lain there. And there is more. These three words make an oblique comment on the cottage itself, and on its latest inhabitant. "To have a residence: dwell"; "to come to a rest"; and "to fall or lie down--used especially of hay or crops"⁷ are three of the intransitive meanings of "lodge." With a delicacy which the prosaic quality of the phrase belies, the old lady has blended into the "rank lodged grass," into a harvested crop, even as the grass has become the current "lodger" of the cottage.

The minister's remarks which follow clearly establish the vacancy of the cottage; but here Frost, through the precision of his narrator's language, has already conveyed the utterness of that vacancy, and just how "well" set back from the roadside the house is--still another ramification of "rank." This in turn reminds us of military formations and soldiers, and the minister's talk does indeed come round to touch on the Civil War, and on the lady's husband, one of the rank and file who died in that war. In addition, this passage implicitly shows, along with line twelve, the community's attitude towards the cottage and the old lady, and to other "past" things as well, such as the war itself, the Declaration of Independence, and

the Apostles' Creed. The minister himself demonstrates this attitude, and on two levels. Consciously he remarks to the narrator "how forsaken / A little cottage this has always seemed" (ll. 34-35); but just prior to this, and less consciously, he has said of the father:

"He fell at Gettysburg or Fredericksburg,
I ought to know--it makes a difference which:
Fredericksburg wasn't Gettysburg, of course."

(ll. 30-33)

Such "hauntingly prosaic lines," as Randall Jarrell observes, not only show "the passing away of this world":⁸ they realize, in human terms, the quality of that passing--the speed with which the memory films over even important events, thus isolating the past, giving it its "pastness." The visual counterpart to this phenomenon is of course the cottage itself, nestled among the weeds. In addition, there is the memory's bemusement when it is confronted with its own forgetfulness, captured in the minister's wry "I ought to know--it makes a difference which."

One of the reasons we may not be fully aware of the sea change the poem has undergone is because by this time we are already inside the minister's long speech, and its argumentative vigor holds us. However, the same telescoping pattern that we observed earlier in Frost's picture imagery is repeated here.

It is fascinating to see how the poetic principle works on the thematic as well as on the imagistic level.

The minister begins by touching on an historical event, the Civil War, and then proceeds to other established "facts" (the Declaration and the Creed) which, the longer he dwells on them, become more and more private. His train of thought leads him, at last and most intimately, to his own intimation of immortality: the "desert land / I could devote and dedicate forever / To the truths we keep coming back and back to" (ll. 112-114). Paradoxically, the path to this interior world begins with Jefferson's great public document. Though remoter in time than the Civil War, the Declaration is closer to the minister's heart: for him its mystery is its haunting presence, like that of the cottage, in a world grown immune to it. Although Jefferson's idealistic phrases were supposedly one of the principles for which the war was fought, the minister, unlike the old lady, sees the war as effecting more pragmatic, even cynical, ends:

"One wasn't long in learning that she thought,
Whatever else the Civil War was for,
It wasn't just to keep the States together,
Nor just to free the slaves, though it did both.
She wouldn't have believed those ends enough
To have given outright for them all she gave.
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?"

(ll. 54-65)

His last lines place the lady's beliefs in the same category of neglect as the Declaration and the cottage. By implication, his speech also juxtaposes Jefferson's ringing phrases with the moral shabbiness of the Reconstruction. This "latter wisdom of the world," to which the minister ironically subscribes, emphasizes the physical and cultural differences between the races, not their essential equality. War can free the slaves, but it cannot make them white men or endow them with the inalienable rights of an Anglo-Saxon heritage. The war and the Declaration become separated, not only from the modern world, but from each other:

"White was the only race she ever knew.
Black she had scarcely seen, and yellow never.
But how could they be made so very unlike
By the same hand working in the same stuff?
She had supposed the war decided that."

(11. 75-79)

That Jefferson's "truths" are really a "hard mystery" and not "self-evident" at all is fascinating to the minister. Astute enough not to commit the intentional fallacy, he is content to wonder about the mystery. He also knows that "the Welshman got it planted / Where it will trouble us a thousand years. / Each age will have to reconsider it" (11. 68-70).

We readily see that similar reconsiderations have taken place on yet more intimate levels. Still speaking condescendingly of the lady, the minister begins on the subject of the Apostle's Creed. It is soon apparent that he is only too

happy to leave its wording intact:

"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 . . . "

(11. 104-108)

He has a genuine affection for the old woman, and a real concern for what he deems to be her wishes, though his is the compact affection of the superior toward the inferior:

"Such a phrase couldn't have meant much to her.
But suppose she had missed it from the Creed,
As a child misses the unsaid Good-night
And falls asleep with heartache--how should I feel?"

(11. 100-103)

Also, his affection is doubtless enhanced by her providing him with a rationale for leaving the Creed alone. In the face of the "liberal youth" who would convert the pagan phrase to Christianity, the minister clings to his "descended into Hades" as "quaintly" as the widow clung to Jefferson's principle of equality. Whether or not he realizes how ironically he has reversed himself is questionable. His remarks seem to hedge between his giving himself an additional reason for not tampering with the Creed, and a recognition of how in this larger sense the widow's clinging is legitimate.

The poem's progress, however, works inward once more, to the minister's private vision of timeless change, brilliantly

captured in the image of the sand dunes "Blown over and over themselves in idleness" (l. 121). Here at last the still center has been reached. Along with the minister, we see the source which is the beginning and ending of thought, the beginning and ending of journeys. Here is not "progress" as the world knows it--evolution, linear development, non-remembrance of things past--but rather unworldly revolution, continuous flux and permanence: a state which can be described only by paradox. The desert vision is magnificent, and it is no accident that the most conventionally beautiful lines in the entire poem describe it. "Sand dunes held loosely in tamarisk / Blown over and over themselves in idleness" have not only a haunting beauty, but a musical onomatopoeia not present elsewhere. Moreover, Frost emphasizes this quality by circumscribing it. The minister's "There are bees in this wall" (l. 125) returns us to the beginning of the poem, to the more mundane strangeness of the cottage, and to the dailiness of experience. Yet the remote grandeur of lines 122-124 does not obscure the bathetic and literally appalling aspects of the sandstorm:

"Sand grains should sugar in the natal dew
The babe born to the desert, the sand storm
Retard mid-waste my cowering caravans . . ."

This is a world whose awful beauty is in large part dependent on its indifference to human existence, and Frost appears to

be drawing some kind of analogy between such a vision and the alienation of principle, with all its pure beauty, from the spottier, human context of change. Yet he makes no overt comment on--and certainly no evaluation of--this analogy. Instead, the minister's vision (which, after all, is a desert, a waste land), like the cottage, like the Declaration, has an air of "hard mystery" about it. There is something in the starkness of the cottage's lapsing back into the elements, as evidenced here by the bees riddling its walls, which lends it an aura of otherness, something alien to human experience or understanding.

Yet the minister's vision, even if there is more mystery than mysticism about it, displays his capacity for wonder in the face of "hard facts" that is rather like worship. The same holds true for our perception of the cottage itself, and for the poem as a whole: its "special picture" is apprehensible to anyone who takes the trouble to read "The Black Cottage" carefully. This kind of accessibility is of a far more profound order than the sort of clarity that is usually associated with Frost. It is also more exhilarating. For Frost deals with reality from the outside in; he evolves from hard fact to hard mystery in a manner comprehensible to anyone willing to see, not merely look, with his eyes. Such a manner is generous, and generosity--the desire to share, not dictate, experience--is as poetic as it is democratic.

In his early correspondence with Louis Untermeyer, Frost defines poetry as "words that have become deeds." Words for him must not only be "flat and final" (a quality readily apparent to us), they must be functional--a trait exemplified in the interiorizing activity of the poetic principle. Our close reading of "The Black Cottage" has also shown us how this process, as it realizes inner experience and reality, achieves other effects. Starting from what may seem ordinariness or even insignificance, a poem acquires nuance and meaning. This process may happen so gradually and undramatically that we may be unaware of it until we feel ourselves suddenly confronted with the strange density the poem has acquired. The effect is one of wholeness, of a beauty that is profoundly satisfying in a manner hard to describe. Moreover, this sense of wholeness persists and increases the more we familiarize ourselves with the poem. These effects are not dependent on the superficially pleasant or ornamental, though of course they do not exclude such qualities.

The gist of Frost's definition links him in a disconcerting way with Walt Whitman, a poet markedly different from Frost, and for whom he had only a limited respect. Frost's definition has affinities with both Whitman's organic theory of poetry and with his views concerning poetic qualities or

effects. In one of the anonymous reviews Whitman wrote for Leaves of Grass when it first appeared in 1855, he says:

It is always reserved for the second-rate poems immediately to gratify. As first-rate or natural objects, in their perfect simplicity and proportion, do not startle or strike, but appear no more than matters of course, so probably natural poetry does not. . . . The perfect poet cannot afford any special beauty of parts . . .⁹

Such a remark sounds very much like the early Frost inveighing against the popular poetry of his day for its preoccupation with the ornamental image and the lushly musical line. While we should not be bullied or conned by either poet into accepting these criteria as the only ones for poetry, they are helpful in enabling us to appreciate the peculiar density of Frost's work, and in what ways he achieves it.

In ensuing chapters we will see how the various aspects of Frost's poetic method--his dramatic qualities, his rhetoric, his syntax and his diction--adhere to the sort of movement exemplified by the poetic principle. The dramatic impulse in Frost's poetry, especially apparent in his employment of metaphor and sound, is a movement which extends the poem as a meaningful construct and deepens it as an esthetic experience. Moreover, this impulse enhances Frost's lyrics and blank verse narratives alike. In both cases, we as readers are transported from factual reassurance to visionary awe as

we perceive the metaphor grow and the sound evolve. The rhetorical principle Frost uses most often is that of ethical appeal--the persuasive value of a speaker's character. In poems as disparate as "A Servant to Servants" and "West-Running Brook" we are persuaded by the speakers' strength and attractiveness of character into accepting as valid an inner realm of imagination or belief which are uniquely the speakers' own. In either case that realm, subjective and richly suggestive, is poetic as well. Our study of Frost's syntax will show us a curious doubleness of structure. Most readily apparent is a "surface" syntax of grammatical clarity; but underlying it is a structural ambiguity affecting the poem's logic and meaning. The densities which arise from this ambiguity are ones usually characterized as poetic. Finally, we will see how Frost's very diction illustrates the "delving" impulse of the poetic principle. Especially in his revitalization of the etymological meanings in language, he "makes the word one with the thing" in a radical way that is at once thrilling and suggestive.

Each of these aspects, then, repeats and even reinterprets the poetic principle's realization of inner beauty and experience. Perhaps our study will itself comprise a similar movement inward.

Notes

¹Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York, 1958), p. 48.

²Kathleen Morrison, Robert Frost: A Pictorial Chronicle (New York, 1974), p. 10 (caption).

³Robert Frost, The Poetry of Robert Frost (New York, 1969), p. 55. All further direct quotations from Frost's poetry will be taken from this source and will be noted by line number within the body of the text.

⁴W. H. Auden, in Recognition of Robert Frost, ed. Richard Thornton (New York, 1937), p. 296.

⁵William Butler Yeats, quoted by Reuben Brower in The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York, 1963), p. 113.

⁶Morrison, Robert Frost, p. 12 (caption).

⁷Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass., 1970), p. 497.

⁸Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York, 1953), p. 49.

⁹Walt Whitman, In Re Walt Whitman, ed. Horace Traubel (Philadelphia, 1893), p. 27.

CHAPTER 2

THE DRAMATIC IMPULSE

In poetry and under emotion every word is
"moved" a little or much--moved from its
old place, heightened, made, made new . . .

--Frost, in a letter to Sidney Cox (1914)

There is a dramatic impulse that informs nearly all Frost's work, and it is no accident that his most memorable poems are filled with drama. We have seen that the poetic principle is essentially relevatory in nature, moving from outer to inner, temporal to spiritual realities, all the while retaining its solid basis in fact. The dramatic impulse has a similar movement. Indeed, it is the active means by which revelation comes about.

Such an impulse is multi-faceted, of course, but certainly its hallmark is movement. In a poem, this movement can go anywhere or constitute practically anything--a fluctuation in tone, for example, or an enlargement (or shrinkage) in perception. In fact, movement is implicit in the idea of metaphor itself, in the correspondences which result from comparing one thing with another. But whatever form it takes, this

movement is perceptible to us in terms of a definite direction and distance. In fact, we are wont to describe the movement we perceive in poetry as "progression": a poem begins at point A and ends at point B, and its vitality, much of its poetic identity, consists in the energy it expends in going from one to the other. Frost, in his best-known comment on poetry, says a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom":

It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life--not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.¹

This "impulse" Frost refers to is by its very nature dramatic, and it is readily apparent that the movement he ascribes to the poem through this impulse parallels the poetic effect. Beginning spontaneously, naturally, in "delight," the poem acquires a maturity which culminates in "wisdom"--achieved, paradoxically, through some ordering principle in the impulse itself.

In attributing this kind of movement to poetry, Frost imparts to poetry an autonomy, a vitality which ironically the poet cannot really control. This quality is implicit in the other figures he uses to describe the poem or the poem-making process. Almost as well-known as the above passage

from "The Figure a Poem Makes" is his comment that a poem, like a lump of ice on a hot stove, must ride on its own melting.² Then, switching metaphors in one of his college lectures, he describes the act of composition in this way: ". . . the great pleasure in writing poetry is in having been carried off. It is as if you stood astride of the subject that lay on the ground, and they cut the cord, and the subject gets up under you and you ride it. You adjust yourself to the motion of the thing itself. That is the poem" (italics mine).³ Such descriptions are in themselves dramatic, and show why the dramatic impulse can infuse "the least lyric" as well as dramatic monologues or dialogues.

One of the purest examples of movement in Frost's poetry is "Nothing Gold Can Stay":

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

The poem is not merely a statement about temporality, the lapsing of essence into appearance; it becomes these states of being through its own dramatization of them. The poem's first line--a characteristically Frostian statement of fact--assumes direction through its seeming paradox (which is

actually ellipsis), that nature's "first green " is "gold." The second line clarifies this statement somewhat and also establishes the poem's movement, a dwindling from magnificence to ordinariness. The next two lines simultaneously repeat and amplify both paradox and movement, bringing to them sharper perspective (" . . . leaf's a flower") and greater poignance (" . . . only so an hour"). With the fifth line the dwindling, which until now has been implicit, actually begins, as the petal lapses into foliage. Nor is this movement confined to subject. Lines five through seven, without the earlier hindrances of mixed feet, h alliteration or successive long vowels, themselves assume an increased momentum. "So Eden sank to grief," especially, literally sinks, in the mouth as well as in the imagination; and "Nothing gold can stay" acquires a true finality, a sense of its being really the end of an accelerated movement, which it would not otherwise have.

What gives the poem its curious tension, however, is another sort of movement, the movement created by the ramifications of metaphor. As it dwindles the poem paradoxically expands as the initial fact changes to metaphor, which in turn broadens into implicit analogy: from gold to green, flower to leaf, Eden to earth, dawn to day, and (as the movement continues beyond the actual scope of the poem)

innocence to experience. In reading the poem we have been moved, as have the words themselves, "a little or much"--from delight in apprehending factual reality to wisdom as fact becomes metaphor. We have moved, and have been moved, from factual to poetic experience.

Our main criterion for determining movement in "Nothing Gold Can Stay" is the sense of discovery which we achieve at the end of the poem. We experience "discovery" rather than "reassurance" primarily because of the dramatic impulse, which as Robert Langbaum shows in The Poetry of Experience resides within the poem itself.⁴ The natural process is not used explicitly, like the exemplum in medieval and Renaissance poetry, but implicitly, for itself--as pure metaphor. As such, it creates its own possibilities of meaning. There is a surprise, an unexpected climax, created by the abrupt shift from "flower" to "Eden," from botanical reality to mythical experience. Much of our surprise depends on the suddenness of the correlation between concrete object and abstract idea; but the correlation is not spelled out, since the extent to which we realize it depends on how acutely we perceive the object--in this case, the flower in the process of becoming leaf.

Our surprise changes to the excitement of discovery as we see how physical process can quicken myth, making it come

alive in our imagination as we see it translated into tangible reality. When we were children, our Sunday School teachers related the Biblical account of creation didactically to us: the poem, however, reverses that process as it enlarges our perception in two directions at once. The flower, when it is compared with Eden, becomes other than itself, yet more intensely itself than it was before the comparison was made; and the story in Genesis, in its juxtaposition with the flower, assumes an immediacy it did not have as simply "story." Furthermore, we notice how the dramatic impulse has infused not only the poem--moving through it, changing it--but ourselves as well. Not only have our perceptions been altered--made more acute, and wider-ranging--but our emotions too have been made to run the gamut, from curiosity and delight, to the excitement of discovery, finally to wonder and awe as the implications of that discovery become more apparent.

Langbaum describes this process of change in the perceiver as epiphany.⁵ Elucidating the Joycean definition of the word ("a manifestation in and through the visible world of an invisible life"), he calls epiphany "a gain in perception" which is essentially an emotional recognition of the object, rather than acknowledging the object's "meaning" as a formulated idea. Then in a further clarification he ties epiphany directly to the dramatic impulse:

. . . the revelation is not a formulated idea which dispels mystery, but a perception that advances in intensity to a deeper and wider, a more inclusive, mystery. The sudden advance in intensity gives a dynamic effect, a sense of movement, of the moving, stirring life of the mystery. It is the whole purpose of the poem, its way of meaning, to give just this apprehension of life, to transform knowledge into experience.⁶

By being dramatized rather than explained, a poem gathers greater and greater accretions of nuance. In doing so, it creates more meaning, and more possibilities for meaning, than can be formulated by either synopsis or exegesis.

In his lyrics, Frost demonstrates repeatedly this "sudden advance in intensity" which comes about through the figures his poems make, through their movement. His 1936 volume, A Further Range, contains a pair of short poems which in strikingly different ways articulate this intensity especially well. "Leaves Compared With Flowers" features the same dichotomy which creates the tension in "Nothing Gold Can Stay": however, its effect, the intensity it generates, is profoundly different from that of the earlier poem. "Leaves" begins with what appears to be a similar lament for the fragility and transience of flowers:

A tree's leaves may be ever so good,
So may its bark, so may its wood;
But unless you put the right thing to its root
It will never show much flower or fruit.

(ll. 1-4)

However, the speaker shifts at once from this generalized perspective to one peculiarly--and perversely--his own:

But I may be one who does not care
Ever to have tree bloom or bear.
Leaves for smooth and bark for rough,
Leaves and bark may be tree enough.

(11. 5-8)

This shift is both abrupt and subtle. The second stanza retains the speaker's "may be" construction, but the construction changes from its subjunctive "might" of the first two lines to a tenor that seems more declarative. We cannot say for a certainty we should read the fifth line "But I am one who does not care"; however, we have a strong inclination to do so. The conjunctive "but" may be one of the reasons; the shift from tree to speaker, from fact and generalization to personal statement, may be another. What we definitely notice is the change in tone--the speaker's voice has become thicker, darker, more mysterious. With this stanza the poem begins a downward movement, not into common daylight or mundane appearance this time, but into darkness and death, absorption and self-absorption. The speaker's attention moves literally downward, from blooms to leaves and bark to fern and lichens. In the final stanza this movement becomes internalized:

Leaves and bark, leaves and bark,
To lean against and hear in the dark.

Petals I may have once pursued.
Leaves are all my darker mood.

(ll. 17-20)

It is here that the poem's inner life suddenly bursts upon us with all its intensity. It becomes palpably more dense, more rich, precisely as the speaker shifts from an implied to a direct comparison. The tone of the poem has become increasingly dark and ominous, but not even our awareness of this progression really prepares us for the thrilling, incantatory quality of "Leaves and bark, leaves and bark, / To lean against and hear in the dark." This is the "mood" of the final line made manifest, not allusion made to mood; its impact is direct and immediate. The speaker here reveals a sensuousness and self-absorption that are literally appalling, yet fascinating. These are effects one does not experience from perceiving trees simply as objects, and the final couplet shows how the speaker has become more intensely himself by comparing himself to trees. We have gone from the outer mystery of the natural cycle to the far deeper mystery surrounding the speaker. Why does he not wish to "put the right thing to its root"? What does he mean by "root," or by "thing," which because of its vagueness is even more mysterious and rather unsettling? Why is he preoccupied, not only with pure sensation--"Leaves for smooth and bark for rough"--but also with darkness and decay? Nothing is

clarified; yet our experience of this mystery satisfies us far more than its clarification ever could.

If part of the poem's drama consists in our awareness of just how closely the speaker is aligning himself with trees--assuming "treeness," and in the process becoming more intensely himself--another aspect of the drama is the poem's element of suspense: just how far will the metaphor stretch? Just as there is a limit to discussing something as itself, there is also a limit to discussing something in terms of something else. In the first case the limits are relatively easy to discern: when we exhaust our language on a certain topic we must resort to metaphorical language in order to continue talking about it. However, the realm of metaphor is less definitively marked, though of course we keep finding boundaries in unexpected places (one thinks of "There Are Roughly Zones" in this regard). Frost maintains that a metaphor itself has dramatic qualities--an ability to move and change, a capacity to invest a poem with meaning, or possibilities for meaning. In "The Constant Symbol" he declares that poetry is "simply made of metaphor," and that metaphorical language gives us "the pleasure of ulteriority."⁷ He elsewhere focuses on the metaphor itself as an active agent, as an entity containing within itself the dramatic impulse: "All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the

beauty of it. It is touch and go with metaphor, and until you have lived with it long enough you don't know when it is going. You don't know how much you can get out of it and when it will cease to yield. It is a very living thing. It is as life itself."⁸

When one takes metaphor as seriously as this (or, in Frost's vein, when metaphor insists on being taken so seriously), the idea of commitment materializes almost as a matter of course--the poem's commitment to metaphor, the metaphor's commitment to function. This idea reminds us of Frost's opinion that words are worthless "unless they do something, unless they amount to deeds as in ultimatums or battle-cries." Not only must words be doers, they must do certain things--and with the metaphor the nature of their function is established. And in the formalized definition which follows--" . . . poetry . . . is words which have become deeds"--the metaphorical transformation is effected and made emphatic.⁹ Ordering words is tantamount to an act of faith: for Frost, "Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements."¹⁰

However, other questions remain. How much can these deeded words achieve--how far does their "ulteriority" reach? And what is the nature of their achievement? In "The Strong Are Saying Nothing" metaphor pushes beyond our ordinary

expectations into a more nebulous area, one fraught with the excitement of discovery coupled with uncertainty.

The Strong Are Saying Nothing

The soil now gets a rumpling soft and damp,
And small regard to the future of any weed.
The final flat of the hoe's approval stamp
Is reserved for the bed of a few selected seed.

There is seldom more than a man to a harrowed piece.
Men work alone, their lots plowed far apart,
One stringing a chain of seed in an open crease,
And another stumbling after a halting cart.

To the fresh and black of the squares of early mold
The leafless bloom of a plum is fresh and white;
Though there's more than a doubt if the weather is
not too cold
For the bees to come and serve its beauty aright.

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.

The overriding metaphor, of course, is the planted, sprouting seeds; however, the poem's focus fluctuates between the seeds themselves and the men planting the seeds, giving to each entity characteristics of the other. The metaphor clearly permeates the first stanza, and our attention is drawn to the reality of planting itself. The logaoedic meter, a mingling of iambs and anapests, enhances the onomatopoeia of "rumpling"; the predominance of short vowels reproduces the sound of the hoe in the earth; and

alliteration, assonance and meter in the third line coalesce into the actual deed, the hoe's tamping the soil over the seed-bed.

The poem perceptibly deepens, of course, with the beginning of the second stanza. "There is seldom more than a man to a harrowed piece" gives impetus to the seed metaphor without making it explicit, and its subtlety carries us farther than we had anticipated. We sometimes refer to children as "young sprouts," but here it is grown men who figure in the comparison, and isolation and vulnerability, not freshness, are the qualities emphasized. In keeping with this sea-change the metaphor has taken on, the meter now dramatizes the planting as it applies to the men, not the seeds. There is a world of qualitative difference between "The final flat of the hoe's approval stamp," with its mundane, even bureaucratic authority, and the men's touching clumsiness in lines six through eight. Yet there is no overt break as the metaphor expands; "stringing," "stumbling" and "halting" are as functionally dramatized in this new context as was "rumpling" earlier. However, the poem has acquired a new sound, or "oversound," as Frost would put it--one which, even as it retains the poem's initial vigor, is tinged with Matthew Arnold's "eternal note of sadness." As the poem begins to follow its metaphor, as the metaphor follows

its impulse, we become aware not only of a comparison being made but of a commitment to that comparison being established.

Moreover, this commitment strengthens as impulse deepens to function. It is impossible for us to see the seedlings as merely plants in stanza three. They are an articulation of all that has gone before, and more--the figure the poem is making is more than the sum of its stanzas, more even than its metaphor. We see this paradox even more clearly in the final stanza, which illustrates perfectly Frost's opinion that "the great thing is to have something happen, an event, in a poem. . . . But there must be a thought stiffening in it too."¹¹ The last two lines of the poem are obviously its "thought," which has stiffened into statement, but the poem is more than an illustration of that thought. The sowing, the seedlings, the movement of the wind--all are articulations of something beyond themselves: they are expressions of soul, concretely realized. The poem achieves an intensity which it lacked earlier, one which dawns into consciousness as we finish reading. The poem deepens still more as we discover how far the metaphor has moved and how much it has been heightened. The movement of the wind, in a comparison as tactful as the earlier one of men to seeds, is crossed with the flights of bees from flower to flower. Not only are we

surprised by this unexpected extension of metaphor, but esthetically moved as the wind acquires something of the bees' delicacy and beauty. In addition, we see that the metaphor moves in a manner indigenous to the poem. Like the wind and the bees, it alights first on one entity, investing it with meaning, then on another, and another--a movement apparent even in the lilting rhythm of the poem itself. In fulfilling its own inclination, the metaphor becomes more intensely itself; and the poem, having its origin in metaphor, becomes itself, an articulation beyond metaphor.

However, an even more ultimate shift in intensity comes about as we acquire a true comprehension of the metaphor: we begin to see further implications, the risks the metaphor is taking. How long can it continue extending itself before, as Frost says, it breaks down? For example, is the planting process more analogous to burial or birth? To what extent can we liken seedlings to human beings? Will our human beauty be as doubtfully "served" as the beauty of blooming plants? All we can be certain of is that the metaphor has not "ceased to yield," since the possibilities it has generated have given rise to these apparently unanswerable questions. Its ulteriority has not yet been reached, and the poem's domain not yet circumscribed.

But visual metaphors are not the only metaphors in the poetry, nor are they even the primary ones. Frost's prefer-

ence for the aural aspects of poetry is readily apparent from his scattered remarks in letters, introductions and lectures; conversely, his barely-concealed condescension to the Imagists is also amply documented. He alludes to both visual and aural qualities of poetry in the beginning of his famous introduction to E. A. Robinson's King Jasper--and in "crossing" sight with sound, Frost leaves little doubt where his primary allegiance lies. Commenting ironically, almost sarcastically, on the spate of experimentation in American poetry which began during the late 'teens and early 'twenties, he says: "It [poetry] was tried without images but those to the eye; and a loud general intoning had to be kept up to cover the total loss of specific images to the ear, those dramatic tones of voice which had hitherto constituted the better half of poetry."¹² Such a comment not only heightens our awareness of the importance Frost places on sound by speaking of it synesthetically; it also shows how sound is fundamental to his concept of poetry.

"Specific images to the ear" is certainly an arresting phrase, and becomes even more intriguing when we realize that Frost, in using it, is repeating the pattern of outer to inner, appearance to essence, which we recognize as the poetic process. Something we perceive by sight--a landscape by Constable, for instance--is less abstract and can be fixed

more precisely by the imagination than something we hear, such as Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony No. 6. In this context Frost's phrase seems contradictory, even self-consciously oxymoronic; yet it is obvious he is employing it in a serious vein. Reuben Brower is helpful here when he describes Frost's famous sentence sounds as "dramatic metaphors": the sounds which words make, and force us to make, are the sounds we customarily associate with certain characters, gestures or states of mind.¹³ For Frost, the ostensible "meaning" a word carries is less important than the sound it creates and the corresponding emotion it evokes. He often refers to sentences and words as "mere notation" for "the brute throat noises" man made before he had words: in this sense, he means for language to be as indigenous as possible to experience--which provides us with still another gloss on his statement that poetry is words which have become deeds.¹⁴ Properly utilized, sound renders up the essence of experience rather than clarifying it in a more abstract way.

However, I do not mean to suggest that Frost, because of his preference for sound, has reversed the Imagists' "error" by excluding visual qualities from his poetry. Anyone who has read "Blueberries," "Hyla Brook" and "The Ax-Helve" knows how much the charm--and authority--of these poems is the result of an extraordinary realization of visual detail.

Sound may constitute the better half of poetry for Frost, but wherever he can he blends the two. Brower is surely correct when he says that the Poetry, in addition to employing its sounds as "dramatic metaphors," characteristically has this "figure of sound" growing "from a metaphorical center."¹⁵ Randall Jarrell demonstrates both of these characteristics in his penetrating lecture on "Home Burial."¹⁶ In the inimitable style that made his Poetry and the Age such a profound delight, Jarrell goes through the poem almost line by line, and it is impossible even to summarize his comments here. The part of his lecture that deals most directly with sound focuses on these lines, spoken by the wife:

"If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand--how could you?--his little grave;
I saw you from that very window there
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole."

(11. 72-77)

The comments which follow I find necessary to quote directly, and almost in full, rather than paraphrase. Jarrell continues:

As the sentence imitates with such tragic life
and accuracy the motion of the gravel, her
throat tightens and aches in her hysterical

repetition of "like, that, like that": the sounds of "leap and leap in air, / Leap up like that, like that, and land so lightly" are "le! le! li! li! la! li!" and re-create the sustained hysteria she felt as she first watched; inanimate things, the very stones, leap and leap in air . . . while the animate being, her dead child, does not move, will never move. . . . Her words "leap and leap in air, like, that, like that" keep the stones alive! alive! alive!-- in the words "and land" they start to die away, but the following words "so lightly" make them alive again, for a last moment of unbearable contradiction, before they "roll back down the mound beside the hole" The repeated o's (the line says "oh! ow! ow! oh!") makes almost crudely actual the abyss of death into which the pieces of gravel and her child fall, not to rise again. The word "hole" (insisted on even more by the rhyme with "roll") gives to the grave the obscene actuality that watching the digging has forced it to have for her.¹⁷

Jarrell lends to the husband the same kind of insight. The husband's rejoinder to his wife, after she has accused him of being preoccupied with "everyday concerns" while burying their child, is: "I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed. / I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed" (ll. 89-90). Jarrell comments:

The sounds have the gasping hollowness of somebody hit in the stomach and trying over and over again to get his breath--of someone nauseated and beginning to vomit: the first stressed vowel sounds are "agh! uh! agh! uh! agh! uh!" He doesn't reply to her, argue with her, address her at all, but makes a kind of dramatic speech that will exhibit him in a role public opinion will surely sympathize with, just as he sympathizes with himself.¹⁸

Through Jarrell's explication/dramatization it is easy to see how closely allied the words of the husband and wife are to the "brute throat noises" Frost speaks of; indeed, stripped of their meaning, pared down to sound, they are those noises. Also we see, through Jarrell's focus on the actual digging of the grave, the growth and shape of sound in the words peculiar to the burial metaphor: "dug," "grave," "leap," "like," "roll," "mound," "down," "hole," "God," "cursed." Moreover, sound, like the dramatic impulse, like the visual metaphor, moves and changes throughout the poem--and always in a direction which goes, as Frost would put it, deeper and deeper into life.¹⁹ Even as the idea of burial has changed from the actual burial of the child, to quite possibly the couple's burial of their sexual relationship (as Jarrell perceptively notes),²⁰ to perhaps the burial of their entire marriage, the poem's sound has changed, too. The opening lines--"He saw her from the bottom of the stairs / Before she saw him"--have a subdued ominousness about them; but the poem builds, as we have seen, to a dramatic confrontation between the husband and wife, and it ends with the stridency of the husband's: "I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will!--" This "figure of sound," like the visual metaphor in "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," becomes more in-

tensely itself by fulfilling its own inclination; at the same time, it emanates from the metaphor of burial.

When we have sound crossed with sound in this way we have formal drama--characters speaking to other characters in a specific setting. One further distinction must, however, be made. In addition to the "something happening, an event, in a poem" which Frost speaks of, there are the more interior "thoughts stiffening in it too," or the unspoken--but dramatized--relationships between the characters. "Home Burial" contains both kinds of drama. There is of course the confrontation between the husband and wife occasioned by their son's death; but there is also an unbearable tension evident behind every word they utter, and it seems to predate the events in the poem. The vehemence with which Amy reproaches her husband ("There you go sneering now!") is matched by his explosive exasperation ("God, what a woman!"), and neither ejaculation seems entirely justified by the tragedy. This same exterior/interior drama occurs in many of Frost's most familiar poems. By virtue of its title, the outcome in "The Death of the Hired Man" is a foregone conclusion; as Reuben Brower points out, the real tension arises from the mercy/justice debate between Mary and Warren.²¹ In "West-Running Brook" the "contrariness" of the brook is

dramatized on a profounder level in the loving exchanges between Fred and his wife. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" "stiffens" throughout "Mending Wall," sometimes beyond the power of the events in the poem to clarify that phrase.

However, dialogue is not necessary to create interior drama. Frost wrote only a few dramatic monologues, but each one demonstrates several sound-crossings within the limits of an individual voice. In "A Servant to Servants," for instance, the speaker runs an emotional gamut from depression and mental weariness to a desperate cheerfulness designed to keep her auditor from leaving. For a detailed examination of interior drama, however, "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" provides a more concise example. As the old woman recounts the protracted generosity of neighboring townships in their attempts to bestow "a noted witch" on each other, the poem takes on a prosy sound which is nevertheless good crackling talk, alive and racy:

They'll find they've got the whole thing to do
over,
That is, if facts is what they want to go by.
They set a lot (now don't they) by a record
Of Arthur Amy's having once been up
For Hog Reeve in March Meeting here in Warren.
I could have told them anytime this twelvemonth
The Arthur Amy I was married to
Couldn't have been the one they say was up
In Warren at March Meeting, for the reason
He wa'n't but fifteen at the time they say.

The Arthur Amy I was married to
 Voted the only times he ever voted,
 Which wasn't many, in the town of Wentworth.
 One of the times was when 'twas in the warrant
 To see if the town wanted to take over
 The tote road to our clearing where we lived.
 I'll tell you who'd remember--Heman Lapish.
 Their Arthur Amy was the father of mine.

(11. 10-27)

While Jarrell is certainly right in focusing on sounds themselves as agents of experience, here we see how pure sound is abetted by syntax to create "prosaic" or "poetic" qualities. For example, lines one and six from the passage above are clearly colloquial in their structure and timbre; yet it is difficult to determine what words (and hence what sounds) receive the primary stresses in Frost's roughed-up iambic pentameter--a problem arising at least in part from our individual perceptions of the character. I stress the lines in question "They'll find they've got the whole thing to do over" and "I could have told them anytime this twelvemonth" respectively; the resultant sounds are "eh," "oh," "i," "oooh," "oh" in the first case, "i," "oh," "eh," "i," "eh" in the second. The same pattern occurs in a line less inclined to variant readings: "I'll tell you who'd remember--Heman Lapish." The vowels thus emphasized are "i," "oooh," "eh," "eee," and "a." While these sounds are less emotionally charged than Amy's in "Home Burial," they

nevertheless indicate the relish with which the old woman contemplates the towns' befuddlement. We also see how this irregular mingling of stressed long vowels modulated by stressed short ones keeps the lines grittily alive--which is to say dramatic, as opposed to lyric in the usual sense of the word. Frost, of course, puts the matter more cogently:

Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the ear of the imagination. That is all that can save poetry from sing-song, all that can save prose from itself.²²

This oversound of prose dominates the first two-thirds of the poem. There are variations of this sound, of course. The first occurs in lines 32-35, where, without losing any of the chatty quality with which she has held our attention, the "witch" shows us a less pleasant side of her personality: " . . . and when all's said, / Right's right, and the temptation to do right / When I can hurt someone by doing it / Has always been too much for me, it has." And there are a few more fits and starts in her monologue before it settles again into narrative, this time of how she supposedly haunted Mallice Huse:

. . . I took him out in his old age
And rode all over everything on him
Until I'd had him worn to skin and bones,
And if I'd left him hitched unblanketed
In front of one town hall, I'd left him hitched
In front of every one in Grafton County.

(11. 46-51)

However, by the end of this recollection she has blended into another, one considerably nearer her heart. At the height of the "Huse business," a "smarty someone" cast doubts on Huse's story by claiming Huse had not gnawed the hitching posts he said he did. When Huse obliged by gnawing the "scarified" posts "till he whined," the nonbeliever then showed how the old man habitually gnawed his bedposts as well. Irritated, yet amused, the speaker asserts:

. . . What did that prove?
Not that he hadn't gnawed the hitching posts
He said he had, besides. Because a horse
Gnaws in the stable ain't no proof to me
He don't gnaw trees and posts and fences too.
But everybody took it for a proof.
I was a strapping girl of twenty then.
The smarty someone who spoiled everything
Was Arthur Amy. You know who he was.
That was the way he started courting me.

(11. 63-72)

With the simpler sentences and shorter lines a new sound is born, cutting across the earlier one. The old lady is still reminiscing, still telling us a story--but now the

story is truly hers as she begins to speak of herself as the young girl she was, not the public figure she has let herself become. Underneath her narrative authority creep pauses and "speaking silences" which create far different "specific images to the ear" than heretofore: hesitancy, and awkward delicacy, feelings of love and passion which find their expression in story rather than statement. Not so paradoxically, as the old woman unmasks herself and the Halloween atmosphere disappears, she becomes much more bewitching. Arthur Amy married her, feeling guilty, so she thinks, for "having interfered in the Huse business. / I guess he found he got more out of me / By having me a witch. Or something happened / To turn him round" (ll. 75-78). She makes plain what that something is a few lines later:

Well, I showed Arthur Amy signs enough . . .
And I don't mean just skulls of Rogers' Rangers
On Moosilauke, but woman signs to man,
Only bewitched so I would last him longer.
Up where the trees grow short, the mosses tall,
I made him gather me wet snowberries
On slippery rocks beside a waterfall.
I made him do it for me in the dark.
And he liked everything I made him do.

(ll. 89, 93-100)

Jarrell says of the entire conclusion to the poem, and especially of the passage above, "that there is more

sexuality there than in several hothouses full of Dylan Thomas; and, of course, there is love, there."²³ By now we realize he is not referring solely to content. The lines are filled with "ah," "oh" and "oooh" sounds, which are cadenced so as to leave little doubt about the kind of "woman signs to man" the old lady has in mind. "I made him gather me wet snowberries / On slippery rocks beside a waterfall," for instance, becomes "ī," "ā," "aah," "eh," "oh," "ĩ," "ah," "ĩ," "ah," "ah"; "And he liked everything I made him do" ends this progression of sound in the only way it should end: "ī," "eh," "ĩ," "ā," "oooh."

After making the sex act--and we see how he has literalized those words--so tactfully explicit, Frost returns the poem to its earlier prose sound. However, it is a prose sound modulated by experience: "I hope if he is where he sees me now / He's so far off he can't see what I've come to. / You can come down from everything to nothing" (ll. 101-103). Yet it is grossly distorting the poem to insist on a categorical "prosaic"/"poetic" distinction between its sounds; as we have seen, the speaker's public and private stories blend almost imperceptibly together, and the same cohesiveness exists in the poem's overriding metaphor of witchery. After seeing the lady's relationship with her husband so dramatically rendered, we see how blatantly sexual, stripped

of its supernatural trappings, her account of Mallice Huse is. This in turn makes us more aware of the townspeople, aptly characterized by Jarrell as "an adulterous generation,"²⁴ and of Arthur Amy's exposure of and marriage to his "witch," which becomes all the more wonderful, and mysterious. Finally we notice, nestled within the lady's earlier gossip, the line "The Arthur Amy I was married to," which scans perfectly and which she repeats only four lines later. Here, in little, are the intenser sounds which proliferate later in the poem, even as a prosaic quality is not entirely absent from her account of Arthur Amy's courtship. Both sounds are "the speaking tone of voice" in different contexts--one is not pejoratively prosaic; the other is not "sing-song." Both become more intensely themselves as the poem progresses. Both are dramatic.

Notes

¹Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrance Thompson, eds., Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose (New York, 1972), "The Figure a Poem Makes," p. 394.

²Ibid., p. 396.

³Lathem and Thompson, "The Poet's Next of Kin in a College," p. 375.

⁴Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York, 1957). Rather than citing a specific quotation here, I am drawing cumulatively from Langbaum's first chapter, "The Dramatic Lyric and the Lyrical Drama," pp. 38-74.

⁵Ibid., p. 46.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Lathem and Thompson, "The Constant Symbol," pp. 400-01.

⁸Ibid., "Education by Poetry: A Meditative Monologue," p. 335.

⁹It is instructive to compare Frost's remark with Emerson's from "The Poet": "Words and deeds are quite in different modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words." The difference is not so much one of belief (although Frost does not refer to any kind of "divine energy") as degree of belief, which the deeper resonance in Frost's statement makes clear. For once, then, Frost has outdone his "mentor."

¹⁰Lathem and Thompson, "The Constant Symbol," p. 401.

¹¹Ibid., a 1935 letter from Frost to Charles Foster, p. 319.

¹²Ibid., Frost's introduction to E. A. Robinson's King Jasper, p. 346.

¹³Reuben Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York, 1963), pp. 4-5.

¹⁴Ibid. There is another article which I found especially helpful in clarifying this aspect of Frost's sentence sounds, although I have not incorporated it into my text. It is Tom Vander Ven's "Robert Frost's Dramatic Principle of 'Oversound,'" and it appears in the May, 1973 issue of American Literature, pp. 238-51.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁶Randall Jarrell, The Third Book of Criticism (New York, 1965), pp. 191-231.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 213-14.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 216.

¹⁹Witness the last sentence in Frost's last letter, dictated to Professor and Mrs. G. Roy Elliott only a few days before his death: "If only I get well . . . I'll go deeper into my life with you than I ever have before." The letter appears in Lathem and Thompson, pp. 462-63.

²⁰Jarrell, pp. 219-23.

²¹Brower, pp. 159-62.

²²Lathem and Thompson, Frost's introduction to his play A Way Out, pp. 272-73.

²³Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York, 1953), p. 56.

²⁴Ibid., p. 55.

CHAPTER 3

THE RHETORICAL IMPERATIVE

The sound of sense, then. . . It is the abstract vitality of our speech. It is pure sound--pure form.

. . . The voice of the imagination, the speaking voice [,] must certainly know how to behave [,] how to posture [,] in every sentence . . .

--Frost, in two 1913 letters
to John Bartlett

Closely allied with the dramatic impulse in Frost's poetry is a rhetorical element, which in its own way is as thoroughly concerned with the poetic process, this constant movement inward. The dramatic elements, for the most part, constitute a kind of vehicular movement by which we as readers are imaginatively taken, "a little or much," into the recesses of the poem. Through persuasion, Frost's rhetoric, in a similar yet different manner, moves us into the poetic realm, and into accepting that realm as valid.

Insofar as Frost's famous sound of sense represents "the abstract vitality of our speech," it is dramatic; but that sound, when shaped by "the speaking voice" into certain

"behaviors" and "postures," becomes rhetorical as well, bent on persuading us. The word has, of course, pejorative connotations which I wish to dispense with at the outset. On the one hand, we sometimes use the term "rhetoric" in its more limited sense as the studied ornament of speech; and Frost systematically subverts this idea in most of his poetry. In "Wild Grapes," the speaker's "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" is effective precisely because it is grammatically awkward. On the other hand, rhetoric has more often come to mean for us a speaker's overly self-conscious (and therefore ineffectual) strategy of convincing his auditors--a quality we ascribe to most politicians. Frost himself gives in to this temptation to "speechify" in his less successful poems, most notably in "Build Soil" and in the Masques.

Yet elsewhere, in poem after poem, he creates people who, though less aware of what they are doing, are extremely convincing. In "A Servant to Servants," for example, the speaker is a woman who is not only unsophisticated, but mentally disturbed. Although one might argue that her madness serves as a persuasive modus operandi, it is hard to see anything calculating in it. Not only is her ultimate subject matter--her insane uncle's incarceration in a

beast-like cage in her father's attic--sufficiently grim to dispel doubts about its being genuinely felt; her method of relating the story displays compulsion, not contrivance, and so convinces us of her sincerity. If the heart of the woman's narrative--and of the poem--lies in the "room with a room" that is her uncle's cage, it is her pathological ambivalence that leads her, and us, inexorably toward that "room."

The woman's uncertainty hovers over the poem from the beginning, and she demonstrates it in various ways. Her speech is filled with quirks and lapses:

I didn't make you know how glad I was
To have you come and camp here on our land.
I promised myself to get down some day
And see the way you lived, but I don't know!
With a houseful of hungry men to feed
I guess you'd find. . . . It seems to me
I can't express my feelings, any more
Than I can raise my voice or want to lift
My hand (oh, I can lift it when I have to).
Did you ever feel so? I hope you never.
It's got so I don't even know for sure
Whether I am glad, sorry, or anything.
There's nothing but a voice-like left inside
That seems to tell me how I ought to feel,
And would feel if I wasn't gone all wrong.
You take the lake. . . .

(11. 1-16)

Already the nature of her narrative is established. In sixteen lines we have the repetend, seen later in the poem, of " . . . but I don't know!", the anacoluthon of "I guess

you'd find. . . . It seems to me," the parenthetical expression, and the abrupt transition from her mental state to another subject. Her voice, posturing in an unselfconscious way, infuses her account with an associative, fragmentary quality.

Yet it is through this quality that she draws us steadily into the vortex of her experience. Hardly has she begun talking about the landscape than she starts investing it with negative, alien qualities, which in turn refocus our attention on her. Although at first it is "a fair, pretty sheet of water" (1. 18), the lake becomes a place of storms "drawing the slow waves whiter and whiter and whiter" (1. 25) toward her house--and her emphatic repetition realizes terribly her barely-controlled hysteria. Then she shifts again, first to the advantages that the lake has as a campsite, then to her husband Len and his "man's" work. With the mention of Len the woman's voice acquires an aggrieved tone, even as her ambivalence deepens:

He looks on the bright side of everything,
Including me. He thinks I'll be all right
With doctoring. But it's not medicine--
Lowe is the only doctor's dared to say so--
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.
By good rights I ought not to have so much
Put on me, but there seems no other way.
Len says one steady pull more ought to do it.

He says the best way out is always through.
And I agree to that, or in so far
As I can see no way out but through--
Leastways for me--and then they'll be convinced.
It's not that Len don't want the best for me.
It was his plan our moving . . .

(11. 45-61)

Len is "into everything in town," and she is clearly envious of the relative freedom his construction work gives him. At the same time, she feels "put on" by him, as we see from her curious reference to his phlegmatic, bromide-defined attitude toward their situation. It is interesting to see how, again unconsciously, she underscores this crucial distinction between herself and her husband through a rhetorical trope. At the end of line 57 Frost takes "insofar" and, by breaking it up, has the woman use it in a syllepsistic way. Superficially the lines have a grammatical meaning (e.g., "And I agree with him, to the extent that . . ."): but "in so far" makes Len's cliché resonate with literality, especially when the woman applies it to herself. She transfers most of her hostility, however, to the four hired men who sprawl "about the kitchen with their talk / While I fry their bacon" (11. 77-78). (To revert to the dramatic mode for a moment, notice how in the latter line the three successive long i sounds--and two of them are spondees--dramatize her feelings of anger and entrapment.) Then, in a dizzying series of

emotional shifts, the woman changes from anger to envy again, and then, through paranoia, to a neurotic bravado:

Coming and going all the time, they are:
I don't learn what their names are, let alone
Their characters, or whether they are safe
To have inside the house with doors unlocked.
I'm not afraid of them, though, if they're not
Afraid of me. There's two can play at that.
I have my fancies: it runs in the family.

(11. 81-87)

With that, she begins the account of her mad uncle, and it becomes clear that it is this that has been dominating her thoughts. However, in keeping with the rhythm she has established, the speaker edges away from the abyss once more and alludes to her own experience in the state asylum--grim enough, certainly, but hardly surprising in view of her earlier references to herself. After this final circling around her true subject she plunges into the most sustained part of her narrative:

My father's brother, he went mad quite young. . . .
They soon saw he would do someone a mischief
If he wa'n't kept strict watch of, and it ended
In father's building him a sort of cage,
Or room within a room, of hickory poles,
Like stanchions in the barn, from floor to ceiling--
A narrow passage all the way around.
Anything they put in for furniture
He'd tear to pieces, even a bed to lie on.
So they made the place comfortable with straw,
Like a beast's stall, to ease their consciences.
Of course they had to feed him without dishes.

They tried to keep him clothed, but he paraded
With his clothes on his arm--all of his clothes.

(11. 111-123)

This is the most thrilling part of the poem, and not simply because of its luridness. It is thrilling because the voice of the imagination, speaking here and in what immediately follows, has created the poetic vision. If this vision seems awful rather than beatific, it is helpful to recall the hauntingly ambivalent cast of the minister's "desert land" in "The Black Cottage"; the visionary experience can be terrifying as well as beautiful, and the woman plainly regards her story with as much fascination as morbidity.

That hers is literally the voice of the imagination there can be no doubt. After relating how as a young bride her mother "had to lie and hear love things made dreadful / By his shouts in the night" (11. 130-131), the speaker dramatizes her uncle's anguish:

. . . He'd shout and shout
Until the strength was shouted out of him,
And his voice died down slowly from exhaustion.
He'd pull his bars apart like bow and bowstring,
And let them go and make them twang, until
His hands had worn them smooth as any oxbow.
And then he'd crow as if he thought that child's play--
The only fun he had. . . .

(11. 131-138)

It is only after creating this scene that she tells us that "He was before my time--I never saw him" (l. 140), and we realize how she has constructed her story from viewing as a child the "pen," "full of attic clutter," recalling what her parents may (or may not) have told her, and imagining the rest. That this is also a poetic activity there can be equally little doubt. For, in addition to realizing qualitative experience, the woman's account is metaphorical in its impetus: in talking about her uncle she is also talking about herself, and in both cases questioning as terribly as Shakespeare in King Lear--a play featuring similar motifs of madness, sexuality, nakedness and bestiality--the nature of the human condition.

It is as if this inner narrative is, on Frost's part, a boldly literal "momentary stay against confusion," during which the woman is free to draw analogies between people and animals. And though she is unable to resolve the questions she implicitly raises, paradoxically her very inconclusiveness is convincing. She seems to regard her uncle equally as a human being treated in a beastly manner by her relatives, and as a beast cared for as humanely as possible--just as she herself fluctuates between identification with, and antipathy towards, him. It is near the end of the poem that her fitful attitude resurfaces finally, and emphatically.

Suddenly realizing that her auditors are about to leave, she says: "Bless you, of course you're keeping me from work, / But the thing of it is, I need to be kept" (ll. 171-172). Her utterance works two ways in addition to her literal meaning. First, it reminds us that she views her present situation, like the cage, as both prison and shelter. Throughout the poem she has envied not only Len's mobility, but her auditors' as well. Earlier, when she hears that her companions discovered Lake Willoughby "in a book about ferns," she exclaims: " . . . Listen to that! / You let things more like feathers regulate your going and coming" (ll. 35-37). Now, again referring to the campers, she says:

I almost think if I could do like you,
 Drop everything and live out on the ground--
 But it might be, come night, I shouldn't like it,
 Or a long rain. I should soon get enough,
 And be glad of a good roof overhead.

 The wonder was the tents weren't snatched away
 From over you as you lay in your beds.
 I haven't courage for a risk like that.

(ll. 161-165, 168-170)

Such a remark, showing how she craves security even as it makes her claustrophobic, strips bare her insanity. Being "kept" also makes her seem animallike, although, unlike her uncle, she more clearly resembles a beast of burden than a "creature" that "shouts" and "crows" in the night.

Throughout the poem she has had things "put on" her which she passively accepts, though not without inner resentment. And it is not only the daily round of chores which she finds burdensome, but her whole existence--which she endures because she can do nothing else. At bottom, life for her is a conundrum. We see this clearly in her reference to Len's "cure," their moving out of her father's house, and supposedly away from an oppressive consciousness:

No wonder I was glad to get away.
Mind you, I waited until Len gave the word.
I didn't want the blame if things went wrong.
I was glad, though, no end, when we moved out.
And I looked to be happy, and I was,
As I said, for a while--but I don't know!
Somehow the change wore out like a prescription.
And there's more to it than just window views
And living by a lake. I'm past such help--
Unless Len took the notion, which he won't,
And I won't ask him--it's not sure enough.

(11. 148-158)

With nothing certain, anything--and everything--is possible; that is the achievement of poetic experience, and poetic experience is what confronts us in "A Servant to Servants." If we cannot wholly identify with the speaker, neither can we dismiss her. She continues to matter, not only through the drama her presence creates, but also through the questions her narrative raises, and extends to us. What does it mean to be human and alive in this world? The

question is saved from being rhetorical by the very rhetoric she uses, successfully, to persuade us of its integrity; and her means of persuasion has been a literally fantastic story.

Indeed, what we ultimately see in the figure of the woman is how closely Frost's best poetry adheres to the rhetorical principle of ethical appeal. Such an appeal, first formulated by Aristotle as the persuasive value of a speaker's character,¹ and later underscored by Quintilian in his depiction of the orator as essentially a good man whose eloquence emanates from his excellence of character,² is clearly what animates Frost's most interesting speakers. This is ironic, for he is often less than persuasive when he attempts other rhetorical modes. Too many times his appeals to reason (e.g., "Build Soil") are strangely complacent or cutely querulous, and his emotional appeals, as in the ending to "Two Tramps in Mud-Time," seem superimposed on his subject--and on the poem as a whole. However, the ethical appeal, with its emphasis on character, is tailor-made for Frost's essentially dramatic kind of poetry, and in most cases he makes striking use of it.

Of course, we must modify somewhat Quintilian's idea of "a good man speaking" in applying it to modern literature. Frost, for all his adherence to tradition, is a modern

writer for whom all value, especially spiritual value, is relative. We have just witnessed in "A Servant to Servants" the woman's literalizing Wallace Stevens' definition of modern poetry as "the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" (which in itself is an interesting variant of Frost's own "momentary stay against confusion"). Furthermore, Robert Langbaum has shown how, "as a necessary condition of reading the [modern] poem," it is a mistake to impose external standards or meanings on it.³ In a world devoid of absolute value, romantic and post-romantic literature "gives the facts from within," derives "meaning that is from the poetic material itself."⁴ This idea holds true even if the speaker in a poem is morally reprehensible; Langbaum's chief example is the notorious duke in Browning's "My Last Duchess." This is not to say that Frost's characters require such a devastating qualification for understanding them. Unlike so many of Browning's speakers Frost's are fundamentally "decent," as the world goes; and, while there is no absolute standard of moral excellence to measure them against, they are, like the woman in "Servants," more sinned against than sinning.

Two poems, almost twin narratives in their similarities of length and subject, appear close together in Frost's fourth volume, New Hampshire. Both "Wild Grapes" and "The Ax-Helve" have to do with the dubious nature of knowledge

and, through knowledge, with the strangeness of existence. Both feature speakers who are persuasive, though one is less innocently so than the other. In "Wild Grapes" the speaker is a woman recounting an incident from her childhood, when "as a girl gathered from the birch myself / Equally with my weight in grapes, one autumn" (ll. 4-5), she "was come after like Eurydice / And brought down safely from the upper regions" (ll. 12-13)--an incident which has given her "an extra life / I can waste as I please on whom I please" (ll. 14-15). If the dominant image established by the woman in "Servants" is one of an ambivalent, haunted person, the image here is that of a woman who has undergone the auguries of both innocence and experience, and yet has retained her essential purity of spirit.

The speaker's language is filled with references to "knowledge" and "knowing," in both the colloquial and the ultimate senses of the word. She begins her narrative by posing a rhetorical question, then modifying it by asking one less formal, and then gracefully blending both into her subject: "What tree may not the fig be taken from? / The grape may not be taken from the birch? / It's all you know the grape, or know the birch." She may not be "determined" to know grapes and birches in quite the same way that Thoreau is "determined to know beans" in Walden, but she comes to

know them nonetheless, through her vulnerability to experience. Closely related to this thematic aspect of the speaker's language is another, the figurative; there are clusters of images throughout her speech, primarily concerned with rising and falling:

One day my brother led me to a glade
Where a white birch he knew of stood alone,
Wearing a thin headdress of pointed leaves,
And heavy on her heavy hair behind,
Against her neck, an ornament of grapes.
Grapes, I knew grapes from having seen them last year.
One bunch of them, and there began to be
Bunches all round me growing in white birches,
.
My brother did the climbing; and at first
Threw me down grapes to miss and scatter
And have to hunt for in sweet fern and hardhack;
.
. . . then, to make me wholly self-supporting,
He climbed still higher and bent the tree to earth
And put it in my hands to pick my own grapes.
"Here, take a treetop, I'll get down another.
Hold on with all your might when I let go."
I said I had the tree. It wasn't true.
The opposite was true. The tree had me.
The minute it was left with me alone,
It caught me up as if I were the fish
And it the fishpole. So I was translated,
To loud cries from my brother of "Let go!
Don't you know anything, you girl? Let go!"

(11. 19-26, 31-33, 36-47)

It is here that image and subject coalesce. The girl's brother is clearly a different sort of person from his sister --he is pragmatic, and defines his relationship to the world around him by the amount of control he can exercise over it.

His bending the tree tops reminds us of the boy in "Birches" who "subdues" trees in the same manner. But unlike this earlier boy, the speaker's brother remains entirely in the earthly realm, climbing birches for what can be gotten from them rather than for the experience of climbing "toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more." Similarly, his exasperation toward his sister's "not knowing anything" shows how he equates "knowing" with "wising up," with "learning the ways of the world." The boy is not an unsympathetic figure; he has at heart his sister's welfare. However, his flatly literal view of things extends to the immediate situation and contrasts sharply with hers. For him it is a simple matter to "let go" or "drop" the short way to the ground. For the little girl, though, as well as for her older self, the "drop" represents a "fall." It is a crucial distinction that cannot be ascribed simply to childish trauma, as the speaker's later remarks make plain.

The other chief image in the woman's account has of course been the tree itself, described with an almost classic simplicity. The starkness of the tree, combined with its grace and beauty, makes it seem a celebratory, almost bridal figure, and it reminds us of the woman's earlier allusion (ironically reversed) to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice--and to more images of ascent and descent. Furthermore, for

anyone reared in even a remotely Christian atmosphere references to knowledge, trees, fruit and falling represent one of the two central Biblical stories, man's fall from grace; and thus we are presented with a mixture of pagan and Christian myths, and a strange configuration of images. It is plain that her childhood experience has not ceased to matter to the speaker, and she is using it metaphorically in order to explain to herself its strange significance. The extent of its strangeness becomes apparent through the language which Frost, with classical precision, gives her to use. In describing her journey upward the woman, in addition to her fish/fishpole metaphor, says she was "translated." The word is a rich one. Besides its root meaning, "to carry," and our usual extensions of that meaning into the areas of language and appearance, it also means "to convey to heaven or to a nontemporal condition without death." In the words of Yeats, the little girl is "changed, changed utterly"--and a "beauty," literally "terrible" in the sense of "awesome" or "great," "is born."

That the speaker is aware of its significance is apparent in the way she talks about the rest of her experience. She punningly refers to herself as holding on "uncomplainingly for life" (l. 54) to the branch, while her brother, an ironic Orpheus indeed, tries to cajole her into "dropping" by making her laugh. But his talk, unlike Orpheus' music, is ineffective;

but she is certain of the long, almost meditative stare she gives her hands once she is on the ground. This last image makes it plain that the woman is making even greater metaphorical extensions, though all that is really clear about them is their ambitiousness. The girl's bark-covered, curled-up fingers create a strikingly primal impression, and recall an allusion which the speaker, seeing her younger self hanging in the tree, made earlier to primates and to Darwin's theory of evolution--and the catch-phrase of mankind's having "descended from the apes" springs into the mind almost as a matter of course. Whether such an allusion serves merely to cast an ironic light on our unfortunate phraseology (wouldn't it be more fitting for progressive thinkers to say we have ascended from the apes?), or to more seriously complicate the relative values of ascent and descent, it is difficult to say; but it is there nonetheless, and thickens any clear-cut distinction we may have been making between the two.

It is the ending of the poem that resolves beautifully our feelings toward the speaker, though not our feelings toward the questions that she raises. After reaching the end of her reminiscence she makes an assessment of the experience which is as dense and rich as it is revelatory:

I had not taken the first step in knowledge;
I had not learned to let go with the hands,

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

(11. 95-103)

As the woman's final word on both knowledge and "letting go," her comments show how, as she indicates at the beginning of the poem, she is living two existences. The final impression we receive is of her living in the world, but not living by it or being of it, at least to the extent that her brother is, or the "others" are. Yet living in the world at all necessitates some sort of compromise, and the speaker has made hers by consenting to "let go" physically after having learned to do so: she acknowledges the twin burdens of knowledge and experience, self-consciousness and earthly existence. However, her "letting go" is from something more abstract than a birch branch, just as her refusal to "let go" with her heart is a clinging to something abstract--to another, intuitive existence, a previous state of being. In a sense her brother, like Orpheus, has failed to "rescue" his Eurydice from an unworldly "region," although it is an "upper region" of heaven rather than the "lower region" of Hades. Also implicit in this final speech is another Biblical reference, which like her classical allusion is reversed: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with

all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy strength."⁵
What exactly is meant by turning both myths upside down we can only guess; what is clear is that through her language the woman succeeds in persuading us that she has essentially remained her younger, innocent self. We are ineffably, yet definitely touched, and know intuitively that here is "a good person speaking."

By contrast, the speaker in "The Ax-Helve" is one considerably more enmeshed in experience. The poem begins with the narrator's remembering how in the woods he has often gotten entangled by branches; then he translates this experience to a human level and a specific instance:

I've known ere now an interfering branch
Of alder catch my lifted ax behind me.
But that was in the woods, to hold my hand
From striking at another alder's roots,
And that was, as I say, an alder branch.
This was a man, Baptiste, who stole one day
Behind me on the snow in my own yard
Where I was working at the chopping block,
And cutting nothing not cut down already.
He caught my axe expertly on the rise,
When all my strength put forth was in his favor,
Held it a moment where it was, to calm me,
Then took it from me--and I let him take it.
I didn't know him well enough to know
What it was all about. . . .

(11. 1-15)

Already we see the references to knowledge and its dubious character, which are emphasized by the speaker's punning on the word. Technically speaking he is employing antanacclasis,

the repetition of a word in two different senses; he will use the same trope in a submerged fashion at the end of the poem, where his discussion of knowledge is most explicit. Despite the similarity of subject in "The Ax-Helve," there is no mistaking the voice of this male speaker for that of the woman's in "Wild Grapes." As in the earlier poem there is fear implicit in this situation, and the narrator betrays that fear in his speech; but it is a different sort of fear from the girl's. What threatens him is at once more imminent and less clearly defined than the little girl's fall, and in true adult--specifically, masculine--fashion he attempts to mask his feelings with ironic humor. Indeed, after one has read and listened to both poems closely--with "the delicatest ear of mind," as Wallace Stevens would put it--they are in some ways radically different from, not similar to, each other. This difference is especially apparent in the respective textures of the speakers' language. In both poems the language is dense; but the woman's is rich and whole, while the man's is a density compounded of undergrowth, sinuous rhythms and murky colors--a difference mirrored even in the personifications of the birch and alder trees. It is a deft stroke by Frost to have his narrator implicitly compare Baptiste to the latter, and to have him materialize almost out of nowhere, coarse, foreign, a little menacing; the speaker is quite persuasive in getting us to feel his help-

lessness and fear. But Baptiste is only trying to be friendly. Using the narrator's "machine-made" ax handle as an excuse, he issues an invitation: "Come on my house and I put you one in / What's las' awhile--good hick'ry what's grow crooked / De second growt' I cut myself--tough tough" (ll. 29-31)! His comments apply not only to ax-helves, but also to the language of the poem as a whole and to experience--everywhere there is this knotty, grainy quality. It is represented visually in the grain of the suspect helve, which runs "Across the handle's long-drawn serpentine, / Like the two strokes across a dollar sign" (ll. 24-25); we both see and feel it in Mrs. Baptiste's rocking, which has "as many motions as the world: / One back and forward, in and out of shadow, / That got her nowhere; one more gradual, / Sideways, . . . " (ll. 47-50). And especially we hear it, in the mouth of the speaker. His language is incredibly dense in its syntax, full of hedgings and qualifications; however, his ambivalence is not that of an insane person, like the woman in "Servants," but of someone who is perceptive, cautious, suspicious. And always his language works inward, toward what he imagines are the real motives of his host:

Baptiste knew best why I was where I was.
 So long as he would leave enough unsaid,
 I shouldn't mind his being overjoyed
 (If overjoyed he was) at having got me

Where I must judge if what he knew about an ax
That not everybody else knew was to count
For nothing in the measure of a neighbor.

(ll. 37-43)

The heart of the poem resides in the narrator's metaphor of the "good" ax-helve. Rather than having machine-induced curves "put on from without," the lines of a servicable handle should be "native to the grain before the knife / Express [es] them" (ll. 73-74). Such a helve will bear up to the strain of work; its strength comes from its own irregularities. But are "native lines" always a virtue? In a dramatic extension of the metaphor, the narrator applies it to his ultimate subject:

Do you know, what we talked about was knowledge?
Baptiste on his defense about the children
He kept from school, or did his best to keep--
Whatever school and children and our doubts
Of laid-on education had to do
With the curves of his ax-helves and his having
Used these unscrupulously to bring me
To see for once the inside of his house.
Was I desired in friendship, partly as someone
To leave it to, whether the right to hold
Such doubts of education should depend
Upon the education of those who held them?

(ll. 82-93)

Not only is the metaphor's application to "laid-on education" extremely interesting, but its obverse value, implicit in Baptiste's "laid-on friendship," calls the metaphor, the

true meaning of the experience, and especially knowledge itself into question. Again we hear the speaker's voice thickening as he poses what in reality are two questions: whether it is friendship Baptiste really wants; and, if so, whether it is not pernicious that one's reservations about knowledge should originate from his own learning. The latter question, as well as the first line from the above passage, are both reminiscent of the man's earlier "I didn't know him well enough to know" remark about Baptiste. Unlike "Wild Grapes," where knowledge was either worldly or unworldly and one could learn or not learn as he pleased, knowledge in "The Ax-Helve" is worldly and more worldly, and it is impossible to really "know" anything beyond a superficial level. It is a world where one is, like the narrator in "Birches," "weary of considerations"--a place of unmitigated experience. What profundities that do come of such considerations are unpleasant, even disturbing. To emphasize this the speaker shifts from his thoughts about Baptiste and looks at his new "friend" completing the ax:

But now he brushed the shavings from his knee
 And stood the ax there on its horse's hoof,
 Erect, but not without its waves, as when
 The snake stood up for evil in the Garden-- . . .

 Baptiste drew back and squinted at it, pleased:
 "See how she's cock her head!"

(ll. 94-97, 101, 102)

Whether "laid-on" or "native," the curves are still "serpentine." The situation is enigmatic, and inescapable; the narrator has convinced us of his, and our, complicity in it.

It would be a mistake to assume that all of Frost's poems are as romantic in their conception as these first three have been. If we must "departmentalize" him Frost is of course romantic, though of a considerably more skeptical stripe from high romantics like Wordsworth (whom he most resembles) and Shelley (whom he resembles least). Frost has a strong classical--and neo-classical--bent, as Reuben Brower has pointed out,⁶ and it shows in much of his poetry published after 1930. Richard Poirier makes a similar, though more emphatic, distinction. In discussing A Further Range (1936) he notes that pieces like "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" and "Provide, Provide" exhibit an "almost blank observation and, for Frost, a near tonelessness"; there is, he continues, "a studied avoidance of the kind of metaphors that would even sustain, much less exhalt, life."⁷ Here he parts company with Brower, and I feel that his assessment is a bit too absolute. Yet both men are certainly correct in detecting in these poems a greater strain of severity in Frost--which is interesting, for even at his most romantic Frost is not an effusive poet.

The speakers in such poems are not so experientially involved in the situation they describe; rather, they are involved in the ideas they find implicit in those situations, and because of this involvement are persuasive--their intellectual exercise creates their "image." Of course, there are varying degrees of this more rarified sort of involvement. The speaker in "The White-Tailed Hornet" is a participant in his poem, but as Brower points out the poem is a kind of twentieth century literary epistle or verse essay,⁸ and both speaker and situation (including the hornet) are generalized:

The white-tailed hornet lives in a balloon
That Floats against the ceiling of the woodshed.
The exit he comes out at like a bullet
Is like the pupil of a pointed gun.
And having power to change his aim in flight,
He comes out more unerring than a bullet.
Verse could be written on the certainty
With which he penetrates my best defense
Of whirling hands and arms about the head
To stab me in the sneeze-nerve of a nostril.
Such is the instinct of it I allow.
Yet how about the insect certainty
That in the neighborhood of home and children
Is such an execrable judge of motives
As not to recognize in me the exception
I like to think I am in everything--
One who would never hang above a bookcase
His Japanese crepe-paper globe for trophy?
He stung me first and stung me afterward.
He rolled me off the field head over heels
And would not listen to my explanations.

(ll. 1-21)

Though concrete enough, this passage lacks the particularity of the girl being drawn upward by the birch or the man being apprehended by Baptiste. As the poem progresses it becomes obvious that the hornet and its instinct are being employed didactically in a way that the ax, for example, was not. Likewise, the speaker's delightfully deprecatory references to himself complete the Horatian dictum of Ars Poetica.

Nevertheless, there is an inner sanctum in this poem, though it is markedly different from the one we reach in "A Servant to Servants." As Brower puts it in describing the verse essays of Pope and Dryden, "though we hear a distinct character speaking, our attention centers on the ideas and judgments offered for inspection. By manipulating his tone the poet [in his persona as man of letters speaking to his public] gives personality to his thoughts, letting them speak up for our intellectual amusement, admitting us to a private debate of ideas, a Shavian theater of the mind."⁹ Certainly the speaker's language urges us to lose sight of the "real" hornet and concentrate instead on what the hornet represents. As a "visitor" in the speaker's house it indiscriminately attacks nailheads, huckleberries, and finally the fly it is really after:

. . . He shot and missed;
And the fly circled round him in derision.
But for the fly he might have made me think

He had been at his poetry, comparing
Nailhead with fly and fly with huckleberry:
How like a fly, how very like a fly.
But the real fly he missed would never do;
The missed fly made me dangerously skeptic.

(11. 42-49)

The narrator's allusion to the metaphorical activity of poetry is an interesting intellectual construct; it makes the abstract concept of metaphor serve as its own metaphor. This is certainly a strange involution, but he does not stop there: he extends the metaphor to the idea of theorizing. Having exploded the infallibility of animal instinct--the "poetry," if you will, of The Origin of the Species--he then deflates other scientific "poets" as well (Freud, Pavlov). In fact, with the sonority of his "Won't this whole instinct matter bear revision? / Won't almost any theory bear revision" (11. 50-51)? which begins the final passage of the poem, the poet-speaker implicates even those who made "upward comparisons," the Renaissance metaphysicians, as "doubtful." He is "dangerously skeptic" indeed, for he and his poem have become distrustful of the poetic process itself--a conclusion analogous to that of "The Ax-Helve," with its doubts about "knowledge" and "education." The chief difference between the two poems is that the energy of "The White-Tailed Hornet" is more purely intellectual.

The skepticism of this latter poem is another instance of Frost's predilection for toying with metaphors to see what can be gotten from them before they "cease to yield." This kind of "serious playing" is an intellectual activity, and as such it tallies with what Frost says elsewhere in "Education by Poetry": "Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, 'grace' metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have."¹⁰ Undoubtedly there is much of this statement that has gone into our impression of the speaker as someone who takes his thinking seriously rather than himself. "Provide, Provide" gives voice to a skepticism more profoundly expressed--a skepticism which nonetheless adheres closely to an intellectual "playing" which saves the poem from sentimentality:

Provide, Provide

The witch that came (the withered hag)
To wash the steps with pail and rag,
Was once the beauty Abishag,

The picture pride of Hollywood.
Too many fall from great and good
For you to doubt the likelihood.

Die early and avoid the fate.
Or if predestined to die late,
Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!
If need be occupy a throne,
Where nobody can call you crone.

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

No memory of having starved
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!

The fact of death surely qualifies as one of the "immedicable woes--woes that nothing can be done for--woes flat and final,"¹¹ and the flatness and finality have found their way into the speaker's voice. Instead of the chatty quality of "The White-Tailed Hornet" we have the clipped accents of regular rhyme and meter, the curious power of his tongue-in-cheek "Die early and avoid the fate," the enjambment-wrought utterness of that final stanza. Nevertheless, it is a woe mitigated by play. If the speaker's voice is one of unblinking acceptance (somehow the mixed metaphor is unavoidable), it is not one of niggardliness. For not only does he direct blatant scorn at the "provisions" most of us make against death and a gentler scorn against the nobler strategies of wisdom and decency; he has equally little confidence in his own advice--he is no more exempt from a hard end than anyone else. His outlook is at once tough-minded and sympathetic, and his self-doubts are what make the poem ultimately work. It works because he is a convincing speaker--convincing because such stringency, applied even to himself, makes him

a "good man" in our eyes. That his irony is sharper and less pleasant than the irony of "The White-Tailed Hornet" does not lessen his essentially ethical appeal.

Indeed, the memento mori character of "Provide, Provide" shows how even in these mortal circumstances "The play's the thing. . . . All virtue in 'as if.'"¹² Not only is the speaker so taken by the idea of mortality as to be persuasive; to an uncertain extent he becomes the aggressor, taking a hold of the idea and seeing what he can do with it. We reach the core of the poem in stanza five, where as Brower notes the narrator's imperatives become indirect and tentative rather than crude: " . . . the application that follows [the first two lines] is very shrewd: 'What worked for them might work for you.' The point remains, however, that the alternative has been presented, though without any sentimental assurances."¹³ To that end, the entire poem may be seen as an antidote to its own outward blatancies.

A third poem in which Frost's speaker is distanced from the situation that he recounts is the masterful but seldom anthologized "The Vanishing Red." The distancing is, however, dramatic rather than intellectual, a fact established by the first three lines: "He is said to have been the last Red Man / In Acton. And the Miller is said to have laughed-- / If you like to call such a sound a laugh." Instead of the

literary essay, we modern readers see in the poem a more immediately recognizable genre, the back-country tale (other, better known variants include "An Old Man's Winter Night" and "Out, Out--"). Although shorn of the hyperbolic humor which is a hallmark of the "yarn," "The Vanishing Red" contains traces of a tougher humor perhaps truer to the frontier experience. The tale is a grim one: the Miller pushes the Indian down a manhole in the mill. Hence the source of the poem's grim humor, implicit in the title; it is literal, and at the same time a punning allusion to the Zane Grey stereotype, with some nasty suggestions of just how "the vanishing American" got that way. The action is dramatically rendered, and the overall effect is a ballad-like objectivity.¹⁴ In keeping with the frontier tradition, the poem is a thoroughly oral performance. In addition to the opening lines it is framed by the speaker's sardonic "Oh, yes, he showed John the wheel pit all right," and the experience itself is prefaced by his cryptic second stanza:

You can't get back and see it as he saw it.
It's too long a story to go into now.
You'd have to have been there and lived it.
Then you wouldn't have looked on it as just a matter
Of who began it between the two races.

(11. 9-13)

Contrary to what it says superficially, this passage does take us backward and inward, confronting us with the event

directly. The speaker's comments are less a statement about the experience than they are his way of acclimatizing us to it. At the same time his language characterizes him as the teller of the tale, but it does not characterize him personally. As in the two previous poems we hear a distinct voice speaking--in fact, its distinctness helps create the experience--but curiously it is a voice belonging more to the tale than to the teller.

Finally, the opening lines show us that this is a poem primarily of and about sounds--sounds of laughter, of guttural expressions, of millstones, of water. They constitute the heart of the poem and are its true "statement":

Some guttural exclamation of surprise
The Red Man gave in poking about the mill,
Over the great big thumping, shuffling millstone,
Disgusted the Miller physically as coming
From one who had no right to be heard from.

"Come, John," he said, "you want to see the wheel pit?"

He took him down below a cramping rafter,
And showed him, through a manhole in the floor,
The water in desperate straits like frantic fish,
Salmon and sturgeon, lashing with their tails.
Then he shut down the trap door with a ring in it
That jangled even above the general noise,
And came upstairs alone--and gave that laugh,
And said something to a man with a meal sack
That the man with the meal sack didn't catch--then.
Oh, yes, he showed John the wheel pit all right.

(11. 14-29)

Again Brower's perceptions are helpful:

What the poem catches--consecrates, almost-- is the old and respectable tradition of savagery in this country, the belief, not entirely unfounded, that Indians were not civilized. But the story-teller reimagines this feeling not "as just a matter of who began it" but as freshly experienced in a "guttural exclamation." A moment of "meanness," if you will, is grasped fully, and that is the poem's "moral." To "take rank hold" of any form of life is to have learned something about what we are and to prepare us for the return from Walden.¹⁵

This is well put, but I feel Brower does not go far enough. Not only is "meanness" captured in John's grunt; both men are joined in an uneasy alliance through the Miller's laugh.¹⁶ Both sounds are "brute throat noises," as is the Miller's scarcely more "civilized" ". . . it's just that I hold with getting a thing done with" (l. 8). The capitalization is a subtle touch. It depersonalizes the Red Man and the Miller and lends them an almost archetypal stature, in much the same way that the narrator is depersonalized as a Teller of Tales. As archetypal figures, both the men and their sounds are subordinated to other figures and other sounds. As the poem works back farther and down deeper we have first the millstone with its "thumping, shuffling" sound, then the "manhole" and the "trap door" (both grimly literalized), and finally the source itself: the

stream, making in its "desperate straits" fishlike sounds. "It is from that in water we were from / Long, long before we were from any creature," Fred says in "West-Running Brook," and it is through this image that our essential "meanness" is expanded and explored. To the extent that the speaker has realized this collective experience and invested it with such authenticity, he is persuasive; his lack of personal involvement only makes his tale the more cogent.

The ethical appeal is most successful when the speaker is demonstrably caught up in his subject. Quintilian in enlarging upon Horace make this quite clear: ". . . the orator's duty is not merely to instruct, but also to move and delight his audience; and to succeed in doing this he needs a strength, impetuosity and grace as well."¹⁷ Many of Frost's speakers demonstrate a need to persuade their auditors that issues from something in addition to and greater than the didactic impulse. Robert Langbaum has isolated what he calls the "lyric burst" which wells up from within so many of Browning's characters. He notes that their language often overwhelms the actual situation that occasioned it, and likens this gratuitousness of expression to that of an operatic singer seeking any excuse to burst into an aria.¹⁹ Such superabundance, he maintains, supplies part of the poem's meaning in that it gives us an existential apprehension

of the speaker's character; it is "a total outpouring of soul, the expression of the speaker's whole life until that moment."¹⁹ Finally, in a further distinction Langbaum says that such an utterance is both lyric and dramatic. It is dramatic in the way it alters things--i.e., it reveals the speaker's character, or it casts a light on the situation; it is lyric to the extent that it "arises as an expression of pure will, an expression for which the dramatic situation, if any, provides merely the occasion."²⁰ Frost himself acknowledges the importance of "wildness" in poetry, saying that "it has an equal claim with sound to being a poem's better half."²¹ In typical fashion, however, with his next breath he modifies his romantic pronouncement. To "have the wildness pure; to be wild with nothing to be wild about" strikes him as dangerously absurd: "We need the help of context--meaning--subject matter. . . . Theme alone can steady us down. Just as the first mystery was how a poem could have a tune in such a straightness of meter, so the second mystery is how a poem can have wildness and at the same time a subject that shall be fulfilled."²²

Some of Frost's strongest poems are those which are a curious amalgam of romantic/dramatic and classical/didactic. One of the best examples is an early poem, "The Bonfire":

"Oh, let's go up the hill and scare ourselves,
As reckless as the best of them tonight,
By setting fire to all the brush we piled
With pitchy hands to wait for rain or snow.
Oh, let's not wait for rain to make it safe.
The pile is ours: we dragged it bough on bough
Down dark converging paths between the pines.
Let's not care what we do with it tonight.
Divide it? No! But burn it as one pile
The way we piled it. And let's be the talk
Of people brought to windows by a light
Thrown from somewhere against their wallpaper.
Rouse them all, both the free and not so free
For what they'd better wait till we have done.
Let's all but bring to life this old volcano,
If that is what the mountain ever was--
And scare ourselves. Let wild fire loose we will--"

(ll. 1-18)

There is a wild (and willed) extravagance in every line of this passage. We see it in the rich redundancy of the speaker's exhortations, in his extravagance of image and sound (especially the last three lines), in his garishness of color. Each of his imperatives is volatile, pulsing with an overt energy which is curiously emphasized by the relative smoothness of the meter. Although the speaker is exhorting his auditors to action in order to "scare themselves," he is plainly "scared" already. Yet it is equally apparent that his fear is quite different from the narrator's in "The Ax-Helve." In a childish way the speaker is "scaring" himself through the wildness of his language and the vividness of his imagination, which contains at times a paradoxical wildness beyond language: "Rouse them all . . . / With

saying what they'd like to do to us / For what they'd better wait till we have done." Appropriately enough, his auditors are children.

Indeed, it is only through this "childish" perspective that the speaker's wildness seems at all warranted by the situation. The fire is only a bonfire, after all, even if fueled by "pitchy hands" dragging boughs "down dark converging paths." It is when we delve beneath the literal level of "fire" and are confronted with the pure force of the image that we can share the speaker's fascination with it:

"Why wouldn't it scare me to have a fire
Begin in smudge with ropy smoke, and know
That still, if I repent, I may recall it,
But in a moment not: a little spurt
Of burning fatness, and then nothing but
The fire itself can put it out, and that
By burning out, and before it burns out
It will have roared first and mixed sparks with stars,
And sweeping round it with a flaming sword,
Made the dim trees stand back in wider circle--
Done so much and I know not how much more
I mean it shall not do if I can bind it."

(11. 20-31)

Somehow after reading these lines we feel the meaning of Blake's "Energy is Eternal Delight." We also receive a further revelation of the speaker's character; in part his fear emanates from his identification with the fire. Briefly its wildness is in his keeping, "but in a moment not"--and he can only look on in hyperbolic wonder as the fire (and we

see the latent power in the formulaic language of the news-cast) "rages out of control." The fire becomes a metaphor for something within the human heart, and therein lies its ultimate terror and beauty.

The energy of the poem's central passage moves in a manner indigenous to its metaphor. As he remembers a specific fire "once . . . upon an April," the narrator's voice begins steadily enough:

"The breezes were so spent with winter blowing
They seemed to fail the bluebirds under them
Short of the perch their languid flight was toward;
And my flame made a pinnacle to heaven
As I walked once around it in possession."

(11. 35-39)

But "there came a gust," and his ritualistic possession vanishes as the fire, like the wind, begins "in earnest." The change is captured in the speaker's language, which becomes even more figurative as clusters of startlingly evocative images crowd into the lines which immediately follow:

"There came a gust. (You used to think the trees
Made wind by fanning, since you never knew
It blow but that you saw the trees in motion.)
Something or someone watching made that gust.
It put the flame-tip down and dabbed the grass
Of over-winter with the least tip-touch
Your tongue gives salt or sugar in your hand.
The place it reached to blackened instantly.
The black was almost all there was by daylight,
That and the merest curl of cigarette smoke--
And a flame slender as the hepaticas,

Bloodrood, and violets so soon to be now.
But the black spread like black death upon the ground,
And I think the sky darkened with a cloud
Like winter and evening coming on together."

(ll. 41-55)

The situation is ominous, yet exhilarating--and we see both states strangely, even perversely, mingled in the speaker. Everything blackens as the event sweeps to its conclusion:

". . . oh, I knew, I knew,
And said out loud, I couldn't bide the smother
And heat so close in; but the thought of all
The woods and town on fire by me, and all
The town turned out to fight for me--that held me.
.....
I won! But I'm sure no one ever spread
Another color over a tenth the space
That I spread coal-black over in the time
It took me."

(ll. 69-73, 81-84)

However, the fire has wrought the greatest change in the speaker himself. While the neighborhood looks about for the cause of so much devastation, he remembers being "some-where wondering / Where all my weariness had gone and why / I walked so light on air in heavy shoes / In spite of a scorched Fourth-of-July feeling. / Why," he asks the children, "wouldn't I be scared remembering that" (ll. 90-94)?

An overt comparison of the fire with war follows, and the poem ends on a quasi-classical, didactic note. But it is a didacticism informed by our exposure to the metaphor, an

exposure that extends beyond an intellectual apprehension of it. "War is for everyone, for children too" (l. 111) is the "moral," and as the speaker points out it is certainly true that "innocents" are not exempt from the destructiveness of war. But as he has demonstrated, the phrase may also be true in that, theoretically at least, children are as capable of violence as men. (The moral's corollary, that war is a childish activity engaged in by adults, is equally frightening.) "Now we are digging almost down to China" (l. 101), the speaker says, and we have seen the same elemental force at work in both situations, impelling "children" of all ages to actions which soon rage out of their control. All of this is metaphorical activity, of course, and there may be a limit somewhere--a sense in which fire and war are disparate after all. But that limit is not reached here. Still showing the degree to which he is possessed by his subject, the speaker resolves the implications of his "moral" intuitively and poetically:

" . . . But if you shrink from being scared,
What would you say to war if it should come?
.....
The best way is to come uphill with me
And have our fire and laugh and be afraid."

(ll. 96-97, 113-114)

It is hard to explain the kind of hold a poem like this has

over us. Both its "moral" and its metaphor are old hat, and furthermore "The Bonfire" is only one of many Frost poems that utilize such unabashedly traditional subjects and images. How to handle the burden of literary tradition was a central problem facing the Modernist generation, and Frost ran a greater risk than most by remaining overtly loyal to his British and Latin forebears. What saves so many of his poems from being hackneyed or derivative are the speakers themselves, the dramatic presence they create through their language. The effect of their presence is different, however, from the overpowering exuberance of Browning characters like Fra Lippo Lippi or Childe Roland. What saves "The Bonfire" from its own ingenuity is the speaker's revitalization of the poem's statement and metaphor through his total involvement with his subject. This is just the point where some of Frost's later, less dramatic poems (e.g., "Kitty Hawk") fail, though in other respects they may be even more ambitious in what they undertake.

Yet other speakers in other poems, usually dramatic and always accessibly "modern," are effective precisely because of their classic tempering. In the manner of Lucretius or Virgil they straightforwardly entertain philosophical questions; their expression is lyrical, yet the quality of that expression is timeless. One of Quintilian's main

contentions is that a seriousness of subject comes naturally to a person of ethical character and is responsible for much of his eloquence:

He will consequently . . . choose the noblest precepts and the most direct road to virtue as the means for the formation of an upright character. . . . For what subject can be found more fully adapted to a rich and weighty eloquence than the topics of virtue, politics, providence, the origin of the soul and friendship? The themes which tend to elevate mind and language alike are questions such as what things are truly good, what means there are of assuaging fear, restraining the passions and lifting us and the soul that comes from heaven clear from the delusion of the common herd.²³

Frost's attitude toward existence is equally serious, though less condescending: "Belief is better than anything else, and it is best when rapt, above paying its respects to anybody's doubts whatsoever. At bottom the world isn't a joke."²⁴ Elsewhere he enlarges on belief as something intimately related to the poetic process:

No one who has ever come close to the arts has failed to see the difference between things written . . . with cunning and device, and the kind that are believed into existence, that begin in something more felt than known. . . . We cannot tell some people what it is we believe . . . because . . . it has got to be fulfilled, and we are not talking until we know more, until we have something to show.²⁵

Belief, then, like poetry, is nurtured in silence, ultimately finding its expression in spiritually impassioned

utterance--in "words which have become deeds."²⁶ For John Keats, the world was "a vale of soul-making," a place into which we enter as pure potentiality and through experience acquire spiritual consistency and wholeness. Frost's remarks likewise demonstrate inner dynamism and resilience, qualities observable in his most memorable speakers. A perfect example of belief being fulfilled through the poetic "making" of "rapt" speakers is "West-Running Brook":

"Fred, where is north?"

"North? North is there, my love.
The brook runs west."

"West-Running Brook then
call it."

(West-Running Brook men call it to this day.)

"What does it think it's doing running west
When all the other country brooks flow east
To reach the ocean? It must be the brook
Can trust itself to go by contraries
The way I can with you--and you with me--
Because we're--we're--I don't know what we are.
What are we?"

"Young or new?"

"We must be something."

(11. 1-10)

This opening exchange seems to me, along with the beginning of "Directive," one of Frost's most masterful performances. The couple's colloquialism rings absolutely true and yet it is deceptive; even as the wife's direction-asking realizes the mundaneness of things ("how far down the road did you say his place was?"), their conversation

begins to work down to a more fundamental level--to "the beginning of beginnings," as Fred says later. In another context, Edwin Muir has commented on this dynamic aspect of Frost's poetry: " . . . starting from a perfectly simple position we reach one we could never have foreseen. It is in this strict and watchful development of his theme, his steady movement towards a point related to his starting-point and yet not obviously implicit in it, that Mr. Frost is perhaps most remarkable as a poet. His revelation of his theme is gradual; it is not contained in an instantaneous flash, but in the whole movement."²⁷ This explains as well as anything, I think, the peculiar satisfaction we get from Frost's mid-length, narrative/dramatic poems.

The chief rhetorical device employed here is a sort of diluted epanalepsis: instead of the key words framing clauses, they reoccur in each speech of Fred and his wife. Thus, instead of the symmetrical power of Shakespeare's "Blood hath brought blood, and blows have answered blows," we have a random, spontaneous effect more in keeping with the subject: "' . . . north?' 'North? North . . . / . . . west.' 'West-Running Brook then call it.' / (West-Running Brook men call it . . .)." It is from such inauspicious beginnings that the progression Muir has observed begins. Although the tone does not appreciably deepen, within these

first ten lines the woman has made a metaphorical comparison to "contraries" and, in demonstrating contrareity in her speech, arrived at one of the ultimate questions: "What are we?"

It is her next statement--"We must be something"--that impels the poem to a deeper level of discourse. At first the change of direction is marked only by the woman's increasingly ecstatic pronouncements. With lyric energy she piles metaphor on metaphor: she and Fred are "married" to the brook, the bridge they build will be "Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it"--and so on, until she climaxes her outburst with: "Look, look, it's waving to us with a wave / To let us know it hears me" (ll. 16-17). No sooner has Fred's voice with its more matter-of-fact tone begun cutting across his wife's than the narrator's voice, speaking for the second and last time, cuts across Fred's:

(The black stream, catching on a sunken rock,
Flung backward on itself in one white wave,
And the white water rode the black forever,
Not gaining but not losing, like a bird
White feathers from the struggle of whose breast
Flecked the dark stream and flecked the darker pool
Below the point, and were at last driven wrinkled
In a white scarf against the far-shore alders.)

(ll. 19-26)

The passage is every bit as much a "lyric burst" as the wife's speeches, but its effect is different. The de-

scription of the stream is controlled yet strongly felt, so that a line like "And the white water rode the black forever" has a hyperbolic force, and yet remains primarily a statement of fact. Not surprisingly, this is the kind of eloquence that Quintilian finds most effective: " . . . oratory is like a river: the current is stronger when it flows within deep banks and with a mighty flood, than when the waters are shallow and broken by the pebbles that bar their way."²⁸ While this is a meditation upon a shallow stream, there is indeed "something more of the depths" in the narrator's utterance which resonates especially within the last three lines.

This resonance is modulated by Fred's own deep pronouncement, which is of course the heart of the poem:

"Speaking of contraries, see how the brook
In that white wave runs counter to itself.
It is from that in water we were from
Long, long before we were from any creature.
Here we, in our impatience of the steps,
Get back to the beginning of beginnings,
The stream of everything that runs away.
Some say existence like a Pirouot
And Pirouette, forever in one place,
Stands still and dances, but it runs away;
It seriously, sadly runs away
To fill the abyss's void with emptiness.
It flows beside us in this water brook,
But it flows over us. It flows between us
To separate us for a panic moment.
It flows between us, over us, and with us.
And it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and love--
And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;

The universal cataract of death
That spends to nothingness--and unresisted,
Save by some strange resistance in itself,
Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
As if regret were in it and were sacred."

(ll. 38-60)

Fred's "as if" serves to remind us of the poetic nature of his performance. Just as his wife changed the wave by investing it with human qualities and the narrator deepened it with his metaphor of a struggling bird, so Fred has humanized the wave again on a still deeper level, briefly seeing its "swerving" as a symbol of the human spirit resisting annihilation. The last line shows us how Frost in his most serious poems means literally "all virtue in 'as if.'" Such comparisons are work that is "play for mortal stakes," and like the wave they are "most us"--a willingness to pose fundamental questions through metaphor, and to take risks in doing so.

Fred also calls the wave's resistance "sacred." This essentially religious apprehension of reality has come about poetically, through his seeing one thing in terms of another, and in so doing he has sanctified the process itself. In the extended metaphor which follows we see how poetry is literally a form of belief, even as belief informs poetry:

"Our life runs down in sending up the clock.
The brook runs down in sending up our life.

The sun runs down in sending up the brook.
And there is something sending up the sun.
It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source."

(ll. 64-70)

Here the poem is at its most "rapt," and we see how it is one of those poems which are "believed into existence," ending as well as beginning "in something more felt than known." Brower, in his helpful comments on this passage, is surely right when he says that the metaphor "must not be pushed too hard" in our attempts to understand it;²⁹ belief, after all, is not dogma. Speaking of Fred's "something" which sends up the sun, he puts the matter in its properest perspective:

We must not lean too hard on this figure either. What that "something" is remains as vague as the "revelation" in "For Once, Then, Something." No orthodox First Cause is in question, certainly.

. . . there is a kind of "salvation" in the act of the will and mind, in a loving study and penetration of the flux that sees form there and, in the act of recognizing it, finds a stay against confusion. This kind of seeing is more than mere measuring and recording of fact; it resembles rather the higher levels of scientific imagination. Or, to speak in less pretentious terms, Frost is saying in "West-Running Brook" that man as poet can have an experience equivalent to that of the scientist, through a marriage of "sight" and "insight."³⁰

The most wonderful thing to witness in the poem is how this belief is fulfilled through the growth of the poem it-

self. Through the voices of its speakers, through its rhythms, through its images, "West-Running Brook" has become its subject: a series of "contraries" continually "crossing" each other, and in the process "sending up" the poem so that it can achieve itself. At its conclusion the poem is indeed a marriage, between husband and wife, couple and brook, perception and insight, creation and extinction. The same kind of resilience the lovers have taken on through their talking about the wave has passed into the poem which encompasses them, giving it a human identity and spiritual wholeness. Seen in this way, poetic "making" is not merely analogous, but identical, to Keats' "soul-making": it is indeed "most us."

Notes

¹Aristotle, The Rhetoric, Richard Claverhouse Jebb, trans., in Readings in Classical Rhetoric, Thomas W. Benson and Michael H. Prosser, eds. (Boston, 1969), p. 57.

²Quintilian, Institutes of Oratory, H. E. Butler, trans., Readings in Classical Rhetoric, p. 118.

³Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York, 1957), p. 85.

⁴Ibid., pp. 78-79.

⁵Matthew 22:37.

⁶Reuben Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York, 1963), p. 200.

⁷Richard Poirier, Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing (New York, 1977), p. 270.

⁸Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost, p. 201.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrance Thompson, eds., Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose (New York, 1972), "Education by Poetry: A Meditative Monologue," p. 332.

¹¹Ibid., Frost's "Introduction" to King Jasper, p. 353.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Brower, pp. 123-24.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁶Hayden Carruth in a perceptive essay ("The New England Tradition," in the October, 1971 issue of American Libraries, p. 945), also sees the Miller's laugh as crucial to the poem,

though his emphasis is necessarily different: "What that laugh means is the heart of Frost's poetic temperament: the blackest, bitterest despair in the three hundred years of the New England tradition." The poem, Carruth maintains, is a portrait of a man destroying himself: "It [man's self-destructive urge] is the greatest absurdity, as our survival somehow in spite of it, our blind, ceaseless endurance, is the greatest heroism."

¹⁷Quintilian, Institutes of Oratory, Readings in Classical Rhetoric, p. 126.

¹⁸Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, p. 183.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., p. 188.

²¹Lathem and Thompson, Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose, "The Figure a Poem Makes," p. 394.

²²Ibid.

²³Quintilian, Readings, p. 129.

²⁴Lathem and Thompson, "Some Observations on Style," p. 299.

²⁵Ibid., "Education by Poetry," pp. 338-39, 340.

²⁶Both here and in my remarks which follow concerning the spiritual qualities of poetry, I am indebted to a monograph entitled "A Way of Happening: An essay in pursuing the experience of the tragic in its essential mode." It is written by Bruce Cutler, Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Wichita State University, and published as No. 109 in Wichita State's University Studies, Volume LII, Number 4, November, 1976.

²⁷Edwin Muir, in Recognition of Robert Frost, ed. Richard Thornton (New York, 1937), p. 311.

²⁸Quintilian, Readings, p. 126.

²⁹Brower, p. 191.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 191-92, 195.

CHAPTER 4

THE STRATEGIES OF SYNTAX

I'm sorry about all those commas and hyphens.
But you know I indulge a sort of indifference
to punctuation. I don't mean I despise it. I
value it. But I seem rather to let other people
look after it for me.

--Frost, in a 1930 letter to
Leonidas Payne

If I didn't drop into poetry every time I sat
down to write I should be tempted to do a book
on what it [Frost's definition of the sentence]
means for education. It may take some time to
make people see--they are so accustomed to look
at the sentence as a grammatical cluster of words.
The question is where to begin the assault on
their prejudice.

--Frost, in a 1914 letter to Sidney Cox

Throughout his long life Robert Frost carried on a
love affair with sound and meaning in poetry, and he con-
trived to make both as poetically accessible as he could.
He also had a barely-veiled contempt for pedantic niceties
like "poetic" diction and conventional grammar and syntax.
As evidenced by the above quotations, Frost regarded pre-
scriptive grammar as not merely a burden and a care but as
a bore, something to be studied by the inmates of Academia,

their poetic sensibilities numbed by liberal dosages of "laid-on education." Yet syntax, when freed from the grammatical concerns which we usually associate with it, means the "orderly or systematic arrangement of parts or elements" and "the arrangement of words . . . by which their connection and relation in a sentence are shown."¹ Especially granting Frost his obsession with sentences and sounds, there has been no poet more concerned with employing syntax in this larger way to reveal the poem's rich possibilities for meaning, or its sounds in all their purity.

These opening quotations may, however, be misleading in encouraging us to make a distinction between poetry and prose that is not altogether valid. As we know from reading his letters and the Thompson biography, Frost was a man of many poses, and one of his favorites was that of the poet so completely immersed in his art that he rarely read prose, much less wrote it. (The first sentence from the Cox letter is a good example.) Louis Untermeyer, who should know better, nourishes this illusion in one of the interstitial comments in his edition of Frost's letters: "Robert believed so inexorably in the life of poetry that he did not want a poet to write anything but poetry. Although he was repeatedly asked to write critical articles, he steadfastly refused to write prose; he even rejected his publisher's

request for a volume to contain his lectures. My alternation of creative writing with critical appraisals seemed to him not only a temporizing but a betrayal."² This is nonsense, of course. Although Frost did not write critical pieces or reviews as such, he made a raft of scintillating critical observations in his letters (the early letters especially), in the introductions to several of his later books, and in his remarks on the lecture circuit--all of which scholars duly collected for him. I personally come away more convinced from each successive reading of "The Figure a Poem Makes," or "Education by Poetry," or some of the letters that Frost knew he was writing for posterity. Critical analysis, like punctuation, was evidently something that he "seemed rather to let other people look after for him" (*italics mine*). The truth in the phrase, like the movement in so much of the poetry, is more than subtle, and we wince under its insidious transparency.

However, my purpose here is not to disparage Frost for his manipulativeness but to point out how often his "poetic" and "prosaic" virtues are identical. Reading his letters with an ear to the voice, as we cannot help doing, we discover how his syntax and punctuation (or lack of it) reveal a knack for gritty detail, an impetuosity, a concern for verbal sound and function. Note, for example, how the fol-

lowing excerpt from a 1915 letter to Walter Pritchard Eaton demonstrates what an early reviewer found to be characteristic in A Boy's Will: " . . . direct observation and immediate correlation to the emotion--spontaneity, subtlety, evocation of moods, humor, an ear for silences":³

I am only interesting to myself for having ventured to try to make poetry out of tones that if you can judge from the practice of other poets are not usually regarded as poetical. You can get enough of those sentence tones that suggest grandeur and sweetness everywhere in poetry. What bothers people in my blank verse is that I have tried to see what I can do with boasting tones and quizzical tones and shrugging tones (for there are such) and forty eleven other tones. All I care a cent for is to catch sentence tones that haven't been brought to book. I dont say to make them, mind you, but to catch them. No one makes them or adds to them. They are always there--living in the cave of the mouth. They are real cave things: they were before words were. And they are as definitely things as any image of sight. The most creative imagination is only their summoner.⁴

What is most interesting here is that while this letter is less informal than Frost's correspondence with closer friends like Untermeyer, Sidney Cox and John Bartlett, its language has the sort of vital immediacy that we generally associate with more intimate writing. In the first four sentences we see how Frost's idiosyncratic punctuation helps create his syntax and move his thought along. As usual, he is stingy with commas; in the opening sentence the subor-

dinate clause is not set off, and yet the sentence's meaning is clear enough. More important, though, is the tone that the sentence has--a perfunctoriness, in large part created by the lack of punctuation, which contributes to the sentence's strength of statement. The second is a simple declarative sentence. By employing polysyndeton in the third, Frost again economizes on punctuation, using only the parenthetical expression. The fourth sentence is again declarative.

Up to this point Frost has been discussing sentence tones abstractly while at the same time brushing aside conventional criticism, and his attitude shows in the brusqueness of his own sentence tones. His real concern is with the sounds themselves, and, like the husband in "Home Burial" whose voice changes from "We haven't to mind those" to ". . . it is not the stones, / But the child's mound--", the tone of the letter changes dramatically as Frost begins discussing his poetics more concretely. Little by little his diction and syntax have been gaining in interest as they edge into the colloquial and begin to dramatize his assertions about sound (" . . . forty eleven other tones"; "All I care a cent for . . ."). By the same token, speaking silences have begun to creep in between the sentences, even as Frost begins to use punctuation to create dramatic pauses within the sentences themselves. "They are always there--

living in the cave of the mouth" is worlds apart from the opening sentence in rhythm, sound, and emotional atmosphere; and between these extremes we have already heard the quasi-playful "I dont say to make them, mind you" (Indeed, from hearing the sentence one can practically envisage the appropriate facial expression.) Finally, we have what seems to me the heart of the entire passage: "They are real cave things: they were before words were." This is poetry. If one wished he could transplant the sentence to one of Frost's dramatic narratives, and the line would be perfectly at home. Part of its excitement resides in the metaphor coupled with the Platonic allusion, of course, but the rest is largely the result of the sounds, and the emotions and attitudes that they embody: awe, delight, a touch of fear. Once again, and in a most unexpected place, we have made a journey to the interior--to the "cave of the mouth," and to a realm where things are grasped intuitively, not intellectually. In such a world, "sound" takes on a new dimension of meaning. We hear the sounds for themselves, rather than record them as their corresponding emotions; we experience them rather than interpret them.

Indeed, these excerpts that I have taken from Frost's letters are of more than passing interest; they are fundamental if we are to understand just how syntax works in his

poetry. Therefore, I feel that a few additional comments are necessary before we examine individual poems. Syntax, like rhetoric, is a word that is often misunderstood, and so for the sake of consistency let me repeat that I am defining syntax in a larger (i.e., Chomskian) sense. Syntax is that property of language which "distributes lexical items . . . into patterns, patterns which are spread out 'left-to-right' in time and space."⁵ These patterns make possible the translating of "an abstract meaning-complex into a piece of sequential behaviour."⁶ These patterns, in other words, create certain expectations in the speaker and hearer--expectations that, when fulfilled, complete a semantic framework, and hence create the possibilities for meaning.

This chapter certainly does not pretend to be a treatise on modern linguistics, and I will usually resort to grammatical terminology to identify certain "arrangements" or "patterns" that comprise Frost's syntax. Nevertheless, it is interesting how often his scattered critical remarks anticipate, metaphorically, many of the contentions of modern linguistics. His comment that sounds "were before words were" exists in an intriguing relation to the linguistic axiom that "speech is primary and that the written language is secondary and derived from it";⁷ another example is

Frost's famous definition of the sentence as "a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung,"⁸ which has an analogous relationship to "string," as the word is technically used in phrase-structure grammar.⁹ Most important, however, is his remark about how people tend to regard the sentence as a mere "grammatical cluster of words." That he considers sentences as something much more than this is obvious from the context of the rest of the excerpt. His comment prefigures somewhat the distinction drawn by transformational grammar between "superficial" and "underlying" syntax. The concerns of the former (or "surface structure," as it is more commonly referred to) are primarily grammatical and phonetic; those of the latter ("deep structure"), logical and semantic.¹⁰ The relationship between Frost's remark and the linguistic concept is of course more metaphorical than direct; for while the linguist tends to compartmentalize the phonetic and semantic properties of language in order to analyze them, Frost's concern with sound and meaning is more impressionistic and experiential.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the way that Frost's syntax weds sound and meaning is similar to the way in which the transformational route between deep and surface structures "pairs" sound and meaning. Marie Borroff, among others, has noted that most of Frost's poetry has a super-

ficial (that is to say, grammatical) clarity;¹¹ but it is a clarity which does not obscure, or account for, the densities beneath the verbal surface. These densities, arising from structural ambiguity, constitute the peculiar richness which we characterize as "poetic." Such richness is quite different from the densities, brought about by structural flaws or incompleteness, which we find incomprehensible. A prime example of such doubleness in structure is "The Silken Tent":

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

What is initially striking about the poem is of course its being generated from a single sentence. Furthermore, "The Silken Tent" is a sonnet, one of the most intricate and compressed--and therefore syntactically demanding--of poetic forms. On its verbal surface the poem is not especially difficult. Although there may be areas of slight uncertainty, they do not preclude our overall understanding of

the poem on a first reading. The intention of the metaphor is clear: a woman, presumably beautiful, is being compared to a tent made of silk. If the metaphor is arresting, it is not far-fetched; as Richard Poirier points out, its allusion to "The Song of Songs" will resonate for any reader who is at all acquainted with the Bible.¹² Successive readings, however, not only clarify the comparison but also reveal the quality of that comparison--we come to apprehend the nature of the woman's being. This is the part of the poem which we feel, but cannot verbalize, and it is largely brought about by unconventional syntax. Let us look again at the first four lines:

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease, . . .

We realize with a slight shock that the woman, whose essence has permeated the entire poem, is specifically mentioned in only its first two words. Moreover, they are two of the simplest words in our language, forming the simplest of constructs, and serve to realize, as Poirier puts it, the "purity of being [that] is one aspect of her loveliness."¹³ With this discovery, the poem becomes palpably more dense, more richly mysterious, than it was on an initial reading. Parts of the sentence begin to coagulate into clusters that are

not merely grammatical.

Part of the mystery results from Frost's having so quickly, and so thoroughly, confused woman and tent in the Latinate sense of blending or blurring them. He does this by making both nouns rely on the same intransitive verb; and, as the woman melts syntactically into the image of the tent, the tent itself becomes more elusive as other "lexical patterns," to resort to the formulaic language for a moment, "spread out left-to-right in time and space."

Through inversions in syntax more exaggerated--not to say ambitious¹⁴--than those of the usual "poetic" variety, Frost has created arrangements of words which capture our attention while at the same time frustrating our usual syntactic expectations. His inversion in the opening line is perhaps the most functional in this regard. It is here where the comparison is made; but the way in which "she" and "tent" are distributed in the line forces us to view the metaphorical exchange from a slightly different perspective than the one afforded by a more mundane syntax. A prosaic reading of the line might go something like this: "She is like a silk tent that is in a field when" Such a rendering drains not only the grace and poise from Frost's line, but most of its wonder, too; in fact, in the prose version the simile now seems a bit bizarre. Furthermore, by delaying

the woman's identification with the tent until the end of the line, the syntax causes us to examine more carefully the smaller word patterns in our attempts to locate the other half of the metaphorical equation: "as in a field" and "a silken tent." The latter phrase constitutes a climax, not only of syntax but of the imagination, that is not lost among a welter of words. Much the same thing happens in the second line, where the word cluster containing the new subject, "a sunny summer breeze," is again placed last. Thus, "At mid-day" acquires a significance in confronting us first, much the same way that "as in a field" did in preceding the image of the tent. Frost's inversion also heightens our awareness of the synesthetic quality of the breeze, and how the phrase serves as both a linear climax and as an impetus for the following line, which further describes the drying actions of the breeze. It becomes increasingly apparent that one of the effects of Frost's convoluted syntax is a clarification of the interplay between the elements that comprise his metaphor.

A second, and, from Frost's view, equally important result of this syntactic juxtaposition is the mating of sound with sense. The sibilance of "silken," when abetted by that of "She is as" and "sunny summer breeze," is obviously onomatopoeic. Moreover, the rest of the poem

abounds with "s" sounds, which further intensify our impression of the rustling silk, even as the word rhythms contribute to our sense of the tent's movement. With the image thus activated, Frost is free to deepen our sense of its beauty and mystery. His inversion of "relent" in the third line imparts authority both to the breeze and to the ropes themselves; the indefinite pronoun in line four momentarily confuses "tent" with "breeze," to the advantage of both; and its continuation in the next line further abstracts the image of the tent. (It is here we discover that "tent," like "she," has been dropped by Frost after the opening line.)

By contrast, the syntax in lines 5-11 is, if intricate, relatively conventional, and as Reuben Brower has observed it discreetly allows for the interplay of meaning¹⁵ to say nothing of sound--between "pole" and "soul" (and, by implication, between "tent" and "she"). Lines 8-14 comprise the poem's most impressive technical achievement, however. Each line is clear, and even has a certain autonomy; yet each is, like the composite image of tent, pole and guy wires, utterly dependent upon the others for fulfillment. This is especially true of the last three lines, where "one's going slightly taut" refers to the "countless silken ties of love and thought," while the implied subject of the

final line is the "central cedar pole," not mentioned since line five. The "silken ties of love and thought" imperceptibly, yet indelibly, wed the woman with the tent; "countless" makes it plain that Frost is no longer speaking of something tangible. Poirier puts it beautifully when he says: "In its inversions, its relaxations into a more conventional syntax, its buttressings, the sentence which is the sonnet has the qualities ascribed to the tent's own grounded elasticity. The whole poem is a performance, a display for the beloved while also being an exemplification of what it is like for a poem, as well as a tent or a person, to exist within the constrictions of space ("a field") and time ("at midday") wherein the greatest possible freedom is consistent with the intricacies of form and inseparable from them."¹⁶

Although "The Silken Tent" is the most notable example of such experimentation, many of Frost's shorter lyrics are made up of only two or three sentences. A poem which presents an interesting contrast to "The Silken Tent" is an earlier lyric, "Spring Pools":

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

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

It is easy to see the intriguing structure of the poem: each stanza is a sentence which "reflects" thematically the other. Any yet each is not entirely the other's mirror image. The first stanza does in fact have a "reflective," even a brooding quality; but the second is impetuous, even feisty. Both sentences achieve their effects through their respective syntax.

The first stanza-sentence is much like the beginning of "The Silken Tent." Its backbone, "These pools . . . / Will . . . soon be gone," is enveloped by the modifications, enlargements and buttressings of the many subordinate clauses and qualifying phrases. We have gone no farther than the first two words before we encounter the qualifying "that," which in turn is held in brief suspension by the phrase "through in forests." For the rest of the line and all of the second, the syntax seems to allow the subordinate clause to expend itself, though even here the inversion concerning "almost" creates a slight ambiguity. However, beginning with line three we find the clause continuing ("And . . . chill and shiver"), but qualified yet again in Chinese box

fashion by the reference to the flowers. At last, in the fourth line, we have a verb phrase relating directly to the subject "pools," and thus satisfying our expectations; but even here an identical subordinate clause--"like the flowers beside them"--qualifies the phrase, and links the entire line with the one preceding it. The two lines which follow and end the stanza are two more dependent clauses, which supply further information about the pools and also direct our attention to the "forests."

The effect of all this convolution is qualitative. The speaker in the poem has not merely registered a factual observation--he has invested it with a sense of poignance, darkness, and even terror. What makes the poem work, after all, is the speaker's attitude toward what he sees; and what the syntax does here is reveal the discrepancy between the natural scene itself and the speaker's perception of the scene.¹⁷ This is particularly true in the last line of the stanza, where the meter and syntax conspire to produce a statement as portentous in its effect as it is colloquial (Frost even commits the grammatical sin of ending a sentence with a preposition.)

From its outset the second stanza presents a marked contrast to the first. Although "the trees," like "these pools" earlier, are qualified by an extensive subordinate

clause, the effect is not at all the same. For one thing, "the" is a less specific article than "these," curiously making "the trees" much more general, even abstract, entities than "these pools" which stand among them.¹⁸ Another difference is that, without the benefits of punctuation, the first two lines of the second stanza become a burst of "song and speed" that races along until it is brought up short by the dash--only to regenerate itself in the imperative which follows, and to build up an increasing momentum which only the conclusion of the poem can halt. Indeed, the pace is so fast that we scarcely have time to acknowledge disturbing word patterns like "pent-up buds," "darken nature," and "be summer woods."

The imperative is a most functional pun. Most obviously, it links both sentence-stanzas together thematically, while pointing out the crucial difference between natural and human "reflection"--thus highlighting the poem's tension as well as its cohesion. The imperative also forces us as readers to "think twice" about what is happening as its four successive stresses slow the poem dramatically. If we give ourselves completely to the rhythm for a moment, the effect of "Lét thém think twíce" is similar, impresionistically speaking, to the feeling one gets in a roller coaster as it attains its highest summit, ready to commence its

deepest drop and sharpest turn. The last three-and-a-half lines plummet and swirl as the pace again picks up and the syntax, working alternately against and with the meter, creates word patterns which realize the temporality of the scene: "blot out"; "drink up"; "sweep away"; "flowery waters"; "watery flowers"; "snow that melted only yesterday." The first three examples are reminiscent of mundane, even domestic, activity;¹⁹ yet they also invoke the absoluteness and brutality of the natural cycle--absolute and brutal, that is, when perceived by a human being. The ingenious "flowery waters" and "watery flowers" are the poem's climax. They have a peculiar kind of symmetry which is at once syntactic, aesthetic and naturalistic; but they also create a certain amount of confusion--it is hard to remember which phrase comes first.²⁰

The imperative, in fact, is grammatically the heart of the sentence-stanza. The first two lines remain fragmentary, utterly dependent upon being understood in "Let them think twice"; the rest of the sentence is comprised of dependent clauses describing the natural cycle, but which are as inexorably tied to the imperative as lines seven and eight. Especially effective is Frost's use of elision between the penultimate and final lines. Our sense supplies "that came" between "watery flowers" and "From snow"; yet without the

phrase the final line is much less pedestrian. Though not affectedly "poetic," the line contains an echo of Villon's "Où sont les neiges d'antan?", providing a literary continuity which coincides nicely with the naturalistic and syntactic continuities in the poem. The master stroke, of course, is that the natural cycle becomes an esthetic cycle as well: "From snow that melted only yesterday" takes us back to the pools that began the poem.

What makes "Spring Pools" a poetic performance, finally, is its "blend of metaphor and fact," as Brower puts it, its "merging of impressions and 'something more'":²¹

The merging of images throughout the poem is paralleled also by the many repetitions and double rhymes. Frost is very bold in recalling so often within such a few lines the same words and sound patterns, and yet the effect . . . is never weak, and noticed only with pleasure. With aptness and economy, double rhymes pick up and absorb the preceding sound and meanings: "defect" includes "reflect" (the sky); "river" includes the "shiver" of the flowers; and "flowers" includes "powers." Through the recurrence of verbal "blocks" of about the same size and shape the impression of a cyclical movement is further increased, an effect enhanced by run-over lines and feminine rhymes that blur line-endings.²²

The poem's syntax is in large part responsible for such authoritative economy and skill. It is also responsible for letting in the human voice, a voice which is for Poirier

"a cry if not in the dark then in woods that will get dark no matter what [the speaker] says in admonishment."²³

Another poem in which the human voice is especially noticeable is "Putting in the Seed":

You come to fetch me from my work tonight
When supper's on the table, and we'll see
If I can leave off burying the white
Soft petals fallen from the apple tree
(Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,
Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea),
Or go along with you ere you lose sight
Of what you came for and become like me,
Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.
How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
On through the watching for that early birth
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

The voice here is more full-bodied than the voice in "The Silken Tent," and it achieves its shape through a more specifically dramatic situation; in fact, the poem is almost like a dramatic monologue encapsulated in sonnet form. More apparent, too, are the modulations that the voice makes. Working primarily through syntax and diction, the poetic impulse drives the voice from colloquial expression to rhetorical eloquence, from a superficial to a deeper level of discourse. Again, this transformation occurs within two sentences.

The poem begins with an imperative. However, unlike

the imperative in "Spring Pools," its power is mitigated in a casual, even off-hand way by what are respectively infinitive and prepositional phrases and an adverbial clause. It is rather shocking to hear how quickly the gravity of "You come" is dissipated by "to fetch me," and how "from my work tonight" serviceably connects the now colloquial line to another "verbal block" just as folksy--"When supper's on the table." The second line is fleshed out syntactically by the conjunction and the intransitive "we'll see," and metrically by the stresses which underline the homely quality of the phrase.

Beginning with the third line, however, both voice and poem begin to change. "If" is technically a subordinate conjunction, but what follows is semantically, if not grammatically, the most important part of the first sentence. "If I can leave off burying" is everyday enough, but the phrase "White / Soft petals" represents a minor syntactical shift (for many readers, the standard pattern would be "the soft / White petals"), which is enhanced by the enjambment. The modifying phrase that follows is syntactically conventional, but its "fallen . . . apple tree" lets the first whispers of myth into the poem. Then without warning comes a strange kind of grammatical enjambment--the two-line parenthetical expression. The repetition, interjection and

inversion of line five, "mingled" with the arrangements of "smooth bean" and "wrinkled pea"--all these call attention to a textural change in the poem that is both visual and aural. The parenthesis does not advance the "plot" in any way, but it comments obliquely on the actions that have so far comprised the plot, recalling the sensuality and beauty of planting, as well as dramatizing the farmer-poet's "earnest love" for his labor. In addition, lines five and six show, with tactful directness, the relationship between seeds and flowers, between insemination and fruition. The two lines which follow have a knotty integrity all their own, and insist on being read as a unit. In grammatical terms, lines seven and eight consist of parallel constructions ("And go along . . ."; " . . . and become . . . ") separated by the modifying ("ere you lose sight"); one can explain their homogeneous effect by noting the deleted punctuation. In poetic terms, though, the syntax "mingles" the speaker with his wife as subtly as it has mingled the seeds with the petals. In so doing, it has made the metaphorical action explicitly sexual, though no less suggestive. In fact, if it were not for the poem's traditional form we might more readily make the comparison with D. H. Lawrence that Frost's boldness demands. (Another poem even more Lawrencian in its imagery and psychology is

"The Subverted Flower.") To really appreciate Frost's feat--the wife's going out to the field "to fetch" her husband, the husband's being prompted by his wife to "go along" in with her to supper, and both movements held in suspension by the subjunctive "if"--we have only to remove the parenthetical expression to see how intimately lines three and four and seven and eight cohere. As Brower observes, line nine with its heightened rhetoric is "risky," but is saved "by being firmly joined by syntax and sense" to the lines preceding it²⁴--and, I would add, by the new depths of perception and sensation revealed by the parenthesis.

The last five lines press forward inexorably, a movement in keeping with the image of the "sturdy seedling" pushing its way through the soil. Much of their momentum is created by the "through," "On through" and "When" clauses, all prefaced by the emphatic phrase "How Love burns." These lines, however, owe their effect to more than this particular distribution of the prepositions and adverb. There seems to be a strange compression of syntax in "How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed," though it is hard to locate. (There is one compression that is readily noticeable, though it is not the whole story. It is the one that occurs in the displacement of a second preposition--i.e., "the Putting in of the Seed"--that most users of Standard

English would include.) Furthermore, there is another syntactical peculiarity in this sentence. With the exception of line ten each line sounds perfectly conventional when read by itself; but when strung into a sentence they acquire a density, a fullness, that is only partly explained by the paucity of punctuation. The one place where punctuation does occur is line twelve, where commas bracket the clause "just as the soil tarnishes with weed." In addition to creating the pause that is appropriated by the climactic couplet, the commas frame this particular word sequence, making us unconsciously pay closer attention to the relationship of "soil," "tarnishes," and "weed." Brower notes that the verb "describes both the green-gold of new growth and the color of soil seen through the haze of slender stems and weedy leaves," furnishing imagery that is as accurate as it is beautiful.²⁵ "Tarnishes" is also freighted with associations of diminishment and corruption, blending the burgeoning seed with the "fallen" petals of line four. But this is the poem's semantic undercurrent, and though it tempers it does not obscure the triumph of the seed's germination. The relatively straightforward verbal blocks which chronicle the event--"sturdy seedling," "arched body," "shouldering its way," "shedding the earth crumbs"--humanize the activity and, when coupled with the capitalization of

line ten, serve to further deepen and fulfill the metaphor. The voice at the conclusion is clearly that of "a man who is led through some combined use of his ordinary speech and his ordinary natural capacities, as farmer and lover, to the discovery of metaphor, of rhetorical eloquence, and of myth."²⁶ And, of course, the growth of the speaker's voice is a paradigm for the triumph of the poem itself, and a chronicler of its performance.

Naturally, many of Frost's shorter poems contain more than one or two sentences, and some of these poems are more straightforward than the lyrics that we have just examined. Nevertheless, even in these cases Frost's syntax is still characterized by its strategic movement inward. His famous "The Gift Outright" affords a good example. It is obviously a poem of statement--five of them to be exact, and all of them quite strong:

The land was ours before we were the land's.
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people. She was ours
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
But we were England's, still colonials,
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves
We were withholding from our land of living,
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.

Despite Randall Jarrell's objection that the third sentence "is a little weakly and conventionally said,"²⁷ the passage is for me the densest of the poem. A classic example of epanalepsis, lines six and seven are also the nuclear statement about "possession" in a poem whose subject is possession in all of its ramifications. The passage also serves to highlight the repetition and slight variation of words and phrases which permeate this short poem. Indeed, repetition is Frost's main structural--and hence syntactic--tool.

"The land was ours before we were the land's." That first sentence has the same force and function as the topic sentence has in an expository essay, and "The Gift Outright" has in fact been called by Brower a "poetic definition of an American state of mind, a compact psychological essay on colonialism."²⁸ However, by the time we reach the conclusion, and the land begins "vaguely realizing westward," the poem has developed into something much more than a "patriotic piece"--though it is profoundly that as well, a poem about America and its people, and of the extent to which each has "possession" of the other. The syntax stolidly inches the lines forward while at first separating, then merging the Americans with their country. By transposing the syntactical units, we can readily see how the first line sets up the

dichotomy: "The land was"; "we were"; "ours"; "land's."

The second line is sustained by the first, yet develops as "something else additional" to it: "She was our land"; "we were her people" is of course the ultimate and ideal relationship, but in both sentences the relationship is made tenuous by the qualifying preposition "before." The same word also makes apparent and maintains the dual sense of possession with which the poem begins, and in the second sentence "before" is itself modified and expanded by the phrase "more than a hundred years."

Like the land, the poem continues to develop and extend itself, always in this deliberate way. The third sentence builds on the first two, using compound structure to further amplify the colonials' mean possession of their land, and the land's thwarted possession of its people. Line eight begins the next sentence, which starts out even more strongly than the others. Frost opens with one of his favorite words, "Something" ("Something there is that doesn't love a wall"; "For once, then, something"; "And there is something sending up up the sun"), made stronger and more mysterious by his elision of "that." The phrase to which "something" belongs is reinforced and clarified by "it was ourselves / We were withholding," this latter phrase itself a discovery brought about by the inversions of the syntax.

In the process, the significance of "withholding" has also become apparent. The word subtly underscores the contradictory nature of the poem's theme: in order to possess the land in anything other than a proprietary sense, our ancestors were forced not only to rid themselves of their attachment to England, but also to discard their sense of "self-possession" and make themselves accessible to their environment in a number of most intimate ways. "Possession" is in fact an expanded pun, and it is Frost's repetitious syntax that has sensitized us to the sexual and even spiritual ramifications of the word.

The final sentence is a triumph. One of Frost's hallmarks is his ability to revitalize the shopworn staples of our language, a trait which he shares with Thoreau. By employing different contexts, he manages to literalize the hackneyed phrase "such as we were," making it represent humility and consecration in terms of the settlers, and glorious mystery in terms of the land: "Such as she was, such as she would become." So it is with the other common word patterns in the sentence's first two lines: "gave ourselves outright"; "deed of gift"; "deeds of war." Enhanced by the syntax, the pun on "deed" and "deeds" alerts us to the rich interplay among the word's various nuances. Just how, exactly--and when--do one's actions constitute a gift? What is the

relationship of both words to "giving?" Moreover, all three phrases mean utterly what they say, and their straightforwardness corresponds with the feeling of inevitability that the poem has taken on. However, it is an inevitability that does not preclude surprise. "To the land vaguely realizing westward" is a stunning achievement, primarily because of the almost oxymoronic tension of the adverbial phrase. "Vaguely" is at odds with Frost's precise use of "realizing"; yet the phrase is a beautifully apt description of America's development. Significantly, the line--as well as the entire poem--depend upon the last two dependent clauses for fulfillment. As lines 15 and 16 make clear, in order for the land to become "America," it needs to be "possessed" by "her people" equally as much as the colonists need to be "possessed" by "their" land in order to name and "enhance" it. It is the syntax which has contributed the most towards making this possession so mutual. The repetition and continuity of "Such as she was, such as she would become" redirects us towards the beginning of the poem. Now we can discern the deeper meaning implicit in "The land was ours before we were the land's": the sense that it was fated to be ours long before the facts of exploration and settlement. This is a love of country that is rooted in the soil itself and rendered in personal terms--a patriotism of a most Emersonian sort.

A poem which both continues and counterpoints the achievements of "The Gift Outright" is "Directive," often cited as the supreme effort of Frost's later years. Like the earlier poem, "Directive" reaffirms the Biblical concept of "salvation in surrender" (seen here as being "lost enough to find oneself"), and naturally it realizes poetic experience. In order to do so, however, the syntax in "Directive" takes us backward rather than forward. In a similar manner, through a series of negations the poem "makes" the affirmation of the human spirit not only possible, but somehow inevitable. Though "Directive's" length precludes my quoting it in its entirety, there are three passages which are crucial, not only for a general understanding of the poem, but also for an understanding of how the poem works. From the standpoint of sheer bravura performance, the opening sentence is one of Frost's masterpieces:

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
Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,
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.

(ll. 1-7)

Already we can recognize several of Frost's by now familiar syntactical turns: the delayed main clause, the convolu-

tions of the qualifying phrases, the way enjambment occasionally dramatizes the syntax ("made simple by the loss / Of detail"). Even Poirier, who finds "Directive" (along with "West-Running Brook") "a prime example of misplaced adulation,"²⁹ commends the poem's "wildly brilliant opening" and its "pile-up of negatives."³⁰ What makes the sentence both wild and brilliant is Frost's strange ambiguity of syntax; in fact, the sentence might be said to exhibit a sort of linear double-dealing. The colloquialism of "Back out," a folksy rendition of "Once upon a time," blinds us at first to the fact that Frost is also using the phrase literally and imperatively. By the same token, "now" serves as both adverb and noun, as Marie Borroff has noted.³¹ Furthermore, even the elision of "that is," which gives the line so much of its force and direction, has a double function--it modifies either "this" or "now," depending on the grammatical emphasis we give to the latter word. The second line's "Back in [to] a time" has an identical duplicity.

The phrase "made simple by the loss / Of detail" illustrates another kind of doubleness. Our natural inclination, which is encouraged by the enjambment, is to read the phrase ironically: the "good old days" are good to us primarily because we have forgotten (or have never known) the myriad inconveniences that made them less than idyllic, and the

dangers that made them terrible. However, the poem as a whole is filled with various "makings"--of songs, of homes, of beliefs--which again demand our literalizing the phrase. In doing so, we are beginning to face utterly the facts of our existence, an action which comprises the larger context of "Directive," and which links the poem with Walden. The three adjectives that follow, as well as the modifying phrase following them, encourage this reading. However, we discover that the syntax has made lines three and four the fulcrum of the sentence: they describe not only a "time" that has been "made simple," but also the non-existent house, farm and town of the main clause. The clause has suspense and weight created by the delay, and by the gravity of the preceding lines, but its ultimate effect is confusion--the verbal blocks in each phrase are informed by a syntactical sleight-of-hand that "really takes away instead of gives." Nevertheless, Frost's maneuverings here still manage to persuade us that less is really more. Our common sense tells us that the house is simply no longer standing; but in a remoter, more absolute sense the phrase "a house that is no more a house" implies that the house, if not a house, is something else--that it may, like the town, like the farm, not be entirely "lost." The poem abounds with ghostly presences like this, which, like the old lady in "The Black

Cottage," are the more intensely felt for their "not being" there.

We are left not knowing quite what the sentence means; yet we are deeply affected by the swirling rhythm and the clusters of sound, both of which are primarily engineered by the syntax. The repetition of word patterns in the main clause especially evokes the rhythms of ritual and incantation. Brower is correct when he observes that "we can for once justifiably speak of sound before sense because in 'Directive' rhythm is so potent in 'getting us lost' and in bringing us to the climax of the metaphorical journey in the poem."³² In fact, the first sentence in "Directive," like the initial sentence in "The Gift Outright," is a paradigm for the entire poem. However, instead of being the topic sentence in an essay, it is literally an "ad-venture" through syntactic thickets to a verbal clearing which contains nothing except what-once-was. The sentence is more of a map than a topic sentence to a poem which takes us subtly back to the "belilaced cellar hole" and the brook which are its center. Once begun, the poem moves steadily backward through time, although Frost carefully disguises the fact by blending the journey's pace into its description: "The road there . . . / May seem as if it should have been a quarry-- / Great monolithic knees the former town / Long since gave up

pretence of keeping covered" (ll. 8-12). Brower's explication is especially helpful here. By designating the poem's regression from geological time into mythological, human and personal time,³³ he shows how Frost has delicately transformed time from an exterior to an interior phenomenon.

A second important passage occurs in lines 29-41. Having already been informed by our "guide" that he "only has at heart our getting lost," and having already been subjected to "the serial ordeal / Of being watched from forty cellar holes," we are now gently urged by the speaker to

Make yourself up a cheering song of how
Someone's road home from work this once was,
Who may be just ahead of you on foot
Or creaking with a buggy load of grain.
The height of the adventure is the height
Of country where two village cultures faded
Into each other. Both of them are lost.
And if you're lost enough to find yourself
By now, pull in your ladder road behind you
And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.
Then make yourself at home. The only field
Now left's no bigger than a harness gall.
First there's the children's house of make-believe,

What Brower calls "the images of loss" have given way temporarily to a recreated "history" of the town which is only conjecture; the force of the imperative is expended through the sentence's "making up" of its own "song." It is a song continually modulated by the confusion of tenses, the

inversion in line 30, and the stringing together of elaborating phrases as each line and thought give way to the next. Lines 32-35 perform in miniature the feat with which Frost began the poem: a heightening-by-delay which reveals apparently nothing at the climactic moment. The first sentence folds into itself as the syntax keeps relocating the word sequence which will satisfy our grammatical and semantic requirements. Grouped into its larger syntactical units, the sentence reads: "The height of the adventure is the height of country where two village cultures faded into each other." The initial phrase leads us to expect some kind of definitive statement; we get something much different as the sentence begins "vaguely realizing eastward" in our minds, and east-and westward on the page. A declarative sequence follows, but it is: "Both of them are lost." By now Frost has us where he wants us, syntactically speaking, and not surprisingly the speaker's next remark is his punning supposition that we indeed may be "lost enough to find ourselves by now." (In terms of the locutions of the poem's opening sentence, this second reference to "now"--which sounds merely idiomatic at first--takes on other nuances.) Next he issues another in a series of gentle imperatives: "Then make yourself at home." By this time the homely familiarity of the words does not

disguise how literally they are being used. Like our forefathers, we are forced to "make ourselves at home" (create our identities, make ourselves to be at home) in an alien environment. Thrown upon our own resources, we are grammatically, semantically and metaphorically reenacting the frontier experience.

The final line of the passage dwells on still a third kind of making, and as usual Frost puns on its meaning. "The children's house of make-believe" is just that, a "playhouse" replete with "playthings." As the conclusion of the poem makes clear, the playhouse bears directly on the "house in earnest" that is now "only a belilaced cellar hole, / Now slowly closing like a dent in dough" (ll. 46-47). (And here is still another instance of how "now" is enhanced by the syntax, as it was only a few lines earlier in "the only field / Now left's no bigger than a harness gall." Besides grammatically modifying "field" and "hole," in both cases the syntax reveals the deeper meaning of "now": as a Present which is literally an overwhelming force that is both "too much for us" and "too present to imagine," as Frost puts it in another poem, "Carpe Diem.") S. P. C. Duvall has pointed out how in many places "Directive" is indebted to Walden;³⁴ one of the clearest examples is the passage about the house, which bears a striking resemblance to Thoreau's description

of the "cellar dents" in his chapter "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors."³⁵ However, there is another passage in Walden that Duvall does not mention--one that unites Frost and Thoreau not only circumstantially, but spiritually as well. In his concluding chapter Thoreau has this to say about "truth" and "make-believe":

In sane moments we regard only the facts, the case that is. Say what you have to say, not what you ought. Any truth is better than make-believe. Tom Hyde, the tinker, standing in the gallows, was asked if he had anything to say. "Tell the tailors," said he, "to remember to make a knot in their thread before they take the first stitch." His companion's prayer is forgotten.

However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names.³⁶

Our being forced to examine "only the facts, the case that is," is surely what "Directive" is all about. Examination of the facts is a motif, moreover, that Frost returns to time and again in his writing. However, in this late poem the motif has a tougher-mindedness than it did in earlier works like "Ghost House" and "The Wood-Pile," even as it achieves a greater poignance, too. The children's broken playthings are neither more nor less inadequate against the onslaught of Time than was "the house in earnest." Yet for all Frost's essential kinship with the author of Walden, he goes one step beyond Thoreau and his flat distinc-

tion between "make-believe" and "truth." The passage which shows this most clearly is the conclusion of "Directive." After identifying "the brook that was the water of the house" as both our "destination" and our "destiny," the speaker says:

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.

(11. 55-62)

It is clear that this final command is issued only half-ironically. At the beginning of this passage, in one of the most intricate sentences of the poem, Frost purposely confuses "make-believe" with "making belief" (i.e., the Grail-like goblet); to make sure that there will be no mistake, he has his speaker parenthetically tie the goblet directly to the "playhouse." There are at least two reasons for such confusion. Brower articulates the first as well as anyone:

We are to go beyond history, geological and human, family and personal, and beyond our adult selves to an "original" source. In the closing lines of "Directive" there is a Wordsworthian sense of healing power, of passing "into our first world" and finding

a release and renewal in the act of doing so.

. . . The poem expresses rather a personal discovery of a "moral equivalent" of salvation in a rehearsal of the past, in making oneself "at home" in loss and defeat. Being saved is becoming a child again in a scriptural and a Wordsworthian sense, but without putting aside later knowledge.³⁷

The second reason is a more poetic one. For Frost, "make-believe" is not frivolous play, but a metaphorical activity that results from our "making belief" out of the hard "facts" and "truths" that we observe everywhere around us. Being human, we have both a propensity and a necessity to do so. If the speaker at the conclusion of "Directive" realizes neither the brief transfiguration of the minister in "The Black Cottage" nor the philosophical passion of Fred and his wife in "West-Running Brook," he nevertheless attains to a detached serenity that is the more impressive for its being so laboriously achieved. Like the brook which he observes, the speaker's voice takes on a tone that is "too lofty and original to rage." His "voice ways" are part of the figure the poem makes--which is itself akin to the "essences unchanged by man: space, the air, the river, the leaf."³⁸

Notes

¹The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, ed. C. T. Onions, 3rd ed. (London, 1970), p. 2114.

²Louis Untermeyer, The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer (New York, 1963), p. 69.

³Lawrance Thompson, Selected Letters of Robert Frost (New York, 1964), p. 77. A sizable part of the review from which this quote is taken appears in Frost's June 16, 1913 letter to John Bartlett. The review itself appeared in the June, 1913 issue of a British quarterly called Poetry and Drama. Living in England at the time, Frost was evidently quite favorably disposed to the review, for a variety of reasons. Chief among these in the Bartlett letter was the fact that the review was so obviously useful; and Frost at this time was circumspectly using all manner of sources to plump his fledgling reputation in America. This letter to his friend and former student was especially designed to drum up favorable publicity for A Boy's Will, and to offset what he feared were well-intentioned but problematical comments by Ezra Pound. Pound's May 1913 review in Poetry magazine begins: "There is another personality in the realm of verse[,] another American, found, as usual, on this side of the water, by an English publisher long known as a lover of good letters. David Nutt publishes at his own expense A Boy's Will, by Robert Frost, the latter having been long scorned by the 'great American editors.' It is the old story." Frost, though he had earlier complained to Pound about the inhumanities of American publishers, was horrified to think Pound's remarks might make him seem "unpatriotic" to an American public--and to future American publishers.

⁴Ibid., pp. 191-92.

⁵Roger Fowler, An Introduction to Transformational Syntax (New York, 1979), p. 8.

⁶Ibid.

- ⁷John Lyons, Noam Chomsky (New York, 1970), p. 14.
- ⁸Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 110.
- ⁹Lyons, Noam Chomsky, p. 63.
- ¹⁰Ibid., pp. 88-89. Also, Fowler devotes an entire chapter in his book to this concept ("Deep and Surface Structure," pp. 10-20).
- ¹¹Marie Borroff, "Robert Frost's New Testament: Language and the Poem," MP, LXIX (1971-72), 43.
- ¹²Richard Poirier, Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing (New York, 1977), p. xv.
- ¹³Ibid., p. xiv.
- ¹⁴Poirier again puts his finger on what I can only call the Frostian authority of voice and syntax. Speaking of "The Silken Tent," he says on pp. xiii-xiv of his introduction: "What is striking here is that the voice usurps the centrality only apparently given to the figures it lays down. Not the placement assigned to her or a tent so much as the act of placement, with the implicit promise of more such actions to follow--it is this act which imposes itself, by the authoritative peculiarity of syntax, as the subject of compelling interest. The elicited suspense waits upon how this voice, with a power of formulation at once flexible, scrupulous, and grand, will conduct itself through the rest of the poem."
- ¹⁵Reuben Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York, 1963), p. 185.
- ¹⁶Poirier, Robert Frost, pp. xiv-xv.
- ¹⁷Ibid., pp. 16-18.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 18.
- ¹⁹I am indebted to the director of my dissertation, Professor J. M. Morrison, for this observation.
- ²⁰Ibid.
- ²¹Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost, p. 36.

- ²²Ibid., pp. 37-38.
- ²³Poirier, p. 18.
- ²⁴Brower, p. 183.
- ²⁵Ibid., p. 184.
- ²⁶Poirier, p. 218.
- ²⁷Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York, 1953), p. 51.
- ²⁸Brower, p. 202.
- ²⁹Poirier, p. 99.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 83.
- ³¹Borroff, "Robert Frost's New Testament," 51.
- ³²Brower, p. 234.
- ³³Ibid., pp. 235-37.
- ³⁴S. P. C. Duvall, "Robert Frost's 'Directive' out of Walden," Am. Lit., XXXI (1960), 482-88. Briefly, in addition to Thoreau's mention of the "cellar dents" in "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors," Duvall points out three other main similarities between Thoreau's chapter and Frost's poem. In the vein of Frost's "Make yourself up a cheering song . . .", Thoreau, walking along a former road by Walden, "repeoples" in his imagination the deserted dwellings that he sees. In a passage reminiscent of "Directive's" closing lines, Thoreau leads us to the spirit's watering places, "to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, . . . this is the place where a wise man will dig his cellar." Finally, Duvall notes, Frost's "Lost enough to find yourself" theme is a more concise version of Thoreau's comment that "not till we are completely lost . . . do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature. . . . Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations."
- ³⁵Ibid., 484.

³⁶Henry David Thoreau, "Conclusion," Walden, ed. Owen Thomas, Norton Critical Edition (New York, 1966), p. 217.

³⁷Brower, pp. 238, 239.

³⁸Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Introduction," Nature, in The American Tradition in Literature, eds. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long, 3rd ed., Norton (New York, 1967), I, 1065.

CHAPTER 5

THE EFFICACY OF DICTION

. . . I dropped into an everyday level of diction [in A Boy's Will] that even Wordsworth kept above. I trust I don't terrify you. I think I have made poetry.

--Frost, in a 1913 letter to Thomas B. Mosher

In "North of Boston" you are to see me performing in a language absolutely unliterary. What I would like is to get so I would never use a word or combination of words that I hadn't heard used in running speech. You do it on your ear. Of course I allow expressions I make myself.

--Frost, in a 1913 letter to John Bartlett

To study Frost's diction closely is to become almost immediately aware of an apparent contradiction: the similarity he has, theoretically at least, with Walt Whitman. Frost not only spoke condescendingly about Whitman's experiments with vers libre but even seemed at times personally irritated by the older poet. Discussing his idea of style in a letter to Louis Untermeyer, Frost defines "style" as the way in which a man "carries himself toward his ideas and his deeds" and as "the mind skating circles round itself as it moves forward."¹ Then he lists

Frost of course was more cautious, in both personal inclination and philosophy. Correspondingly, his style is not of such an omnivorous sort as Whitman's. Certainly the qualifications and hedgings of "Directive"--or even those of a poem so apparently straightforward as "The Road Not Taken"--are alien to the man who made a point, in his poetry, at least, of brushing aside the "trippers and askers" surrounding him with "the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events."⁷ However, this is not to say that Frost is not idealistic. Poems such as "The Trial by Existence" and "I Will Sing You One-0," on through to the late "Kitty Hawk," betray a vaguely Christian, and always an Emersonian, aspiration; but Frost's flights upward are usually circumscribed by his absorption in William James and by his more than adequate grounding and interest in modern science. Walt in his cosmic acceptance may be "By thud of machinery and shrill steam-whistle undismay'd, / Bluff'd not a bit by drain-pipe, gasometers, artificial fertilizers,"⁸ but there is a less histrionic tolerance in the keener flavor of Frost's

. . . the furthest bodies
To which man sends his
Speculation,
Beyond which God is;
The cosmic notes
Of yawning lenses.⁹

The differences between Whitman and Frost are real, and they are important. They should not, however, be allowed to obscure the poets' mutual allegiance to Emerson. Whitman, with his predilection for mystical transcendence, and Frost, with his bent for factual observation, are merely emphasizing different aspects of a single phenomenon observed by Emerson in Nature:

There seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms; and day and night, river and storm, beast and bird, acid and alkali, pre-exist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God, and are what they are by virtue of preceding affections in the world of spirit. A Fact is the end or last issue of spirit. The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world.¹⁰

For Frost, "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows"; for Whitman, every leaf of the lilac bush is "a miracle." Both utterances (or "warblings," as Walt would say) are Emersonian song, though in different keys.

There are yet other striking similarities. Whitman, in his impatience with old literary models and language, in his desire to capture instead the real speech of America, has a marked affinity with the poet who boasts in letters to his friends about "performing in a language absolutely unliterary" and of not relying on words that he has not "heard used in running speech." In a letter to Sidney Cox, Frost restates this aim even more strongly:

"You aren't influenced by that Beauty is Truth claptrap.
. . . I want the unmade words to work with, not the familiar
made ones that everybody exclaims Poetry! at. Of course the
great fight of any poet is against the people who want him
to write in a special language that has gradually separated
from the spoken language by this 'making' process."¹¹ Im-
plicit in these comments, no doubt unconsciously, is the
Whitmanian desire to "make it new!"; and it is almost un-
canny how often these two supposedly antagonistic poets
echo each other in their concern for language, differing
more in style than in substance. Walt rhetorically wonders:
"Words! Book-words! What are you?";¹² Frost flatly de-
clares that "Words exist in the mouth not books."¹³ In
Democratic Vistas, Whitman inveighs against the "parcel of
dandies and ennuyees . . . who flood us with their thin
sentiment of parlors, parasols, piano songs, tinkling
rhymes . . . or whimpering and crying about something,
chasing one aborted conceit after another, and forever oc-
cupied in dyspeptic amours with dyspeptic women."¹⁴ Frost,
of course, rather than abandoning conventional form, rhyme
and meter, instead accommodated them subtly to American
experience. Nevertheless, he too objects to "tinkling
rhymes," though on more technical grounds than Whitman:

I am possibly the only person going who works on any but a worn out theory (principle I had better say) of versification. You see the great successes in recent poetry have been made on the assumption that the music of words was a matter of harmonised vowels and consonants. Both Swinburne and Tennyson arrived largely at effects in assonation. But they were on the wrong track or at any rate on a short track. Any one else who goes that way must go after them.¹⁵

In different ways, then, both Frost and Whitman wished to "make" a new, concrete, primarily aural poetry that was wholly American in its intonations and rhythms. Significantly, their ambition is rooted in their wish to realize Emersonian factual experience. In the same passage where he castigates the "dandies and ennuyees," Whitman wonders why "we see no fresh local courage, sanity, of our own . . . real mental and physical facts . . . in the body of our literature." F. O. Matthiessen elaborates on this idea of fact and language admirably in his discussion of Whitman's diction:

He understood that language was not "an abstract construction" made by the learned, but that it has arisen out of the work and needs, the joys and struggles and desires of long generations of humanity, and that it has "its bases broad and low, close to the ground." Words were not arbitrary inventions, but the product of human events and customs, the progeny of folkways. Consequently, he believed that the fresh opportunities for the English tongue in America were immense, offering themselves in the whole range of American facts. His poems, by cleaving to these facts, could

thereby release "new potentialities" of expression for our native character. When he started to develop his conviction that "a perfect user of words uses things," and to mention some of the things, he unconsciously dilated into the loose beats of his poetry: "they exude in power and beauty from him--miracles from his hands--miracles from his mouth . . . things, whirled like chain-shot rocks, defiance, compulsion, houses, iron, locomotives, the oak, the pine, the keen eye, the hairy breast . . . "

He there reveals the joy of the child or the primitive poet just in naming things. . . . Whitman's excitement carries weight because he realizes that a man cannot use words so unless he has experienced the facts that they express, unless he has grasped them with his senses. This kind of realization was generally obscured in the nineteenth century, partly by its tendency to divorce education of the mind from the body and to treat language as something to be learned from a dictionary.¹⁶

Obviously, both poets were in reaction from such "learned" constrictions. Interestingly enough, however, the poets' mutual rebellion against a prettified "special language" is also one of several places where the two part company. Though Frost's language likewise has its impetus in the spoken word and remains "close to the ground" in its scrutiny of "the whole range of American facts," the way in which it "cleaves" to those facts is distinctly different from Whitman's. It is a distinction, moreover, that is apparent even in relatively minor poems. "Clear and Colder," for example, creates the fact of New England autumn in such a way that we can almost feel the atmosphere. Frost

evokes a sense of place more precisely than would Whitman in his loosely mystical vision of America, even as the voice in this poem, strained through form and meter, shapes itself into a "talk-song" instead of a chant:

Wind, the season-climate mixer,
In my Witches' Weather Primer
Says, to make this Fall Elixer
First you let the summer simmer,
Using neither spoon nor skimmer,

Till about the right consistence.
(This like fate by stars is reckoned,
None remaining in existence
Under magnitude the second.)

Then take some leftover winter
Far to north of the St. Lawrence.
Leaves to strip and branches splinter,
Bring on wind. Bring rain in torrents--
Colder than the season warrants.

Dash it with some snow for powder.
If this seems like witchcraft rather,
If this seems a witches' chowder
(All my eye and Cotton Mather!),

Wait and watch the liquor settle.
I could stand whole dayfuls of it.
Wind she brews a heady kettle.
Human beings love it--love it.
Gods above are not above it.

Paradoxically, Frost makes both clarity and coldness almost palpable through a precise use of generalized language ("rain," "leaves," "branches," "wind," etc.). To a great extent the precision is articulated through the poem's compactness of form. The driving force of the trochaic

meter and the closeness of the rhyme do not allow the starkness of the abstract, unadorned images to fade, and the concept of seasonal change is left implicit in "summer" and "winter"--but these words are sharply juxtaposed in the poem, psychologically if not spatially. Not surprisingly, when Whitman strives for such directness he goes about things quite differently. The longer lines and the looser beats of his poetry accommodate not only a continual contrast between a transcendental and an earthly vision, but also make possible a more adjectival description of the "things" he names directly:

. . . And I know that the hand of God is the
 promise of my own, . . .
And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in
 the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones,
elder, mullein and pokeweed.¹⁷

Frost's tightness of form serves to heighten his diction in another way. Through rhyme he is able, not only to make us unconsciously pay closer attention to key words, but also to bring out the root meanings of those words. The most notable example occurs in the first stanza, where "mixer" and "Elixir" are brought into two kinds of close proximity; the rhyme scheme brings the words within a line of each other, and the rhyme itself duplicates their sound. "Elixir"

is indeed a "mixer": emanating from the Greek xerion, meaning "dessicative powder"; and from xeros, meaning "dry,"¹⁸ elixir in its middle English, alchemical sense of course means the preparation or substance capable of changing metals into gold. In its other senses the word means "a prolonger of life; a cure-all" and "the sweetened liquid (with alcohol) used as a vehicle for medicinal agents." All these meanings are implicit in the poem, from Frost's reference to the dry, powdery snow of New England's winters to his mention of "liquor"--itself a pun--in the final stanza. Much the same thing happens with "summer," "simmer" and "skimmer," where, enhanced by the sibilance, the meanings of the second two words are transferred to the season, and we see how "to stew gently below or just at the boiling point" and "to clear (a liquid) of scum or floating surface (i.e., boiling syrup)" respectively become the fact of "summer" itself, turning into autumn. "Simmer" also incorporates "fermentation" as one of its meanings, and thus alludes to seasonal, profoundly New England activities: the making of beer and wine, as well as jams, jellies and syrup. It is in fact this activity, implicit in the poem's "recipe" for autumn/winter, that makes "Clear and Colder" so regional a poem--"regional" in its non-pejorative sense of relating to or being characteristic of a "region," a word which is

itself defined as "a sphere of activity or interest." Frost's realization of a localized climate and human activity through analogy, moreover, is a use of language that Emerson would have understood and approved of. Calling man an "analogist" who "studies relations in all objects," Emerson reveals what is poetic in such a practice: " . . . neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man. All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren, like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life."¹⁹

Finally, Frost's poem is American on a more superficial level. There is a deft regional touch in his evocation of New England's Puritan history--including its Salem witch trials--through the single allusion to Cotton Mather. Furthermore, the impression of witchery and magic is enhanced by even the most Yankee of words, "chowder"--it stems from the late Latin caldaria, from which "caldron" also comes. The poem's catalectic/trochaic tetrameter is a time-honored device for evoking an incantory atmosphere, the most familiar example being the Weird Sisters' "Double, double, toil and trouble" from Macbeth. Also, through his constant allusion to Halloween, Frost reminds us that late October is indeed the time when this magical change in the weather occurs. In a passage from his recent novel, October Light, John

Gardner echoes this idea. In an attempt to dramatize "that sudden contraction of daylight in October," he describes the phenomenon as something "obscurely magical, a sign of elves working." Gardner's efforts to verbally distill the seasonal change also demonstrate the difference between poetry and poetic prose:

It began as a suspension of time altogether. . . Rudyard Kipling saw it in Brattleboro, in 1895, and wrote: "There the seasons stopped awhile. Autumn was gone. Winter was not. We had Time dealt out to us--more clear, fresh Time--grace-days to enjoy." There'd be nothing to do but chores, load pigs for butchering, chop firewood, or walk through the dry, crisp leaves of a canted wood hunting deer. The air in the cowbarn would be clear and cold, but when you bent down between them for the milking, the cows would be as warm and comforting as stoves. Sometimes an Indian summer would break up the locking, sometimes not; but whatever the appearances, the ground was hardening; every now and then a loud crack would ring out, some oak tree closing down all business for the season. If it was warm and mild on Monday afternoon, Tuesday morning might be twenty degrees, and you'd find the water in the pig-trough frozen solid. By Thanksgiving the locking would be irreversible: the ground would be frozen, not to thaw again till spring. When the first good snow came, maybe three feet of it, maybe six, they'd call it winter.²⁰

Description like this, though accurate and effective, takes considerable pains and space in establishing its verisimilitude. But Frost creates much the same effect without such detail. His precise use of language in "Clear and Colder"

belies the poem's oblique quality, the impression we have that the dry, cold atmosphere emanates from somewhere between the lines.

Indeed, this kind of indirectness is particularly characteristic of poetry, even poetry that is most factual or unobscure. As Emerson observes, our language is innately metaphorical;²¹ hence the "piquancy," as he would put it, of Gardner's passage. Poetry, however, because it is "simply made of metaphor," resonates even more than prose the nuances born of un- or understated comparison. In spite of the journalistic flavor of so much of Song of Myself, Whitman's diction hints at all manner of things far beyond the range of point-blank observation. Nor is this effect invariably of a transcendental order:

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly;
Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all
so lonesome.²²

The above passage is drenched, not in visionary experience, but in an unspoken "ulteriority," to use Frost's word; though Whitman achieves this effect in an associative manner quite different from Frost's.

As I have noted earlier, Whitman and Frost are both in agreement with Emerson as to the true source of language. Both adhere, in varying degrees to his three propositions

about language in Nature:

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of the spirit.²³

As I also said earlier, where Frost and Whitman begin to differ is in their conception of linguistic and poetic purpose. Walt, for all his reliance upon the spoken word, nevertheless emphasizes the mystical cast of his work in his pronouncement that "All words are spiritual--nothing is more spiritual than words."²⁴ Frost, on the other hand, is much more comfortable with the word made flesh. While certainly aware of the spiritual properties of language, he tends to concentrate on what words can "do" in the workaday world. For him, words not only originate from "brute throat noises"; they also, in the process of forging themselves into "deeds," create poetry. Closely allied with this experiential, even existential, conception of language is Frost's well-known remark that "Literature is a performance in words."²⁵ Perhaps no other statement indicates so clearly the divergence of the Frostian and the Whitmanian roads. Both men attempt to realize spiritual reality, an "innerness," in their poetry; but The Poetry of Robert Frost, much more than Leaves of Grass, is a

worldly performance. The relevatory tendencies in Frost's poetry, though real enough, are constantly muted by conjecture and qualification. Whitman, contradicting himself, containing multitudes, easily gravitates between the poles of Emerson's first and third propositions, shading soul into body and body into soul, and always maintaining that neither is greater than the other. Frost's poetry, obviously rooted in the first of Emerson's propositions, makes subtle advances toward, and commonsensical retreats from, the third. The characteristic double sense in his phrase "performance in words" exemplifies this crucial difference. Poetry, for Frost, is both a performance comprised of words, and a performance that is within the words themselves: a vital, inherent property of language closely related to its being the embodiment of sounds "living in the cave of the mouth."

Such a difference in the poets' conception of purpose naturally leads to a corresponding difference in practice. Though Frost would no doubt agree with Whitman that "a perfect user of words uses things," the way in which each man uses words is distinct from the other. Whitman, in his efforts to make body and soul tangible, devised a language characterized by a number of seemingly irreconcilable parts: the specific images existing cheek by jowl with

Frost's most transcendent poems are usually his most orthodox, and even in these he remains ultimately earthbound. In "Kitty Hawk" he gingerly approaches Emerson's contention that "Nature is the symbol of the spirit" from a Christian perspective:

Pulpiteers will censure
Our instinctive venture
Into what they call
The material
When we took that fall
From the apple tree.
But God's own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation.

.
Spirit enters flesh
And for all it's worth
Changes into earth
In birth after birth
Ever fresh and fresh.

(ll. 213-224; 246-250)

Yet several lines later he is paraphrasing Newton ("Nothing can go up / But it must come down"), and reminding us that "Earth is still our fate" (ll. 306-308). He then closes a section of the poem with a passage about counting and naming stars; it ends with a remark which seems almost intended for Walt, with his penchant for enumeration:

Some have preached and taught
All there was to thought
Was to master Nature
By some nomenclature.
But if not a law
'Twas an end foregone
Anything we saw
And thus fastened on
With an epithet,
We would see to yet--
We would want to touch,
Not to mention clutch..

(11. 321-332)

Eschewing Walt's kind of experimentation, Frost employs language in a more traditional way, discovering inner reality through word-plays and in contexts which bend the words back to their classical or literal meanings. Both Frost and Whitman are radical poets; but Frost is "radical" in the word's etymological sense of "relating to, or proceeding from, a root." In this respect, he has a closer kinship with another Transcendental writer, Thoreau. (Interestingly, Frost does not care for Thoreau's "conceited" style, even as he disparages Whitman's "bumptious" one.) Both Frost and the author of Walden are men of the soil, literarily and literally. Both are steeped in classical literature, and have a healthy respect for the written as well as the spoken word. Both have a knack for the pithy, even epigrammatical observation which often broadens into didactic pronouncement. However, what is most pertinent

here is that in their common veneration of the classics Thoreau and Frost seek to recover a classical purity of style, a genuineness of utterance, through precision in language. Each attempts to "make the word one with the thing" in a manner more traditionally radical than Whitman's. Consequently, neither betrays the instability that is so often evident in Whitman's diction. If neither gives the impression of sometimes "using a language not quite his own," as Mattiessen says of Whitman,²⁸ it is also true that Walt's kind of verbal excitement--an excitement that resides to a great extent in the very risks he takes--is an excitement not found in Walden or in North of Boston.

However, Thoreau and Frost undertake a considerable amount of risk in their language, although it is a risk different both in intent and quality from Whitman's; the "surface calm" of their work is deceptive. Theirs is the risk of "getting down to cases," and it goes hand in hand with their wish to return language to its origins, however mean they may be. The activity that their diction performs is not the less exciting for its being profound. In the passages which conclude his second chapter in Walden, "Where I lived, and What I Lived For," Thoreau demonstrates this "delving" principle of language at work:

God himself culminates in the present moment,
and will never be more divine in the lapse of

all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. . . .

Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature. . . . Let us rise early and fast, or break fast, gently and without perturbation; . . . determined to make a day of it. Why should we knock under and go with the stream? . . . Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe . . . till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake. . . . If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.²⁹

The above passage is also valuable in that it shows how Thoreau bridges the gap between Whitman and Frost. The deliberate but supple style, the fundamental tenor of the puns, the stubborn independence, the tough-mindedness of the final sentences--all of these are qualities readily apparent in Frost. Also very like Frost is Thoreau's later contention that "The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things."³⁰ However, Whitman, who generally distrusted such cleavage, would heartily agree with the Thoreau who says:

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born.³¹

Finally, for all his willingness to "stand right fronting and face to face to a fact," Thoreau is much more optimistic than Frost about what that fact will reveal. We see this optimism in his statement that "God himself culminates in the present moment." The control, even the timbre of the voice, are similar to Frost's; but the sentiment is Whitman's. Thoreau may in some ways be the most traditional of writers, but the confidence that he has in the sloughing off of "opinion, prejudice, tradition, delusion and appearance" is radical in Walt's sense of the word. Thoreau's is a confidence which rests ultimately in mystical, not empirical, assurance; in "Higher Laws" he hazards the guess that "the highest reality" consists of intangible "gains and values" which cannot be literally "appreciated."³² The thought occasions some of his most natural, beautiful utterance: "If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal,--that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have

momentary cause to bless yourself."³³ Frost is no more capable of this kind of belief than he is personally inclined toward making vatic pronouncements in his poetry. A poem which illustrates his decisive break with the Transcendental vision is "The Most of It":

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

There is mystery here, but little mysticism--at least of Thoreau's reassuring sort. Even where his vision is bleakest--in "Brute Neighbors," where the ant episode constitutes a microcosmic Iliad--Thoreau manages to find a human similitude in the natural activity he observes. In this poem, however, the buck is a "natural fact" which cannot be translated into human terms. At best, it seems indifferently different to the man's existence, even as its unsettling

emergence from the cliff's face seems not so much a "response" to his cries as a coincidental occurrence. Yet human beings, especially those who "cry out on life," demand "answers," and there is something awful and definitive in the buck's steady advance to the opposite bank. The sight of it "pouring like a waterfall" gives a typically Frostian twist to Thoreau's concept of a "drenching" reality that is constantly trembling on the brink of revelation. Behind the hard clarity of the buck's presence there is a density born of hard mystery, not mystical communion. However, Frost's diction, so similar to Thoreau's in its mixture of the classical and colloquial, rifts its way, as does Thoreau's, "into the secret of things." The question is where the secret lies.

To begin with, "The Most of It" abounds in word-play--puns, double meanings, deceptive contexts. These particular performances in the words create the sense of an elusive, ambiguous reality, which in turn permeates the poem--the completed "performance in words"--in a variety of ways. Ambiguity surfaces, for instance, in Frost's crossing a word's superlative sense with its cheapened value in a different context ("The Most of It"; " . . . and that was all"); it comes about through his punning upon the archaic meanings of words ("mocking echo," for example,

precisely "echoes" "copy speech"); it is realized in the tension of "counter-love," where Frost employs the complementary and the antagonistic senses of "counter" simultaneously. This last example, especially, calls our attention to the curious relationships that he is establishing among words like "response," "answer," "echo," "voice," "speech," "cry," "love," and (though unuttered, the word all but "cries out" itself) "song."³⁴ Even more than Whitman's singers, Frost's singers are solitary. This is especially the case here, where so much of the poem's power comes about through the pent-up longing implicit in the question that it raises: is the buck a "response" to the man's "cries?" If so, it is not the one he wished for or expected. The buck's wonderful, but vaguely menacing "embodiment" and disappearance may indeed be "counter-love"--a sign, not of nature's indifference to man, but of its hostility toward him. As in "Spring Pools" and "Once By the Pacific," the problem is one of perspective:

You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
The cliff in being backed by continent;
It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age,
Someone had better be prepared for rage.³⁵

Sublime indifference or sublime malignity--it is a characteristic choice between two unattractive alternatives,

with no clearcut indication of which is worse.

In a similar manner the central figure in "The Most of It" is literally between rocks and a hard place, and it is this tension wrung from paradox that informs the poem. On the one hand Frost's diction, performing in and enhanced by the syntax, fashions what appears to be the more negative choice: nature's indifference to human experience and, consequently, the meaninglessness of that experience. Frost subtly advances this idea by making the climax of the poem the second half of a vague equation. For all its grandeur, the buck is not seen solely for itself, but "as" something else--an "it" for which the antecedent is unclear until we trace the long third sentence back to its beginning in line nine. There we see that the pronoun refers both to "nothing" and to the entire line--a beautiful example of the literalism and the colloquialism in Frost's language merging seamlessly together. The effect is at once devastating and ambiguous. If we emphasize the literal quality of the language the buck becomes "nothing," a powerful non-response to the man's cries and a symbol of the meaninglessness inherent in the natural world; if we focus instead on the colloquial aspects of the line, the literal severity of "nothing" is mitigated, but only slightly. Frost underscores this latter impression through his skillful use of

conjunctions. "Unless it was . . ." promises that something will "come" from "nothing," after all; "But after a time . . ." and "Instead of proving human . . ." renege on that promise.

Frost, however, provides an alternative to "nothing" and meaninglessness. His Latinate diction not only emphasizes the original meanings of particular words but also infuses the modern context of the poem with a mythical quality which lends significance to the man's experience. Just what his experience actually "means," however, remains shrouded in mystery. The first line of the poem outlines the lonely perfection of the man's isolation. Interestingly, it is the Latinate "universe" (from universum, meaning "whole" or "entire")³⁶ coupled with the meaning of the prefix ("uni-" stems from unus, meaning "one" or "single")³⁷ that gives the line its succinctness, and the man's situation its poignancy. The next three Latinate words reinforce our sense of the man's plight, and at the same time they emphasize the efficacy--indeed, the necessity--of utterance. "Voice," of course, stems from vox, which is also akin to vocare ("to call"),³⁸ and to the Greek epos ("word, speech"); "cry" originates from quiritare, meaning "to cry out for help; to scream"; and "echo," a direct borrowing from the Greek and Latin, alludes to the Greek eché ("sound"),

and to the Latin vagire ("to wail"). These words indicate how the man's solitude impells him to speech, even if he speaks to no one in particular. His "crying out on life," an almost literal rendering of "quiritare," is a grand illustration of that impulse. There is magnificence as well as impracticality implicit in such utterance. Also, the man's cries constitute a kind of vocal gesturing which tells us something about the vital nature of the language that he is using.

There is more than a hint of Genesis here--the vastness of the "universe," Adam's sterile perfection before the creation of Eve. This impression is reinforced by the man's desire for "counter-love," for "someone else additional to him," as well as by the poem immediately following "The Most of It," the expressly Edenic "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same." Like the earlier phrase, "universe alone," "someone else additional to him" is not redundant when we consider the classical word and its meaning. The Latin additum means not only "to add in reckoning,"³⁹ but also "to bring to, to add to, to increase; to impart, bestow."⁴⁰ There is a sense in which the spectacle of the buck enhances, even if it does not clarify, the man's perception of reality. By the same token, the animal does seem like something "bestowed" on the human being for just that purpose--to

"impart" to him a vision, as Richard Poirier puts it, "of some fabulousness beyond domestication."⁴¹ There is something in the way the stag materializes from sound and rocks that makes it visionary, a truly "original response." Frost certainly intends for us to read "original" in its Latin sense of "beginning,"⁴² and is probably suggesting the related infinitive as well. Oriri means "to rise, become visible; to spring from, come forth,"⁴³ and it describes literally and impressionistically how the stag "comes" to the man, and how the man "comes" to see it. "Response" is more problematic. The word stems from respondere, meaning "to pledge, to answer to one's name, to appear";⁴⁴ but closely related is responsare, which means "to answer, echo; to withstand, defy."⁴⁵ Given the paradoxical context of the poem, both of these words seem to apply to the stag's emergence, and together they underscore one of the secondary meanings of "response" in the dictionary: "an oracular answer."⁴⁶

Intriguing too is the correspondence that Frost draws between the stag and the rocky environment from which it comes. First characterized as an "embodiment that crashed / In the cliff's talus," the buck seems to metamorphose from the rock itself, an impression that is only strengthened through the Latin word. Geologically, "talus" refers to

"a sloping mass of detrius lying at the base of a cliff . . . and consisting of material which has fallen from its face,"⁴⁷ and the context of the poem demands our taking this meaning into account. In its Latin sense "talus" means "ankle,"⁴⁸ and thus the metaphorical activity implicit in the geological definition becomes clearer. "Talus" imparts a rockiness to the stag's hooves, too, suggesting their hard texture as well as their shape and location on its legs.

The same sort of interchange occurs near the end of the poem, where the buck stumbles "through the rocks with horny tread." Frost's diction here is masterfully suggestive, both from a modern and from a classical standpoint. "Horny," of course, refers to the stag's antlers as well as its horn-covered hooves. Similarly, corneus--of which "horny" is the literal translation--means "consisting of, or resembling horn,"⁴⁹ while cornu means "horn, antler, excrecence on the head."⁵⁰ Not only are both meanings implicit in "horny," but Frost seems equally bent on blurring the images symbolized by that word with the stones. He achieves this effect in at least two ways. His first tactic is his simple juxtapositioning of "rocks" with "horny tread," which relates the stag's hooves directly to "the boulder-broken beach." His second method is etymologically more subtle, yet nonetheless valid--and, in its own way, daring. As

"horny" substances, antlers are distinguished from hooves as being "deciduous"--as being growths which fall, or are shed, from their source at the end of their development. "Deciduous" stems from decidere, which means, not surprisingly, "to fall down" or "to fall off." It is this sort of downward momentum which links the stag's antlers to the "detrius" which comprises the cliff's "talus." Frost, in effecting such a radical correspondence between natural facts, is also "conversing in figures," as Emerson puts it.⁵¹ It is this power to make factual reality so vividly coherent, a power inherent in the words themselves, which makes his language poetic.

By giving us moving rocks and animals which "answer" one's call, Frost has, in addition to Genesis, alluded to Orpheus, whose song moved rocks, changed the course of rivers, and induced wild beasts to follow him. Like Thoreau, Frost has made his diction yield up much of its original meaning, and he has restored to human experience something of the accumulated richness, the "innerness" of myth. However, the mythical patterns in "The Most of It" reassert themselves only in an ironical, coincidental fashion. Placed in a situation similar to Orpheus', the protagonist here is notable for the ineffectuality of his song. The genuineness of Frost's language is unassailable; but the

reality which it describes is very much the "diminished thing" of which "The Oven Bird" sings. "The Most of It" is "a far cry," indeed, from the transcendent realities of Walden Pond.

Yet there are times when Frost, for all his skepticism, joins (albeit fitfully) the visionary company of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. Appropriately, it is Thoreau's classicism which makes such a reunion possible. "A written word," Thoreau remarks in his chapter "Reading," "is the choicest of relics. It is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may . . . not be represented on canvas or marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself."⁵² "Breath of life," of course, is a literal translation of spiritus, a fact of which Thoreau was undoubtedly aware. The Latin word recalls not only Frost's affinity for "original" diction, and Whitman's declaration that "nothing is more spiritual than words"; it also unites the two poets in their mutual desire to create a poetry that would truly live in the mouths of men. Spiritus also gives a religious dimension to words and the impetus behind them, and Frost has as profound a belief as his Transcendentalist forebears in the origins and offices of language. Unlike the others, however, Frost's faith in language remains largely confined to the words themselves. He is much less apt than Thoreau,

Emerson, or especially Whitman to make extravagant claims for either poets or poetry; rather, he "affirms" the miraculous properties of language in a suggestive manner that we readily identify as "modern." It is in a poem like "Maple" that Frost seems least defensive about his ties to an idealistic literary tradition. Indeed, "Maple" is both a literal and a metaphorical restatement of the idea that "Nature is the symbol of the spirit."

Outwardly, the poem is a narrative of a girl named Maple whose efforts to discover the meaning of her unusual name are frustrated; inwardly, it is an awesome combination of motif and symbol. At the outset there is the mystery, the secrecy, surrounding the naming process itself. Frost's use of paranomasia makes us really listen to "Maple," and to try its strange savor on our tongues: "Her teacher's certainty it must be Mabel / Made Maple first take notice of her name. / She asked her father and he told her, 'Maple-- / Maple is right'" (ll. 1-4). Then Frost dramatizes Maple's birth into life and language:

" . . . you were named after a maple tree.
Your mother named you. You and she just saw
Each other in passing in the room upstairs,
One coming this way into life, and one
Going the other out of life--you know?
So you can't have much recollection of her.
She had been having a long look at you.
She put her finger in your cheek so hard
It must have made your dimple there, and said,

'Maple.' I said it too: 'Yes, for her name.'
She nodded. So we're sure there's no mistake.
I don't know what she wanted it to mean,
But it seems like some word she left to bid you
Be a good girl--be like a maple tree.
How like a maple tree's for us to guess."

(11. 9-23)

Such an explanation, set within the context of story, teller and hearer, satisfies the girl but not the woman. The narrator describes the father's performance as containing "dangerous self-arousing words to sow" (l. 29), and in the ensuing lines we soon see what he has in mind. With Maple's maturity comes the second of the poem's motifs, the necessity--and the problem--of meaning:

What he sowed with her slept so long a sleep,
And came so near death in the dark of years,
That when it woke and came to life again
The flower was different from the parent seed.
It came back vaguely at the glass one day,
As she stood saying her name over aloud,
Striking it gently across her lowered eyes
To make it go well with the way she looked.
What was it about her name? Its strangeness lay
In having too much meaning. Other names,
As Lesley, Carol, Irma, Marjorie,
Signified nothing. Rose could have a meaning,
But hadn't as it went. (She knew a Rose.)

(11. 36-48)

The "self-arousing words" that Maple's father "sows" within her, the fortuitous image/symbol of the seed, the delicacy of lines 40-43, the deft double allusion to Shakespeare⁵³--

all these touches sensitize us to the mystery that exists between word and symbol. They also aid the poem in its tendencies inward, to the spectacle that predates and occasions language.

"What's in a name," indeed, to give it such authority? This is what Maple sets out to discover, and in the process find her identity. Ironically, however, her search becomes increasingly superficial; she begins to look for herself, "as everyone / Looks for himself, more or less outwardly" (ll. 70-71). Maple ceases to wonder what it means to "be a good girl--be like a maple tree" in favor of wondering what her name asks "in dress or manner of the girl who bore it" (l. 53). The shift is subtle, but decisive. Disregarding her father's earlier advice to "guess," Maple tries to "know" in a less intuitive manner the significance implicit in his story. Maple's "passing" into adulthood constitutes a sort of fall into literal-mindedness, a change which proves disastrous when she stumbles upon a real clue to the mystery of her name. In her attempts to "form some notion of her mother-- / What she had thought was lovely, and what good" (ll. 54-55), Maple one day glances at the family Bible in her parents' bedroom, and finds

. . . for a bookmark in the Bible
A maple leaf she thought must have been laid
In wait for her there. She read every word

Of the two pages it was pressed between,
As if it was her mother speaking to her.
But forgot to put the leaf back in closing
And lost the place never to read again.
She was sure, though, there had been nothing in it.

(11. 62-69)

With the introduction of the Bible, the poem makes another involution. "Maple" is profoundly religious, and not just in an overtly Biblical sense. In a wonderful scene that recalls the opening of the poem, Maple's husband-to-be "divines" "without the name her personal mystery": "'Do you know you remind me of a tree-- / A maple tree'" (11. 93, 87-88)? Their ensuing journeys to her father's house become a "pilgrimage," their increasingly obsessive search for meaning a "quest." Yet it is a quest that is constantly thwarted by Maple's insistence upon a trivial kind of factuality; could there be, she wonders, "some special tree / She might have overlooked" (11. 100-101) which inspired her mother? They find no such tree. Again, it is Maple's husband who is closer to the mark:

"Your father feels us round him with our questing,
And holds us off unnecessarily,
As if he didn't know what little thing
Might lead us on to a discovery.
It was as personal as he could be
About the way he saw it was with you
To say your mother, had she lived, would be
As far again as from being born to bearing."

(11. 123-130)

What is most noticeable in his speech is the denseness of the syntax in the final lines; aided by the alliteration, it isolates the key words "be," "being," "born," and "bearing." At the same time, the syntax stresses the interdependence of these words in a poem filled with references to women bearing children, people "bearing" or "carrying" names, and words pregnant with meaning, which can themselves be "sown" like seeds. The syntax also creates a strange, vague sort of beauty when applied to Maple's mother: " . . . would be / As far again as from being born to bearing." This is not exactly an image, just as her mother, existing only in words and faded photographs, never quite materializes into being; yet both wield immense authority throughout the poem. The ultimate effect of the husband's syntax is cumulative, and emphasizes the qualitative aspects of symbols--the intuitive grasp we have of reality the moment before our language begins to formulate, and thus distance, what we see. It is just this fresh, almost wordless quality which makes "Be a good girl --be like a maple tree" so compelling, and the image so vital. In her obsession to "know," Maple has almost lost touch with this symbolic aspect of language.

Yet Maple, for all her prosaic tendencies, is not an utterly lost soul. While talking with her husband earlier

in the poem, she recalls the family Bible with its leaf-marked passage. She even remembers a key phrase from the passage--"Wave offering, / Something about wave offering, it said" (ll. 106-107)--but quickly dismisses it, presumably because she finds it meaningless. Actually, "wave offering" occurs several times in the Old Testament;⁵⁴ in each instance the context is that of the Hebrews offering burnt sacrifices to God. A typical passage is Exodus 29:26: "And thou shalt take the breast of the ram of Aaron's consecration, and wave it for a wave offering before the Lord: and it shall be thy part." "Wave offering" remains suggestively poetic--how the Hebrews are to wave is not stipulated, just as "how like a maple tree's for us to guess." Maple's cursory remembrance of the phrase is significant; she is not entirely oblivious to the visual power of images, nor to the subrational qualities of language.

As Maple's obsessive searching abates somewhat, the narrator observes that she and her husband cling "to what one had seen in the other / By inspiration. It proved there was something" (ll. 134-135). Frost's use of the Latinate word is tactful as it is strategic. Inspiraor means not only "to inspire," or, more literally, "to breathe into," but also "to rouse, inflame; to instil, implant,"⁵⁵ and Frost makes use of nearly every one of these

meanings during the course of the poem. It is certainly inspiration which aids them in intuitively selecting the right kind of symbol:

When they made her related to the maples,
It was the tree the autumn fire ran through
And swept of leathern leaves, but left the bark
Unscorched, unblackened, even, by any smoke.

(11. 139-142)

But it is their inability to believe in that symbol which constitutes the poem's climax:

Once they came on a maple in a glade
Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up,
And every leaf of foliage she'd worn
Laid scarlet and pale pink about her feet.
But its age kept them from considering this one.
Twenty-five years ago at Maple's naming
It hardly could have been a two-leaved seedling
The next cow might have licked up out at pasture.
Could it have been another maple like it?
They hovered for a moment near discovery,
Figurative enough to see the symbol,
But lacking faith in anything to mean
The same at different times to different people.
Perhaps a filial diffidence partly kept them
From thinking it could be a thing so bridal.

(11. 144-158)

It is here that all "Maple's" previous concerns--with names and naming, with meaning, with intrinsic reality, with religious import--coalesce into pure symbol as the poem makes one final turn inward. If Maple and her husband fail to achieve epiphany, the poem does not fail to achieve it-

self. As Reuben Brower observes, poets, even philosophical poets like Frost, think in images, not verbal formulas.⁵⁶

So, too, Emerson attests to the cohesion between symbol and diction and shows its moral significance:

A man's power to connect his thought with its proper symbol, and so to utter it, depends on the simplicity of his character, that is, upon his love of truth, and his desire to communicate it without loss. . . .

Wise men pierce . . . rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things; so that picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it, is a man in alliance with truth and God.⁵⁷

The word becomes one with the thing, and meaning--at least the kind that Maple demands--is unnecessary.

However, the pure moment in Frost's poetry is just that--momentary. The narrator no sooner shifts his attention back to the couple than his tone changes, a sardonic regret overtaking the wonder in his voice: " . . . anyway it came too late for Maple. / She used her hands to cover up her eyes" (ll. 159-160). The poem concludes with a performance as deftly ironic as one finds anywhere in Frost:

Thus had a name with meaning, given in death,
Made a girl's marriage, and ruled in her life.
No matter that the meaning was not clear.
A name with meaning could bring up a child,
Taking the child out of the parents' hands.
Better a meaningless name, I should say,
As leaving more to nature and happy chance.
Name children some names and see what you do.

(ll. 163-170)

We recognize in the final line the colloquial imperative that is one of Frost's favorite devices for making ambiguity palatable. But there is another, less defensive sanction for such a line. It enables Frost to affirm the power inherent in words--and not invariably at the expense of the people who speak those words. Admittedly, this is the case in "Maple," but then Maple fails in her inability to believe in the symbol that is her name, fails to follow in the inward direction that her name points her. "Name children some names and see what you do" is as much a challenge to us as makers and users of language as it is a discrepancy between the surety of performance in words and the uncertainty of performance in ourselves.

"Performance" and "belief" are more than important words for Frost: to him they are synonymous. We see this time and again in his metaphors for poetry. Not only is poetry a "performance in words" and "words that have become deeds"; it is also an activity in language that tends toward a "commitment" to something greater than itself, as we see in this passage from "The Constant Symbol":

Every single poem written regular is a symbol
small or great of the way the will has to pitch
into commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded
conclusion and then be judged for whether any
original intention it had has been strongly
spent or weakly lost; . . . Every poem is an
epitome of the great predicament; a figure of
the will braving alien entanglements.⁵⁸

Elsewhere, Frost makes a distinction between poems that are written "with cunning and device, and the kind that are believed into existence, that begin in something more felt than known."⁵⁹ Belief is active, performance creative. Words commit themselves to the entity that is the poem; and a poem's "doing" something invariably results in its "becoming" something--it "makes" a "figure." The virtue of poetic performance lies in its very gratuitousness, in its lack of calculation. It is here, in Frost's existential commitment to "deeds" and "doing" in poetry, that he comes closest to Whitman's kind of transcendence:

We play the words as we find them. We make them do. Form in language is such a disjected lot of old broken pieces it seems almost as nonexistent as the spirit till the two embrace in the sky. They are not to be thought of as encountering in rivalry but in creation. No judgment on either alone counts. We see what Whitman's extravagance⁶⁰ may have meant when he said the body was the soul.

It is this kind of performance, with all its attendant risks, that we are challenged by Frost to emulate. Love is "a relationship of two that is going to be believed into fulfillment"; the belief in God, "a relationship you enter into with Him to bring about the future."⁶¹ It is the performance that counts; one acts "as if." In Henry James's "The Middle Years," Dencombe affirms this idea in his valedictory speech: "We work in the dark--we do what we

can--we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and
our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art."⁶²
For Dencombe as well as for Frost, strongly spent is
synonymous with kept.

Notes

¹Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose, eds. Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrance Thompson (New York, 1972), pp. 298-299.

²Ibid., p. 299.

³F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York, 1941), p. 523.

⁴Ibid., p. 520.

⁵Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston, 1959), p. 48. Hereafter all direct quotations from Whitman's work will be taken from this source, and noted by title and page number.

⁶Ibid., "For You O Democracy," p. 87.

⁷Ibid., "Song of Myself," p. 27.

⁸Ibid., "Song of the Exposition," p. 144.

⁹Robert Frost, "I Will Sing You One-O," The Poetry of Robert Frost (New York, 1969), p. 219.

¹⁰Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Language," from Nature in The American Tradition in Literature, eds. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long, 3rd ed., Norton (New York, 1967), I, 1078. Hereafter all direct quotations and references to Emerson's work will be taken from this source.

¹¹Lathem and Thompson, Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose, p. 257.

¹²Whitman, "Song of the Banner at Daybreak," p. 204.

¹³Lathem and Thompson, p. 256.

- ¹⁴Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," p. 488.
- ¹⁵Lathem and Thompson, p. 250.
- ¹⁶Matthiessen, American Renaissance, pp. 517-18.
- ¹⁷Whitman, "Song of Myself," p. 28.
- ¹⁸Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass., 1970), p. 268. Unless otherwise noted, all further direct quotations concerning etymology will be taken from this source.
- ¹⁹Emerson, Nature, p. 1074.
- ²⁰John Gardner, October Light (New York, 1977), pp. 121-22.
- ²¹Emerson, p. 1075.
- ²²Whitman, "Song of Myself," p. 31.
- ²³Emerson, p. 1073.
- ²⁴Matthiessen, p. 521.
- ²⁵Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York, 1958), p. 45.
- ²⁶Whitman, "Song of Myself," p. 68.
- ²⁷Matthiessen, p. 531.
- ²⁸Ibid.
- ²⁹Henry David Thoreau, Walden, ed. Owen Thomas (New York, 1966), pp. 65-66.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 66.
- ³¹Ibid.
- ³²Ibid., p. 144.
- ³³Ibid.
- ³⁴The poem following "The Most of It" in both The Poetry of Robert Frost and in the volume in which both

poems initially appeared, A Witness Tree (1942), is "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same." It is expressly concerned with "voice" and "song": ". . . the birds there in all the garden round / From having heard the daylong voice of Eve / Had added to their own an oversound, / Her tone of meaning but without the words. / Admittedly an eloquence so soft / Could only have had an influence on birds / When call or laughter carried it aloft" (ll. 2-8).

³⁵Frost, "Once By the Pacific," p. 250.

³⁶Langenscheidt's Latin-English Dictionary, ed. S. A. Handford (New York, 1961), p. 333.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid., p. 26.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Richard Poirier, Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing (New York, 1977), p. 165.

⁴²Langenscheidt's Latin-English Dictionary, p. 223.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 280-81.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 281.

⁴⁶The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd ed., ed. C. I. Onions (London, 1970), p. 1718.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 2128.

⁴⁸Langenscheidt's Latin-English Dictionary, p. 317.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 90.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Emerson, p. 1075.

⁵²Thoreau, Walden, p. 69.

⁵³Frost's allusion to Romeo's famous speech in Romeo and Juliet, II, ii, is fairly obvious. Not quite so apparent is "Signified nothing" at the beginning of line 47. It alludes, of course, to the conclusion of Macbeth's "Tomorrow and tomorrow" soliloquy: ". . . it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing." Frost daringly begins his line with the same phrase, and uses the allusion to cast a darkening light on the "story" that Maple's father tells at the outset of the poem.

⁵⁴There are twelve places, to be precise: Exodus 29:26; Numbers 6:20 and 18:11; and Leviticus 7:30, 8:27, 8:29, 9:21, 10:15, 14:12, 14:24, 23:15, and 23:20.

⁵⁵Langenscheidt's Latin-English Dictionary, p. 173.

⁵⁶Reuben Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York, 1963), p. 135.

⁵⁷Emerson, Nature, pp. 1075, 1076.

⁵⁸Lathem and Thompson, p. 401.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 339.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 404.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 338-39.

⁶²Henry James, Henry James, ed. Lyon N. Richardson (U. of Illinois Press, 1966), p. 378.

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