

Foundations of American Literature

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The Twentieth Century

(Part Five)

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THE MASQUES OF ROBERT FROST

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A Masque of Mercy

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The *mercy* of God has been defined¹ as:

Forebearance from inflicting harm, especially in the way of punishment, under provocation, when one has the power to inflict it; compassionate treatment of an offender or adversary; clemency.

“Examples of justice must be made for terror to some;
examples of *mercy* for comfort to others.” *Bacon*.

A merciful act, as of God; a blessing regarded as a manifestation of compassion or favor.

“The Father of *mercies* and the God of all comfort.”²

Of the very closely related term *grace*, Webster³ says:

The favor shown by Providence.

Graciousness shown by God to man; especially divine favor unmerited by man; the mercy of God as distinguished from His justice.

“And over wrath *grace* shall abound.” *Milton*.

Grace is the operation of divine love, especially as manifested in God's taking the initiative toward reconciliation with man and His forgiveness of the repentant sinner.

“The soul whose sight all-quickenning *grace* renews.” *Cowper*.

We may therefore safely affirm, without fear of contradiction, that God's mercy

1 According to *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, Second Edition (Unabridged), 1951, p. 1539.

2 2 Corinthians 1. 3.

3 Webster, op. cit., p. 1084.

and grace are totally and absolutely *undeserved* acts of favor on the part of the Creator toward man the creature. In view of this fact, Frost's second masque, *A Masque of Mercy*,¹ takes on an aura of wonder as he deals with these attributes of the Creator. The author's purpose in this paper, as concluding comments on the life and works of Robert Frost, is to consider highlights from his final masque in light of the above.

It is not surprising that Frost chose to finalize his work by publishing the two masques.² Both are descriptive of what he himself had experienced in rough and tumble fashion throughout life. The various characters of each masque take on a sometimes subtle (and sometimes not so subtle!) revelation of Frost's own alter ego. And the overriding theme in each reinforces certain critical observation to the effect that the mature Frost spoke out with increasing frequency during the closing years of life on what he considered to be the supreme issues of man's existence.

Frost seems to have become rather put out by those who fail (or refuse!) to acknowledge that the salvation of God springs totally and absolutely from His grace and mercy alone—*plus nothing!* In a letter to Roy and Alma Elliott, dictated by Frost and transcribed by Mrs. Robert Morrison's daughter³ on the day preceding his death,⁴ he expressed it thus:

I'm mighty glad you like this poem for Christmas. Why will the quidnuncs⁵ always be hoping for a salvation man will never have from anyone but God? I was just saying today how Christ posed Himself the whole problem and died for it. How can we be just in a world that needs mercy and merciful in a world that needs justice?⁶

Hence, we see that the stage for Frost's frequent return to the theme "justice versus mercy" was set early in life,⁷ ultimately dramatized in the two masques, and borne along to the very gates of death. Thompson suggests that the masques, especially *Mercy*, reflect theological notions he might have derived in part from Milton's *Paradise Lost*.⁸

OPPOSING PAIRS ORDAINED

From the following it should be obvious that Frost's philosophical delight in opposites stemmed from and was firmly built upon the foundation "either...or," where all fundamental oppositions are viewed as extensions of the warfare between God and the devil:

1 Hereafter referred to as *Mercy*, except when quoting other writers.

2 *A Masque of Reason* was published in 1945, close on the heels of which followed *Mercy* in 1947.

3 Anne Morrison Gentry.

4 January 27, 1963.

5 Hardly a term of the most endearing affection.

6 Lawrence Thompson and R. H. Winnick, *Robert Frost: The Later Years*, p. 344.

7 See Lawrence Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years*, pp. 11 ff.

8 Lawrence Thomson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph*, p. 656.

I don't know what makes this so nettling unless it is that it ignores so superciliously the strain we may have been under for years trying to decide between God and the Devil, between the rich and the poor (the greed of the one and the greed of the other), between keeping still about our troubles and enlarging on them to the doctor and—between endless other things in pairs ordained to everlasting opposition.¹

Stanlis shares this enlightening comment :

Frost once remarked that "the most American trait is Americanness,"² which even in its playful wit suggests that impoverished shrewdness and conscious Yankee humor provided the poet with a regional-universal perspective toward life most appropriate for dealing with unreconciled oppositions, for double-edged dramatic ironies, for saying the whole of a theme in terms of a part contained in an image, for harmonizing the eternal "two-endedness of things," such as the conflicting claims of justice and mercy.³

THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

The theological and philosophical foundation on which Frost's *Mercy* is based undoubtedly originated in his "pairs of opposites" theme.⁴ His conservative attitude caused him to argue politics often with his liberal friend, Wilbert Snow. Snow, in his essay entitled "The Robert Frost I Knew,"⁵ provides us with context for an understanding of *Mercy's* background :

The entire problem of justice versus mercy intrigued him. In the 1930's he sat up until well past midnight many times in our home denouncing mercy and lauding justice. My wife and I pled the cause of mercy and pointed out the mercies which filled the pages of the New Testament. He retorted that he was an "Old Testament Christian" who feared the softening effects of mercy. Justice as laid down in Deuteronomy delighted him and once when he was coming to our house he wrote ahead and warned me to read Deuteronomy before he arrived. His case against the New Deal⁶ was that it was putting mercy too much above justice, and was in danger of wrecking all we have achieved in our American experiment.⁷

1 Thompson, op. cit., p. 413.

2 A conversation between Robert Frost and a group of students at Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, July 1962.

3 Peter J. Stanlis in *Frost: Centennial Essays*, p. 442.

4 As used also in his incomplete poem, "Tendencies Cancel" (Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., p. 388), where he seems to have been trying to explain the paired forces of nature in terms of an essential dualism under the control of the great One: *God*. The idea of the universe being composed of counterbalancing forces was a favorite with Frost, who repeatedly expressed his conviction that all fundamental opposites are but extensions of the warfare between God and the Devil. (Ibid., p. 393) "Everything has its opposite to furnish it with opposition." (Ibid., p. 99)

5 Wilbert Snow, "The Robert Frost I Knew." *The Texas Quarterly*, Vol. XI, No. 3, Autumn 1968, pp. 33-4.

6 The Roosevelt Administration.

7 Thompson, op. cit., p. 656.

The letter referred to by Snow in the preceding quotation contained Frost's interpretation of Milton's famous passage in *Paradise Lost*¹ on the same subject :

January 1938

Dear Bill,

Use your brains a moment while we brush up on your vocabulary. You simply must not quibble in a serious matter like a win-at-any-cost public debater. Don't pretend you don't know what Milton meant when he said mercy was always first. You know your Milton and your Puritanism. He used it in the sense of first aid to what? To the deserving? No, to the totally depraved and undeserving. That's what we are and have been since the day Eve ate the rotten apple... "In Adam's fall We sinned all,"² Mercy ensued. There could be nothing for us but mercy first and last and all the time from the point of the religious pessimist... There is the presupposition of a whole setup of sin, failure, judgment, and condemnation. Mercy comes in rather late to prevent execution—sometimes only to delay it. It is too easy to understand Milton. He faced and liked the harshness of our trial. He was no mere New Testament saphead. (I should like to think Christ was none; but have Him your own way for the time being. You'd better read up on your Deuteronomy before I see you again.) Milton loved Cromwell for his Ironsides and Michael for licking the Devil. He had a human weakness for success; he wanted the right to prevail and was fairly sure he knew what right was. With certain limits he believed in the rewards of merit. But after all was said for the best of us he was willing to admit before God our whole enterprise from the day we put on fig leaves and went to work had been no better than pitiful.

I'm like that...

Illogical kindness—that is mercy. Only those are likely to act on it who know what it is in all its subordination. It was just and logical that a man's body should be taken in slavery when he went beyond his depth in debt. It was illogical that his creditor couldn't take him in slavery and the state should take him merely as a prisoner. It was another step in illogic when it was decided his person should never again be taken at all. Another when it was decided that he shouldn't be reduced by the sheriff below a certain amount of personal property. At every step there were warnings from the conservative that character would be demoralized by the relaxation of strict logical justice. People would go in debt on purpose it was feared to abuse the rich and thrifty. We are now in our lifetime seeing a great next step taken in this long story of debt—and it will be something if it is all that comes of your New Deal. It is going to be settled once for all that no man's folly or bad luck can ever [again] reduce him to no income at all. A chicken is hatched with enough yolk

1 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book III, lines 80 through 134, from which is taken :

...in Mercy and Justice both,
Through Heav'n and Earth, so shall my glorie excel,
But Mercy first and last shall brightest shine.

2 First couplet from the New England Primer used in colonial American education. (See "Foundations of American Education," *Culture and Language*, March 1979, p. 10)

in its guts to last it several days. Henceforth not only the rich but everybody born is to be sure of at least a few dollars a week as long as he lives. Never more quite down to the quick. That is in America—and while we can afford it. We are all going to fetch in and make that come true. But don't call that social justice. Keep your words in their places. It is illogical kindness. It is mercy. And you and the Lord have mercy on my argument.

Ever yours,
Robert Frost

MAN'S RELATIONSHIP AND DUTY TO HIS CREATOR

That the existence of God to Frost was a present reality and not merely an ephemeral theory need hardly be argued. At the same time, his utterances and works bear out the fact that Frost's relationship with the Supreme Being was usually to be found in a state of uncertain anxiety.

Two fears should follow us through life. There is the fear that we shan't prove worthy in ourselves. That is the fear of God. And there is the fear of man: the fear that men won't understand us and we shall be cut off from them.¹

Although Frost was far from orthodox on the latter, he was dead center on the former, as witness the Scriptures:

The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the LORD shall be safe.²

Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.³

On the duty of man toward his Creator, Frost expresses the following:

Another one: "a jealous God."... What is jealousy?⁴ It's the claim of the object on the lover. The claim of God is that you should be true to Him, and so true to yourself... One might forget God, [but] I can't imagine any honest man without the fear of finding himself unworthy in the sight of someone else.⁵

It has been strongly suggested that words such as these (above) from the pen of Frost reveal the unmistakable influence of John Calvin:

Thus a sense of our ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, depravity, and corruption, leads us to perceive and acknowledge that in the Lord alone are to be found true wisdom, solid strength, perfect goodness, and unspotted righteousness: and so, by our imperfections, we are excited to

1 Thompson, op. cit., p. 420.

2 Proverbs 29. 25.

3 Ecclesiastes 12. 13.

4 See footnote 5, p. 33. This concept is in keeping with orthodox Biblical thought as witness Exodus 20. 5, 34. 14, Deuteronomy 4. 25, 5. 9, Joshua 24. 19, etc.

5 Thompson, op. cit., p. 483.

a consideration of the perfections of God. Nor can we really aspire toward Him, till we have begun to be displeased with ourselves.¹

SEARCH FOR TRUTH

Thompson and Winnick make plain the following salient points in clarification of the foregoing :

Robert Frost's search for truth was constant and unwavering. He believed that the source of all truth is God, and the passion of his life was to discover more truth. This led him not only to read the Bible but to study it constantly, to meditate upon it, to "inwardly ingest it." He knew the Bible as few—even the professionally trained ministers—do. At home or away, he was never without this Book while he lived, and because he worked hard, and reflected deeply, reading it was for him an adventure leading to always new discovery.

Yet he never felt it was possible to gain more than a very partial knowledge of the whole truth. "There is such a thing," he said, "as not being old enough to understand." He realized that "My thoughts are not your thoughts."² He realized the value of "the mystery withheld from us." He sought for more light but even when it seemed dim, he bravely went forward determined to [use] what light he had. He accepted having to "see through a glass darkly."³ On a visit to the President's house at Kenyon College he sat up until about two o'clock in the morning discussing religion. When he finally started to bed, he stopped half-way up the stairs, thought for a few moments, then turned to his hostess and said, "Well, at least you [ought] to live so's if there isn't Anything, it will be an awful shame." He knew every man could start here even though he could find no other secure foundation, and many a lost person has been thankful for this place to begin.

It was during this same visit, I think, that Mr. Frost was walking in the night with his close friend Gordon Chalmers. He suddenly stopped, as he often did when he wanted to think hard about something important, and then he said to President Chalmers, "He's up there all right." He didn't need theological terms to express his conviction that God is. This strong conviction that God is, and that he was dependent upon God, and must be true to Him, were really at the heart of Robert Frost's faith. He once said to Mrs. Chalmers: "The only fear I have is that I won't be true, every minute." As part of the 125th anniversary celebration at Mt. Holyoke, Mr. Frost had an evening at the college. In his address he

1 John Calvin, *A Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 4.

2 An excerpt from the well-known Isaiah 55. 6-9: "Seek ye the LORD while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

3 A reference to 1 Corinthians 13. 12.

reported what was evidently much on his mind since he said the same thing on a number of occasions and in speaking with several individuals. He gave what he called "the greatest prayer": "May my sacrifice be acceptable in Thy sight." Then he added: "That's your life, your poem, your everything."¹

Frost's philosophy as expressed in the foregoing is exactly what he had lived all along. Apprehension in connection with what seemed to be this basic motivating force took embodiment through Paul's climactic speech in *Mercy*:

The fear that you're afraid with is the fear
Of God's decision lastly on your deeds.
That is the Fear of God whereof 'tis written.

*

We have to stay afraid deep in our souls
Our sacrifice—the best we have to offer,
And not our worst nor second best, our best,
Our very best, our lives laid down like Jonah's,
Our lives laid down in war and peace—may not
Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight.
And that they may be is the only prayer
Worth praying. May my sacrifice
Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight.²

Stanlis says :

Because of the uncertainty of God's ultimate justice or mercy man is compelled throughout his life "to stay afraid" deep in his soul, a fear that goes beyond the necessary elemental pagan virtue of courage. As a basis for humility and maximum effort in an absolute commitment to life, this passage is in essence Christian and Hebraic, and reconciles the justice of the Old Testament with the mercy of the New Testament. In the masque this reconciliation is summarized in the final line, spoken by Keeper: "Nothing can make injustice just but mercy." The religious orthodoxy at the end of *A Masque of Mercy* is at once more subtle and more obvious than in *A Masque of Reason*; more subtle because of Frost's originality in what God's mercy means, and more obvious because the theme of the masque is more congenial to modern man's New Testament emphasis upon a God of love. Yet both masques make the same stress on the limitations of man's knowledge regarding God's ultimate purposes, and the need for implicit faith in God.³

MORAL DILEMMA

God's mercy raises a serious moral problem, however. His ultimate forgiveness

1 Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., pp. 443-4.

2 Edward Connery Lathem, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, p. 520.

3 Stanlis, op. cit., pp. 464-5.

of wicked men is as great a mystery as His temporal afflictions sometimes laid upon the innocent. How can God be just, and at the same time justifier of the unjust? Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, and as God's mouthpiece, solves the dilemma for us :

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God ; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus : whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare *His righteousness* [emphasis added] for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God ; to declare, I say, at this time His righteousness : that He [God] might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.¹

Once in the history of mankind—*and once only*—has this matter ever been taken care of to the complete satisfaction of the righteousness of Almighty God. His wrath against us² was placated *only* by the sacrificial death of His own sinless Son (Jesus)³ for the sins of mankind. It is *only* at the Cross of Christ that "Mercy and Truth are met together ; righteousness and peace have kissed each other."⁴

Thus we understand that destiny lies in decision,⁵ not in guesswork about the supposed coquettish whims and fancies of the Almighty !

Shortly after the completion of *Mercy*, Frost penned the following in a letter to G. R. Elliott,⁶ revealing a central motif for both masques, his "New England Bibliicals"—

...My fear of God has settled down into a deep inward fear that my best offering may not prove acceptable in His sight. My approach to the New Testament is rather through Jerusalem than through Rome and Canterbury.⁷

This passage is a perfect transition from Frost's exploration of Old Testament justice in *A Masque of Reason*, to the other side of the same theological coin—the claims of New Testament mercy as set forth in his masterpiece on the same subject.

Six years after the publication of *Mercy*, Frost wrote to Rabbi Victor Reichert,⁸ asking for information as to the exact location of the precise Biblical passage that had provided him inspiration for this classic :

Do you want to tell me where in the Bible if at all the idea occurs as a prayer that our sacrifice whether of ourselves or our property may be acceptable in His sight? Have I been making this up out of nothing?

1 Romans 3. 23-6.

2 "God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day." (Psalm 7. 11)

3 "And ye know that He was manifested to take away our sins; *and in Him is no sin.*" (1 John 3. 5)

4 Psalm 85. 10.

5 "He that hath [chosen] the Son [Christ] hath life; and he that hath not [chosen] the Son of God hath not life." (1 John 3. 5)

6 April 22, 1947.

7 Stanlis, op. cit., p. 459.

8 In a letter dated November 5, 1953.

You know how I am about chapter and verse—somewhat irresponsible some would say. I went wielding the phrase *culpa felix* to my own purpose for a long time before I pinned myself down to what it may originally have meant in Church history.

Someone may be getting after me in the matter of this prayer I have gone about so cheerfully quoting as the heart and center of all religion. It is kindred in spirit to “Nevertheless not my will but Thy will.”^{1,2}

Reichert replied:

...you most assuredly have not been making this up out of nothing. On the morning, memorable to us of the Rockdale Avenue Temple, the First Day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Thursday, October 10, 1946, you read these words of prayer out of our Union Prayer Book:

“Look with favor, O Lord, upon us, and may our service ever be acceptable unto Thee. Praised be Thou, O God, whom alone we serve in reverence.”

In our morning service for the Sabbath, there is also a prayer that begins:

“Our God and God of our fathers, grant that our worship on this Sabbath be acceptable to Thee.”

Turning now to the Bible, the prize passage that completely supports your view...the key passage is Psalm 19, verse 14:

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable before Thee, O Lord, my Rock, and my Redeemer.”^{3,4}

OPUS INCOMPLETE

On Sunday, January 27, 1963, and one day before his death, Frost was delightfully surprised by a visit from Ezra Pound's daughter, Princess Mary de Rachewiltz. During the conversation, as recorded by Anne Morrison Gentry,⁵ they exchanged pleasantries and the princess conveyed a special word of thanks to Frost from her father. With that, the brief visit ended and Frost went back to working on his new poem about “the prophet and the king.” This was his final work—never to be completed. Mrs. Gentry's roughhand notes reveal that Frost's basic convictions about Christ, mercy, and justice, had not changed since he penned *Mercy* sixteen years earlier:

tells king 'only dream' is difficulty

1 A reference to Matthew 26. 39: “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt.”

2 Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., p. 407.

3 The authorized (KJV) translation of 1611 renders it:

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD [Jehovah], my Strength, and my Redeemer.”

4 Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., p. 407.

5 Ibid., p. 343.

*between mercy and discipline—like Christ
who died for it.*

What a wonder you are how did you know?

*dream of everyone to be higher than
judge who can be reversed by absolute
monarch*

*king says to prophet you're a real prophet
a wonder, what's your name?*

he says my name is Daniel, call me Dan.

*I am the author of the famous letters
from Dan to Beersheba¹*

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR *MERCY*

Frost's choice of subject for the masque is based on the fact that the mercy of God is

One of His essential characteristics: Exodus 34. 6-7: The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.

Deuteronomy 4. 31: (For the LORD thy God is a merciful God;) He will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which He swore unto them.

Psalms 62. 12: Also unto Thee, O LORD, belongeth mercy: for Thou renderest unto every man according to his work.

2 Corinthians 1. 3: Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort. . .

Ephesians 2. 4: But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us. . .

James 5. 11: Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

Associated with His forbearance: Psalm 145. 8-9: The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of

¹ Thompson and Winnick, op. cit., p. 442.

	great mercy. The LORD is good to all: and His tender mercies are over all His works.
Associated with His covenant :	1 Kings 8. 23 : LORD God of Israel, there is no God like Thee, in heaven above, or on earth beneath, who keepest covenant and mercy with Thy servants that walk before Thee with all their heart...
Associated with His justice :	Psalm 101. 1 : I will sing of mercy and judgment: unto Thee, O LORD, will I sing.
Associated with His faithfulness :	Psalm 89. 24: But My faithfulness and My mercy shall be with him: and in My name shall his horn be exalted.
Associated with His truth :	Psalm 104. 4: For Thy mercy is great above the heavens: and Thy truth reacheth unto the clouds. ¹
Abundant and practically infinite :	Psalm 86. 5, 15: For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon Thee... But Thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth. Psalm 119. 64: The earth, O LORD, is full of Thy mercy: teach me Thy statutes.
Everlasting :	1 Chronicles 16. 34: O give thanks unto the LORD; for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever. Psalm 100. 5: For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting; and His truth endureth to all generations.

Mercy is a Biblical term used not only in connection with God's attributes but also with reference to man's. God holds man accountable for mercy extended, or not extended, both to his fellow-man and to the beast of the field.²

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.³

Be ye therefore merciful, even as your (heavenly) Father also is merciful.⁴

The lower creation may indeed also be an object of God's mercy (*ἔλεος*), but man alone is the object of God's grace (*χάρις*); he alone needs it and is capable of receiving it. God's mercy is not to be understood as merely His pardoning of sinners, but His attitude to man in general, from which His pardoning mercy proceeds.⁵

Any so-called mercy which does not agree with that clearly delineated in the

1 A better reading: "...the skies."

2 See Deuteronomy 25. 4, Proverbs 12. 10, Micah 6. 8, etc.

3 Matthew 5. 7.

4 Luke 6. 36.

5 James Orr, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. III, p. 2035.

Bible becomes immediately suspect. According to Dr. Rodney Bell, who echoes the Christian ethic from Old and New Testament times, all Roman Catholics are made aware of their sin and are taught that repentance must precede forgiveness of sin. He states, however, that

Such repentance is not Bible repentance, for the pope's repentance, common to all Catholics, [is] expressed in Romanist acts of contrition and satisfaction for punishment of sin. The trust in the mercy of God expressed by the pope is a "Romanist mercy." It can only come through the channels defined by the Roman church, namely, the sacraments. The mercy in which Pope John trusted for salvation was not the mercy offered by the Word of God.¹

A GEM FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

In Old Testament times, the Jewish people sang their Psalms, some of which lend themselves to perfect leader-congregation responsive readings as practiced in many of today's churches. Psalm 136 is typical of these, and inasmuch as it bears remarkably on the subject of Frost's *Mercy*, it must be quoted in its entirety:

<i>Leader</i>	<i>Congregational Response</i>
O give thanks unto the LORD; for He is good:	For His mercy endureth for ever.
O give thanks unto the God of gods:	"
O give thanks to the Lord of lords:	"
To Him who alone doeth great wonders:	"
To Him that by wisdom made the heavens:	"
To Him that stretched out the earth above the waters:	"
To Him that made great lights:	"
The sun to rule by day:	"
The moon and stars to rule by night:	"
To Him that smote Egypt in their firstborn:	"
And brought out Israel from among them:	"
With a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm:	"
To Him which divided the Red Sea into parts:	"
And made Israel to pass through the midst of it:	"
But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea:	"
To Him which led His people through the wilderness:	"
To Him which smote great kings:	"
And slew famous kings:	"
Sihon king of the Amorites:	"
And Og the king of Bashan:	"
And gave their land for an heritage:	"
Even an heritage unto Israel His servant:	"
Who remembered us in our low estate:	"
And hath redeemed us from our enemies:	"
Who giveth food to all flesh:	"
O give thanks unto the God of heaven:	"

1 Rodney L. Bell, ed., *The Fundamental Baptist Crusader*, September 1979, p. 2.

INTRODUCTION TO THE DRAMA

Like his earlier masque, Frost's *Mercy* is loosely based on an Old Testament story. Stanlis provides us with a brief summary:

The setting of *A Masque of Mercy* is a bookstore late at night in New York City. There are four characters, all innocent, but each is harassed by a personal spiritual problem involving love and faith toward God or man within the justice-mercy contradiction. The first speaker, Jesse Bel, proprietress of the bookstore, is somewhat like Job's wife in *A Masque of Reason*, a shrewd, hardheaded, bored, slightly alcoholic woman, under psychiatric care because she can't love God, her husband, or her psychiatrist. Her husband is My Brother's Keeper, called "Keeper," a modern pagan-religious man who says he would "rather be lost in the woods / Than found in church." The third character is Paul the Apostle, whom Keeper calls "the Exegete,"—"the fellow who theologized / Christ almost out of Christianity." Finally, there is Jonas Dove or Jonah, whom Paul identifies as "the universal fugitive"¹ running away from God's "mercy-justice contradiction." Keeper and Paul divide the serious debate between them, and each at various times expresses Frost's own convictions on justice and mercy. Jonah, like Job, appears as a man unjustly treated by God, and his case provides the essential drama in *A Masque of Mercy*.¹

CAST OF CHARACTERS

The characters in the drama² have been described as "dramatic vehicles for expressing Frost's own ideas."³ Listed in order of their appearance, they are:

Jesse Bel — line 8
Paul — line 9
Keeper — line 11
Fugitive⁴ — line 17 (identical with the hero of our story: Jonah)

JESSE BEL

Jesse Bel doubtless derives from the Old Testament Jezebel, wicked wife of Israel's most despicable king, Ahab. The Hebrew word *Jezebel* itself means "unexalted" or "unhusbanded,"⁵ and it is clear that Frost is drawing a parallel between his *Mercy* character and her Biblical counterpart. His attempt deserves further clarification, in order to better understand this character (and her utterances) in the drama itself.

Jezebel in Scripture was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Zidonians—more commonly known as the Phoenicians of seafaring fame. Ahab, king of Northern Israel,

1 Stanlis, op. cit., p. 459-60.

2 Lathem, op. cit., p. 493.

3 Stanlis, op. cit., p. 463.

4 Identified as Jonas Dove (Jonah) following his self-introduction in line 55.

5 A prototype of the modern woman's libber, perhaps?

carried out a policy of making alliances with other states. His alliance with the Phoenicians was cemented by his marriage to Jezebel. This union was regarded as a sin, according to 1 Kings 16. 30, 31 :

And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him.

The LXX translation here indicates that it was not enough that Ahab should walk in the sins of Jeroboam ben Nebat, but that in addition to this already horrible declension he also took to wife Jezebel, whose wicked influence over her husband drew him still further away from following the LORD. The Hebrew text would indicate that it was the lightest thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam ben Nebat, and that he also took unto himself Jezebel the idolatress, sinking with her into the mire of all her abominable wickedness. Briefly comprehended, all the other sins of Ahab were light as compared with his marriage to Jezebel and, with her, his moral and spiritual retrogression to serve Baal the idol.¹

There is no doubt that Jezebel was a powerful personality. She brought the worship of the Phoenician idols Baal and Astarte with her into Hebrew life, directly intruding these abominations into the Northern Kingdom, and indirectly into Judah (the Southern Kingdom) as well. Her religious attitude and zeal is likened to that of Mary, Queen of Scots. Of her life and character, two main incidents demand attention :

1. Persecution of Jehovah's Prophets.

This is only alluded to, but not described, in 1 Kings 18. 4 :

For it was so, when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, that Obadiah took an hundred prophets, and hid them by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water.

In light of verse 19 of the same chapter, however, the above takes on fuller meaning and significance :

Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto Mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves four hundred, *which eat at Jezebel's table*. [emphasis added]

2. Jezebel's Plot against Naboth.

Revolting in its gory detail of plot, intrigue, and murder, the entire narrative is set forth for us in 1 Kings 21. Briefly stated, Ahab covets the vineyard owned by Naboth, which lies adjacent to his palace in Jezreel, but Naboth refuses to part with the family inheritance—either for money or for a better vineyard in exchange. Ahab

¹ Orr, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 1675.

is disappointed and depressed, and his wicked queen immediately plots to murder the owner and seize the coveted property. She sarcastically asks Ahab if he is not indeed king, suggesting that as such his wishes should be immediately granted by his subjects.

And Jezebel his wife said unto him, Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? Arise, and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. (v 7)

Jezebel forges and sends letters sealed in Ahab's name to the elders of Naboth's township, and bids them hold a public feast and make Naboth "sit at the head of the people."¹ Two false witnesses are then to be suborned and accuse the hapless Naboth of blasphemy and treason. This will result in a mock trial by the kangaroo court and death to Naboth by stoning. The actual narrative record states:

[Then] they proclaimed a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people. And there came in two men, children of Belial,² and sat before him: and the men of Belial witnessed against him, even against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, Naboth did blaspheme God and the king. Then they carried him forth out of the city, and stoned him with stones, that he died. (vs 12-3)

This wicked witch-like woman, on hearing that her crime was complete, now attempts to console her husband the king with these words:

...Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give thee for money: for Naboth is not alive, but dead. (v 15)

The property is confiscated, and falls to the king. But Elijah the prophet, on hearing the dreadful and shocking news of Naboth's murder, is dispatched by God to threaten Ahab with Divine vengeance:

And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, which is in Samaria: behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, whither he is gone down to possess it. And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the LORD, Hast thou killed, and also taken possession?...Thus saith the LORD, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine. (vs 18-9)

In verse 23 of the same chapter, the prophecy is made, not against Ahab—but against his wicked queen, Jezebel.³ Verse 25 attributes the sins of Ahab to her influence over him:

But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the LORD, *whom Jezebel his wife stirred up* [emphasis added].

1 1 Kings 21. 12.

2 Satan, the devil.

3 The prophecy is fulfilled in detail, as recorded in 2 Kings 9. 30-37.

PAUL THE APOSTLE

Frost's Paul is probably more "in character" with his Biblical namesake than was Jesse Bel. A consideration of the Biblical Paul reveals that, before his conversion from Old Testament Judaism, his temper as a whole was distinctly hostile to Christ. He was a veritable volcano ready to burst forth against Christ and against all who followed Him. At this very moment, and with letters in hand authorizing him to seize and persecute any and all Christians,¹ he was arrested by God in supernatural fashion and made to see, and surrender to, Jesus. That conversion was instantaneous and complete.

And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?²

At once there was tumult in Paul's soul. He had undergone a revolution, both spiritual and intellectual. Such a transformation required time for the great Apostle to think, to get his bearings as it were, for the complete change in life and objectives which were now his. For this purpose he journeyed into Arabia,³ but concerning which sojourn we know very little. He may have gone to Mt. Sinai and thought out grace in the atmosphere of law,⁴ but it is impossible to escape the conclusion that the significance and value of the Cross became clear to him almost simultaneously with the certainty of the *actual bodily resurrection* and Messiahship of Jesus. The narrow Jew had surrendered to Christ who died for the sins of the world. The Gospel had taken hold of his mind and heart, and his time in Arabia had not been wasted. Henceforth the union of Paul with Christ was the real key to his life and writings. This is far more than a mere doctrine about Christ. It is *fellowship with God!*

Although he did continue to use some rabbinical methods of argument, it is not true (as has been falsely claimed) that his theology is rabbinical. His message is Christocentric. His personal contact with Christ revolutionized his Messianic conceptions, his view of God, and his view of man. Paul's Christology is both theocentric and anthropocentric, but it is theocentric *first*. Grace is his distinctive for the Gospel message; he echoes and re-echoes the truth that Christ has set us free from the bondage of (Old Testament) ceremonial legalism.⁵ In spite of this fact, however, Paul never divorced ethics from religion. He insisted strongly on the spiritual experience of Christ as opposed to mere ritualistic ceremonies which had destroyed the life of

1 Acts 9. 1-2.

2 Acts 9. 6.

3 Galatians 1. 17-8.

4 Orr, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 2279.

5 "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree..." (Galatians 3. 13)

"Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." (Galatians 5. 4)

"For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God." (Hebrews 7. 19)

Judaism.¹ Mystic as he was, he was still the sanest of moralists and had no patience with hypocrites or licentious pietists or idealists who allowed sentimentalism and emotionalism to take the place of genuine righteousness as proof of repentance unto salvation.²

THE FROSTIAN PAUL

In comparison with the utterances of other *Mercy* characters in light of the Biblical perspective, those of Paul are outstanding.

PAUL : Late, late, too late, you cannot enter now.

JESSE BEL : ...He doesn't go.³

We are immediately reminded of the parable of the importunate friend as recorded in the Gospels :

And He said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves ; for a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him ? And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not ; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed ; I cannot rise and give thee. I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth.⁴

Paul's "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days ; I fled Him, down the arches of the years"⁵ calls to mind the famous and beautiful passage from Psalm 139 :

Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit ? Or whither shall I flee from Thy presence ? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there : if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea ; even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me ; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from Thee ; but the night shineth as the day ; the darkness and the light are both alike to Thee.⁶

1 "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true ; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us : nor yet that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others ; for then must He often have suffered since the foundation of the world : but now once in the end of the world hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." (Hebrews 9. 24-6)

"And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins : but this Man [Christ], after He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God..." (Hebrews 10. 11-2)

2 Orr, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 2288.

3 Lathem, op. cit., p. 493.

4 Luke 11. 5-8.

5 Lathem, op. cit., p. 494.

6 Psalm 139. 7-12.

Frost also makes Paul take a swipe at Unitarianism and various other "isms" and unbelief parading in the name of Christianity, but who do not hew the line in matters pertaining to historic, orthodox, Biblical doctrine :

Keeper's the kind of Unitarian
Who having by elimination got
From many gods to Three, and Three to One,
Thinks why not taper off to none at all,
Except as father putative to sort of
Legitimize the brotherhood of man,
So we can hang together in a strike.¹

In harmony and agreement with Keeper's final line,² Frost summarizes the burden of his masque by making Paul to say

You can't trust God to be unmerciful.³

*

There you have the beginning of all wisdom.⁴

The actual quotation from Scripture reflecting Paul's wisdom reference is to be found in Proverbs 9. 10 :

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom : and the knowledge of the Holy is understanding.

A similar reference is found in Proverbs 1. 7 :

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge : but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Job also is quoted as saying :

Behold, the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom ; and to depart from evil is understanding.⁵

The overwhelming and consequently indisputable impression gleaned through concentration of thought and mind on the Biblical Paul's thirteen epistles⁶ is indeed that personal knowledge of, and fellowship with, the Creator, is first of all prerequisite to any genuine understanding of the existence and purpose of man.⁷ Citing such passages as Romans 1. 18-32 and 1 Corinthians 1. 19-29 would make it indelibly clear that God takes a dim view of *anyone* or *anything* being allowed to usurp His rightful place as central, briefly stated also in such as the following :

1 Lathem, op. cit., p. 498.

2 "Nothing can make injustice just but mercy." (Lathem, op. cit., p. 521)

3 Lathem, op. cit., pp. 501, 507.

4 Ibid., p. 501.

5 Job 28. 28.

6 Romans to Hebrews, inclusive.

7 See also concluding paragraphs, pp. 38-9.

Thou shalt have *no other gods* before me.¹

*

Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: *this is the first commandment...*²

Paul to Jonah credits the latter with having beaten him to the punch on the matter of mercy :

You should be an authority on Mercy.
That book of yours in the Old Testament
Is the first place in literature, I think,
Where Mercy is explicitly the subject.
I say you should be proud of having beaten
The Gospels to it...³

ATTENTION TO ECONOMICS

A lesson in basic economic science is to be gleaned if close attention is paid to the words of Frost's Paul :

You mean about success,
And how by its own logic it concentrates
All wealth and power in too few hands?
The rich in seeing nothing but injustice
In their impoverishment by revolution
Are right.⁴

The goal of something to strive for—of something to gain—produces initiative in any society, and initiative and motivation produce success, which in turn results in reward. The resulting reward, when accumulated, is wealth, which in turn makes possible further labor and further reward. Even communist societies, who take great pride in boasting about Utopian “equality of distribution,” find it necessary to fall back on a measure of capitalism in order to make the wheels go round. That indispensable talisman is identified as “reward for labor,” which in turn produces more capital, which in turn makes possible more labor, which in turn produces more capital, etc. *ad infinitum*. On this basic point hinges success, stagnation, or failure in any economic enterprise, in any society—of whatever color or hue.

But equal distribution of all the world's capital (communist capital included!) would soon result in poverty and create only unemployment and misery. Man, having

1 Exodus 20. 3—the first of The Ten Commandments.

2 Mark 12. 30.

3 Lathem, *op. cit.*, p. 508.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 509.

now received his slice of "the capital pie," no longer is spurred on by the incentives of necessity and reward, and no longer by the process of labor seeks to gain reward or accumulate wealth. Without wealth, then, who is to give the reward for labor? And without reward for honest labor, who will strive to excel?

To each individual also is given a degree differing from any other in inherent mental, physical, and moral/spiritual capacities—the great "democratic ideal" (equality) to the contrary notwithstanding! Should not each citizen, then, be rewarded according to his own productive ability, industry, and accomplishment instead of being made subject to forced reduction by the bureaucratic upper echelons of a "womb society"¹ into the mediocrity of a high-sounding but common-level "democratic equality"? The concept of superior excellence in our day seems to have been sacrificed on the altar of idolatrous democratic conformity.

Root says:

Our contemporary destroyers say that men are "real" only in their lowest terms. Everybody is to be "equal" — but "equality" is to be reached not by a free and noble adventure upward, but by a forced and jealous levelling downward. We humble men are not to be encouraged to rise toward the best; but all men are to be "made" equal to the worst... But to be a man, we must see and say and seek the highest realization of man... To be a man we need not be ourselves a champion. But we must reverence the champion in every field...and love the excellence of the champion as the standard of reality.²

ARE MEN EQUAL?

Alonzo Myers introduces a clarity of concept by posing the question

Are men in fact equal? In any sense of the word which leaves out the question of final worth, they are not... Physically, mentally, and morally, men are not equal.³

When we see the close tie between beauty and order, and admit that much of our treasured literature and art comes from old orders of inequality, we must ask whether beauty or perfection of any kind could be found in a society based on the surly contention of losers that winners are no better than they. Is it not true that the idea of equality is merely a device whereby underlings and failures contrive at times, by mere weight of numbers, to drag every kind of human excellence down into the swamp of mediocrity?⁴

The proposition of equality does not imply an equal division of property. Granted that all men are equal in ultimate worth⁵ and that all should

1 E. Merrill Root, *America's Steadfast Dream*, pp. 2, 13, 185.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 17-8.

3 Henry Alonzo Myers, *Are Men Equal?*, p. 17.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 21-2.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 40: "The Bible makes equality doubly meaningful by teaching that men, created in the image and likeness of God, are finally subject to divine justice."

enjoy the same rights—from these premises we cannot conclude that the toiler and the shirker are entitled to equal rewards.¹

If the idea of equality is not true, however, the [American] Civil War must be viewed in quite another light. Under this assumption...Lincoln may have thought of himself as the champion of equality and of human rights, but if the idea of equality is false, he was really the able mouth-piece of industrial society who brought the folklore of the people into the service of the evolutionary and progressive gods of inequality.²

Darwinism [founded upon the concept of inequality—the survival of the fittest in the struggle for existence] became the fashion of the intellectual world at a time when the philosophy of inequality seemed to be on its last legs in America.³

The gospel of inevitable progress with its concealed barb—the unproved assumption that men are naturally unequal—reached America in many forms. Darwinism, Spencerianism, Hegelianism, and Marxism, each presenting a picture of the better world-to-be in colors certain to appeal to the tastes of some men, induced a small but influential minority to abandon their faith in the proposition of equality.⁴

Darwin, Spencer, and their followers have argued that evolution proves the inevitability of progress. They have *assumed, without proof*, [emphasis added] that later forms of life are higher and better than earlier forms, and that higher and better forms are necessarily happier than earlier forms. In *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, Henry Adams opposed the gospel of progress with a pessimistic law of retrogression, which he believed he had deduced from the second law of thermodynamics.⁵

...the nineteenth-century faith in progress, popularized by Hegelianism, Darwinism, and Marxism, has been a principal cause of war and disaster.⁶

PURITAN INFLUENCE

In one aspect of Puritan doctrine which Robert Frost admired, change-for-the-worse is the basic pattern of human response; hence, his question about “what to make of a diminished thing” in “The Oven Bird.”⁷ To Frost, all diminishment began with Adam’s disobedience to the divine plan in the perfect Garden of Eden, the Earthly Paradise, and it was as a consequence of this original sin and depravity that man

1 Myers, op. cit., p. 138.

2 Ibid., p. 106.

3 Ibid., p. 107.

4 Ibid., p. 114.

5 Ibid., p. 166.

6 Ibid., p. 113.

7 Lathem, op. cit., p. 120:

...And comes that other fall we name the fall.
He says the highway dust is over all...
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

began to drag down man, and nation began to drag down nation.¹ According to Frost's view, significant change for the better will occur only in the Heavenly Paradise, and there only through divine grace.² Hence the appropriate nature of his line in "New Hampshire"³ about life on earth:

Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it.⁴

Excerpts from Henri Bergson help clarify what Frost had in mind, and reinforce the preceding reference to Adams:

A world like our solar system is seen to be ever exhausting something of the mutability it contains. In the beginning, it had the maximum of possible utilization of energy: this mutability has gone on diminishing unceasingly.⁵ All our analyses show us, in life, an effort to re-mount the incline that matter descends. In that, they reveal to us the possibility, the necessity even of a process the inverse of materiality...*Incapable of stopping the course of material changes downward*, it succeeds in *retarding* it.⁶

Life as a whole, from the initial impulsion that thrust it into the world, will appear as a wave which rises, and which is opposed by the descending movement of matter.⁷

An excerpt from "The Figure a Poem Makes" brings out the following by Frost:

All I would keep for myself is the freedom of my material—the condition of body and mind now and then to summons aptly from the vast chaos of all I have lived through.⁸

Surely this is not without reference to his struggle over money matters, in light of which the following may be more easily comprehended:

The revolution Keeper's bringing on
Is nothing but an outbreak of mass mercy,
Too long pent up in rigorous convention—
A holy impulse towards redistribution.
To set out to homogenize mankind

1 Exactly as postulated in the established and empirically demonstrable Second Law of Thermodynamics, wherein it is stated that *the course of all nature is downward* (both physical and spiritual), and that given free rein, everything tends toward less organization, greater randomness, and ultimate corruption.

2 The Second Law of Thermodynamics was evidently decreed and established at the time of Adam's disobedience and rebellion against the law of God. It will *not* be rescinded until the total and complete restoration of all things, when God Himself destroys the last vestige of that original sin, and this will come about *only through direct intervention by God* in the affairs of men and nations. So Frost is absolutely orthodox and historically Christian in his theology on this point.

3 Lathem, op. cit., p. 166.

4 Thompson, op. cit., p. 601.

5 Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 243.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 245-6.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 269.

8 Robert Frost, *Complete Poems of Robert Frost*, p. 19.

So that the cream could never rise again...¹

This is not to be interpreted except in the light of such oft-repeated philosophy as appears in "Provide, Provide"² and "Build Soil".³

Further, and on the subject of *taste*, Root sheds additional light :

The intellectual adventure of life, the pursuit of excellence, the ascent from the Mazda to the star, lie implicit in every such exercise of taste. Of course, today, the relativists and egalitarians of the hour not only seek to homogenize the milk of human kindness, but also to homogenize *all* the various liquids of the world into one totality of tasteless integration. I myself use homogenized milk, though I personally miss the pure intensity called cream; but I will not accept the modern homogenizing of milk, honey, Lysol, vodka, crankcase oil, Seven Up, and swamp-water into one supposedly potable beverage. Why? Because, like the artist in tea-tasting or wine-tasting, I keep my palate pure—and so my taste is as the taste of ten. With Coleridge in "Kubla Khan," I say in paraphrase :

"For I on honey-dew have fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise."⁴

When you have sipped such divine tippie, you can't abide Sartre-and-soda or Le Roi Jones on the rocks!

Virgil told us that the descent into Hell is easy, but hard the return. So with us. But from our contemporary cycles of the cultural Inferno—existentialism, relativism, instrumentalism, phenomenism—we may, through discipline and pain, if only we will again use our minds and our wills, return to the sun ... even bringing Eurydice with us. But so to return, we must regain the basic sense that we have lost—the sense of *taste*. Our contemporary descent into nihilism began with our loss of taste; our noble re-ascent into reverence for Heaven will come only through a renaissance of taste.

We need, today, to cultivate taste and the delicate and valid appraisals and evaluations that come only to those who have taste. That is why the Communist Conspiracy is one of the chief agents in the destruction of contemporary taste; for if you destroy taste, you subvert the strength of the soul and soften man for the easy kill.⁵

ON GOD'S GRACE, MERCY, AND LOVE

The following dialogue makes plain the impossibility of ever reconciling justice with mercy except through the grace and love of God for lost humanity :

1 Lathem, op. cit., p. 509.

2 Ibid., p. 307.

3 Ibid., p. 316.

4 Margaret A. Keeling, ed., *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poems of Nature and Romance*, p. 111.

5 Root, op. cit., pp. 92-3.

PAUL : Christ came to introduce a break with logic
That made all other outrage seem as child's play:
The Mercy on the Sin against the Sermon.
Strange no one ever thought of it before Him.
'Twas lovely and its origin was love.¹

*

PAUL : You all have read the Sermon on the Mount.
I ask you all to read it once again.²

*

JESSE BEL: We're reading it.³

*

KEEPER : A beautiful impossibility...
An irresistible impossibility.
A lofty beauty no one can live up to,
Yet no one turn from trying to live up to.⁴

*

PAUL : Yes, spoken so we can't live up to it,
Yet so we'll have to weep because we can't.
Mercy is only to the undeserving.
But such we all are made in the sight of God.⁴

*

Here we all fail together, dwarfed and poor.⁵

The foregoing is in full accord with the following historic, orthodox, Biblical teaching, as propounded by the Apostle to the Gentiles:

For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I... For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do... I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?⁶

For God hath concluded them [all mankind] in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all.⁷

But the Scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.⁸

But [Christ] was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our

1 Lathem, op. cit., p. 511.

2 Idem.

3 Ibid., p. 512.

4 Idem.

5 Idem.

6 Romans 7. 15, 18-9, 21-4.

7 Romans 11. 32.

8 Galatians 3. 22.

iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on Him [Jesus] the iniquity of us all.¹

Paul's final confession² again reflects Frost's own convictions, not uncommonly found in the utterances of characters throughout his writings, but especially so in *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *Mercy* (1947).

KEEPER

Keeper, an abbreviated form of *My Brother's Keeper*,³ is an enigmatic but very essential character in Frost's plan unfolding the drama. Keeper's opening dialog reveals a kind of honest cynicism possessed by an honest cynic—a very integral part of the story. It reveals his deep-seated humanitarian personality:

You needn't be so stern.
Open enough to find out who it is.⁴

To Keeper also is relegated the final and highly significant line of the entire presentation:

Nothing can make injustice just but mercy.⁵

Between these, he is credited with an array of utterances, beginning with skepticism and ending in Biblical understanding of the doctrine of God's grace and mercy, yet further revealing his character. Examples follow:

1. His affinity for collusion with Bel—

We're good sports, aren't we, Bel?⁶

*

We're reading it.⁷

2. His sarcastic remarks against the Apostle Paul—

He [Paul] is the fellow who theologized

Christ almost out of Christianity.

Look out for him.⁸

1 Isaiah 53. 5-6.

2 Lathem, op. cit., p. 520:

May my sacrifice
Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight.

3 Ibid., p. 512. See also Genesis 4. 9-10. The name recalls Cain's obtuse reply in response to God's quest for the murdered Abel: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Premeditated murder was the second sin committed upon earth; the first had been rebellion against, and willful disobedience to, the explicit command of God.

4 Ibid., p. 493.

5 Ibid., p. 521.

6 Ibid., p. 496.

7 Ibid., p. 512.

8 Ibid., p. 498.

3. His half-mocking manner in which he questions the call and motive of the prophet—

Shall it be told we had a prophet captive
And let him get off without prophesying?
Let's have some prophecy. What form of ruin
(For ruin I assume was what it was)
Had you in mind to visit on the city,
Rebellion, pestilence, invasion?¹

*

If I were in your place, though, Mr. Prophet,
I'd *want* to be more certain I was called,
Before I undertook so delicate
A mission as to have to tell New York
'Twas in for an old-fashioned shaking down
Like the one Joshua gave Jericho.²
You wouldn't want the night clubs laughing at you.³

4. His obviously serious ridicule of things ultra-socialistic (soft and merciful) to the detriment of responsible justice and rugged individualism—

The future state is springing even now
From the discovery that loss from failure,
By being spread out over everybody,
Can be made negligible.⁴

5. His oblique rebuke to Jonah—

Paul only means you make too much of justice.⁵

6. His defense of the poet-seer—

We poets offer you another: star-crossed.
Of star-crossed, mercy-crossed, or evil-crossed⁶
I choose the star-crossed...⁷

7. His sarcastic self-defense and self-exoneration—

Not everything I say is said in scorn.
Some people want you not to understand them,
But I want you to understand me wrong.⁸

1 Lathem, op. cit., p. 502.

2 See Joshua 6 for the complete Biblical narrative.

3 Lathem, op. cit., p. 503.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 506.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 508.

6 Stanlis, op. cit., p. 462, says: "In violent total revolutions, such as communism, justice is *evil-crossed*."

7 Lathem, op. cit., p. 510.

8 *Idem.*

8. His continuous and unrelenting reflection of the heart and mind of Frost—

Paul's constant theme. The Sermon on the Mount
Is just a frame-up to insure the failure
Of all of us, so all of us will be
Thrown prostrate at the Mercy Seat for Mercy.¹

*

A beautiful impossibility.²

*

An irresistible impossibility.
A lofty beauty no one can live up to,
Yet no one turn from trying to live up to.³

9. His agreement with Frost on the difference between Roman Catholicism and Judaism—

Our disagreement when we disagree, Paul,
Lies in our different approach to Christ,
Yours more through Rome, mine more through Palestine.—⁴

10. His faith in the origin of Truth, and his discourse on the relationship between Light and Truth—

No true source can be poisoned.⁵

*

Awh, there's no lack of
light, you—
A light that falls diffused over my shoulder
And is reflected from the printed page
And bed of world-flowers so as not to blind me.
If even the face of man's too bright a light
To look at long directly (like the sun),
Then how much more the face of truth must be.
We were not given eyes or intellect
For all the light at once the source of light—
For wisdom that can have no counterwisdom.
In our subscription to the sentiment
Of one God, we provide He shall be one
Who can be many Gods to many men,
His church on earth a Roman Pantheon;
Which is our greatest hope of rest from war.

1 Lathem, op. cit., p. 511.

2 Ibid., p. 512.

3 Idem.

4 Ibid., p. 513.

5 Ibid., p. 514.

Live and let live, believe and let believe.
'Twas said the lesser gods were only traits
Of the one awful God. Just so the saints
Are God's white light refracted into colors.¹

11. His condemnation of religious fanaticism—

By something to believe in, Jesse means
Something to be fanatical about,
So as to justify the orthodox
In saving heretics by slaying them,
Not on the battlefield, but down in cellars.
That way's been tried too many times for me.
I'd like to see the world tried once without it.²

*

Too much all-fired belief and we'd be back
Down burning skeptics in the cellar furnace
Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.³

12. His sarcasm directed against Jewish communist leader Karl Marx—

JESSE BEL: The world seems crying out for a Messiah.
KEEPER : Haven't you heard the news? We already have one,
And of the Messianic race, Karl Marx.⁴

13. His satire against bureaucracy—

I say we keep him [Jonah] till we wring some more
Naiveness about Justice out of him,
As once the Pharoah did it out of Sekhti
By having him whipped every day afresh
For clamoring for justice at the gate,
Until the scribes had taken down a bookful
For distribution to his bureaucrats.⁵

14. His censure of Frost's Paul for a former utterance,⁶ and his agreement with
the Biblical Paul that the door of mercy is still open—⁷

Who said, "Too late, you cannot enter now" ?⁸

1 Lathem, op. cit., p. 515.

2 Idem.

3 Ibid., p. 516. See Daniel 3 for complete story on the refusal of these three Hebrews to bow before Babylonian idolatry.

4 Idem.

5 Ibid., pp. 517-8.

6 Ibid., line 9, p. 493.

7 "...behold, *now* is the accepted time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 6.2)

8 Lathem, op. cit., p. 519.

15. His rebuke of Jesse Bel for sacrilege—

Lady, at such a time, and in the Presence?—
I won't presume to tell Bel where to go.
But if this prophet's mantle fell on me
I should dare say she would be taken care of.
We send our wicked enemies to Hell,
Our wicked friends we send to Purgatory.¹

16. His distinction between courage and fear—

Courage is of the heart by derivation,
And great it is. But fear is of the soul.²

17. His humility, discourse on the fear of God, and revelation of uncertainty—³

But I'm too much afraid of God to claim
I have been fighting on the angels' side.
That is for Him and not for me to say.
For me to say it would be irreligious.
(Sometimes I think you are too sure you have been.)
And I can see that the uncertainty
In which we act is a severity,
A cruelty, amounting to injustice
That nothing but God's mercy can assuage.⁴

18. His final statement justifying the ways of God to man—

Let the lost millions pray it in the dark!
My failure is no different from Jonah's.
We both have lacked the courage in the heart
To overcome the fear within the soul
And go ahead to any accomplishment.
Courage is what it takes and takes the more of
Because the deeper fear is so eternal.
And if I say we lift him from the floor
And lay him where you ordered him to lie
Before the cross,⁵ it is from fellow-feeling,
As if I asked for one more chance myself
To learn to say...
Nothing can make injustice just but mercy.⁶

1 Lathem, op. cit., p. 519.

2 Idem.

3 See 1 John 5. 13, John 5. 24, etc. on assurance (certainty) of salvation.

4 Lathem, op. cit., p. 520.

5 Keeper is echoing Frost's conviction that nothing—*absolutely nothing*—will assuage God's righteous wrath against the sin of all mankind except His own perfect and sinless sacrifice in the person of Christ at Calvary. (See 2 Corinthians 5. 21, Colossians 1. 20, etc.)

6 Lathem, op. cit., p. 521.

JONAH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The hero of Frost's *Mercy* is Jonah, introduced as the Fugitive in line 17 and as Jonas Dove in line 55. Frost's knowledge of Hebrew here is noteworthy, for Jonah in that language is rendered "dove" in English. The entire masque centers around the runaway Jonah, as based upon his Old Testament counterpart, and his dilemma as to forgiving mercy versus righteous justice.

According to the book bearing his name, the Biblical Jonah, son of Amittai, received a command at the hand of God to preach to Nineveh. Hoping to escape from his unpleasant task of proclaiming God's message to the great heathen city, Jonah fled by ship in the opposite direction. He was a narrow-minded patriot who feared that Assyria would one day swallow up his own little nation; thus he wanted to do nothing that might lead to the preservation of wicked Nineveh. He was afraid that God, who is merciful, would forgive the oppressing heathen city, if it should repent at his preaching. In short, he wanted to see it destroyed.

The vessel in which the prophet had taken refuge was arrested by a great storm. The heathen sailors inferred from this that some god must be angry with someone on board, and promptly cast lots to discover the culprit. When the lot fell upon Jonah, he immediately confessed his sin of rebellion and disobedience, and bravely suggested that they cast him overboard. The mariners rowed desperately to reach shore, but made no progress against wind and wave. After beseeching Jehovah not to bring innocent blood upon them, they cast Jonah into the sea. Meanwhile, God had prepared a great fish² to swallow and accommodate Jonah for three days and three nights. In the belly of the fish, Jonah comes to his senses, repents, and prays to God; whereupon—at the command of God—Jonah is disgorged from the belly of the fish on dry land, and is given a second chance to obey. He immediately heads for Nineveh, marches through its streets, and lifts up his voice with:

Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!³

*

So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth,⁴ from the greatest of them even to the least of them.⁵

The men of Nineveh turned from deeds of violence,⁶ to seek forgiveness at the hand of an angry God,⁷ whereupon Jehovah decided to spare the city. This turn of events proves to be too unsettling for the prophet of righteousness and repentance.

1 Orr, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 2288.

2 *Whale* is erroneously used in the English translation of Matthew 12.40, but *κίττος* (*κῆτος*) is the Greek expression meaning "a huge fish" (as gaping for prey).

3 Jonah 3.4.

4 A sign of humility and repentance.

5 Jonah 3.5.

6 Jonah 1.2: "their wickedness" and Jonah 3.8: "...let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands."

7 "God is angry with the wicked every day...The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God...It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Psalm 7.11, Psalm 9.17, Hebrews 10.31)

Jonah breaks out into loud and bitter complaint when he learns that Nineveh is to be spared. He decides to encamp near the city to see what will become of it. He hopes it may yet be overthrown.¹

At this moment God uses a very simple object² to teach the prophet a needful and very great lesson.

If such a mean and perishable plant could come to have real value in the eyes of the sullen prophet, what estimate ought to be put on the lives of the thousands of innocent children and helpless cattle in the great city of Nineveh? These were dearer to the God of heaven than Jonah's protecting vine could possibly be to him.³

It is the fashion now in some so-called "scholarly" circles to treat the book of Jonah as pure fiction, but Christ regarded the miracles of the great fish and the repentance of the Ninevites as actual events. On two different occasions He referred to the sign of Jonah the prophet.⁴ He spoke of Jonah's three-day experience in the belly of the fish as parallel with His own entombment. He cited the repentance of the Ninevites as a rebuke to the unbelieving of His own generation. Our Lord thus speaks both of the physical miracle of Jonah's preservation in the body of the fish and of the moral miracle of Nineveh's repentance, and without the slightest hint that He regarded the story as any less than absolute historical fact and truth. If Jesus thought of the story as history and so taught, that fact alone should forever settle the question once and for all, to the satisfaction of rational and reasonable minds.

THE FROSTIAN JONAH

Jonah, hero in the drama, bursts upon the scene with this arresting line:

God's after me!⁵

Later, he asks for a Bible,⁶ not to consult, but to introduce himself:

Look, I don't need the Bible to consult.
I just thought if you had a copy handy,
I could point out my sort of passport in it.
There is a story you *may have forgotten*⁷

1 Orr, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 1728.

2 The gourd vine. See Jonah 4. 6-10 for complete story.

3 Orr, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 1728.

4 Matthew 12. 38-41; 16. 4; Luke 11. 29-32.

5 Lathem, op. cit., p. 493.

6 Ibid., p. 494.

7 It is interesting to note in Frost's wording "may have forgotten" a propensity on the part of unbelieving mankind to willfully forget that which it is our duty to God to remember and do. We "conveniently forget" even the existence of God our Creator when that concept would conflict with our own selfish man-centered plans, our proud God-rejecting intellect, or any "scientific theory" (so-called) which would render the God-concept unnecessary. Modern pseudo-theologians have even gone so far afield as to reject the actual historicity of the Jonah record!

About a whale.¹

In response to Keeper's query ("What have you got against the city?"), he replies—almost facetiously:

We have enough against it, haven't we?
Cursed be the era that congested it.²

Evidently an agrarian at heart, Jonah identifies New York as the particular city against which he has been sent to prophesy.³ He then follows up with Frost's now-famous and recurring theme which has surfaced repeatedly throughout his somewhat tragic and tortured life:⁴

I've lost my faith in God to carry out
The threats He makes against the city evil.
I can't trust God to be unmerciful.⁵

At this point in our drama, Jesse Bel—the typical neurotic, butterfly-paramour, and philandering feminist—insists that she is sick and that she be put under the care of Paul as attending physician.

JESSE BEL: An analyst's the latest thing in doctors.
He's mine. That's what he is (you asked)—my doctor.
I'm sick.

JONAH : Of what?

JESSE BEL: Oh, everything, I guess.
The doctors say the trouble with me is
I'm not in love. I didn't love the doctor
I had before. That's why I changed to Paul—
To try another.

PAUL : Jesse Bel's a girl
Whose cure will lie in getting her idea
Of the word love corrected. She got off
To a bad start it seems in the wrong school
Of therapy.

JESSE BEL: I don't love Paul—as yet.

JONAH : How about loving God?

JESSE BEL: You make me shrug.—
And I don't love you either, do I, Keeper?

1 The word *whale* is an incorrect translation that does not appear in the Greek text. (See footnote 2, p. 30.)

2 Lathem, op. cit., p. 496.

3 Idem.

4 Frost's remark from "The Figure a Poem Makes" bears repeating here: "All I would keep for myself is the freedom of my material—the condition of body and mind now and then to summons aptly from the vast chaos of all I have lived through." (Frost, op. cit., p. 19)

5 Lathem, op. cit., p. 497.

KEEPER : Don't lay your hand on me to say it, shameless.
 Let me alone.

JESSE BEL : I'm sick. Joe's sick. The world's sick.
 I'll take to drink—at least I'll take *a* drink.

JONAH : My name's not Joe. I don't like what she says.
 It's Greenwich Village cocktail-party talk—
 Big-city talk. I'm getting out of here.¹

A QUESTION OF SUPREME IMPORTANCE

To the question of supreme importance for man as posed by Jonah,² Jesse Bel's response is faithfully representative of twentieth century moderns who have long since dethroned God from the center of life in typical man-centered humanistic fashion:

You make me shrug.—³

Rebellious and sinful man indeed owes a debt of love, gratitude, and obedience to God the Creator—as explicitly taught in both Old and New Testaments—but his attitude is, all too often, only that portrayed by Bel (above). The Bible, nevertheless, levies against all mankind God's prior claim that we should

Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.⁴

And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together... asked Him, Which is the first commandment of all? And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; the LORD our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first [supreme, greatest, most important] commandment.⁵

In a shrewd aside at modern know-it-all "scientism,"⁶ Frost's Jonah draws a parallel between his very real experience in the belly of the great fish and that which masquerades as Truth in some of today's *soulless* "halls of learning."

You're modern; so the whale you throw me to
 Will be some *soulless* [emphasis added] lunatic asylum—
 For me to disagree with any science
 There may be there and get spit out again.⁷

As a key to understanding this and other such frequent Frostian utterances, we must remember that Frost insisted on leaving something to God—in spite of God's

1 Lathem, op. cit., pp. 499-500.

2 "How about loving God?", *ibid.*, p. 499.

3 *Idem.*

4 Ecclesiastes 12. 13.

5 Mark 12. 28-30.

6 For a definition of the term, see "Understanding the Mind of Robert Frost," *Culture and Language*, Vol. 11, No. 2, March 1978, p. 15.

7 Lathem, op. cit., p. 500.

rich endowment to man (intelligence far superior to that of any other creature). In a poem written especially for, and presented to, Raymond Holden of Franconia, New Hampshire in 1919,¹ Frost maintained in his last line :

But something has to be left to God.

He is quoted also as voicing a like opinion in 1925 :

My motto is that something has to be left to God.²

Frost repeatedly reveals skepticism that man's natural reason alone is capable of piercing through the design and purposes of our Creator. Stanlis gives us essentially the same comment on the masques :

...both masques make the same stress on the limitations of man's knowledge regarding God's ultimate purposes, and the need for implicit faith in God.³

The old poet's knack for, and apparent delight in, needling the latest findings of "scientism" which cannot be substantiated by empirical, reproducible, laboratory evidence—hence, *not* qualified as genuine *science*⁴—surface repeatedly in his works and letters. Jonah's confession (above) attests the truth of this assertion.

Waggoner comments :

Meanwhile, from *West-Running Brook* (1928) onward, what Frost was against had become clearer and clearer. He was against scientific positivism or "scientism" ("The Bear," "The White-Tailed Hornet," "At Woodward's Gardens"), against philosophic rationalism ("It's knowing what to do with things that counts"), against naturalism as a philosophy, especially in its reductive forms with its "downward comparisons" ("The White-Tailed Hornet"). He was against the directions society was taking in the 1930's—against liberals and planners and New Dealers of all stripes. Modern society was a kind of hell ("In Dives' Dive") in which both the true artist and the sensitive man could endure only by exploring to the limit the possibilities of disaffiliation and disengagement ("One Step Backward Taken").⁵

1 Final line of the poem entitled "Good-by and Keep Cold." According to Lawrence Thompson (*Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph*, p. 139): "Raymond Holden did not know that the last line in 'Good-by and Keep Cold' touched on a notion which provided a subject for continuing argument between Frost and his wife. According to Mrs. Frost, it was safer to leave *nothing* to God, even to view God as *nothing*. [emphasis added] Her atheistical views, often expressed with bitterness, had found reflection in two of her husband's early poems." The poems were "Stars" in *A Boy's Will* (1913) and "Home Burial" in *North of Boston* (1914).

2 Thompson, op. cit., p. 693.

3 Stanlis, op. cit., p. 465.

4 Knowledge gained through observation and experimentation *only*, by use of the five senses *exclusively*.

5 Hyatt H. Waggoner, *American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*, p. 316. Works cited (above) appear in *West-Running Brook* (1928), *A Further Range* (1936), and *Steeple Bush* (1947).

Keeper queries Jonah as to the precise form God's judgment upon New York should take—"Rebellion, pestilence, invasion?"—to which the prophet replies:⁶

JONAH : Earthquake
Was what I thought of.

KEEPER : Have you any grounds,
Or undergrounds, for confidence in earthquake?

JONAH : It's good geology—the Funday Fault,²
A fracture in *the rocks beneath New York*³
That only needs a finger touch from God
To spring it like a deadfall and the fault
In nature would wipe out all human fault.⁴

Jonah continues with :

Another possibility I thought of—
—Was Babel: everyone developing
A language of his own to write his book in,
And one to cap the climax by combining
All language in a one-man tongue-confusion.⁵

What an apt picture of modern tongue-confused society, with every nation and individual "doing his own thing." Before Babel,⁶ the whole inhabited earth was of one tongue (only one speech, only one language). In order to usurp God's rightful place of import in the universe, humanistic man-centered thinkers had conspired to build a tower to heaven, and in this they might well have succeeded—but for the hand of God's judgment upon their efforts. Since *Mercy* was published just about the time our one-world monster, the so-called "United" Nations, was getting its feet off the ground,⁷ it has been speculated that Frost had this monstrosity in mind when he made Jonah refer to "a one-man tongue confusion." If penned before the concept and birth of the U.N., however, was Frost the prophet-seer that enabled him to look into the then future and view what is now past history to us?⁸

1 Lathem, op. cit., p. 502.

2 Doubtless a reference to America's having willfully ignored for years the Fourth Commandment of Moses ("Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy."—Exodus 20. 8 ff), with a pun on the word *Sunday* (Funday), and perhaps on the word *theology* (geology) as well.

3 The America *foundation* in law and morals: *The Word of God*.

4 Total Depravity of man, first tenet in Calvinism. See Exhibit A, p. 8, "Foundations of American Literature," *Culture and Language*, September 1978.

5 Lathem, op. cit., p. 502.

6 The third judgment of God upon the human race (See Genesis 11 for complete story). The first was expulsion from Eden for Adam's sin, with resulting death passed on to all mankind. The second was The Great Flood (worldwide cataclysmic deluge) of Noah's day (See Genesis 6-9 for complete story) in which all humanity perished from off the face of the earth *except* the eight souls who had taken refuge within the Ark.

7 1947. The U.N. was born in 1945.

8 For an excellent exposé on the subject, see G. Edward Griffin, *The Fearful Master*.

JONAH : And here come all your Great Books tumbling
down!
You see the Lord God is a jealous God!¹
He wrote one book. Let there be no more written.
How are their volumes fallen!

KEEPER : Only one!

The Bible itself makes all the world's great books (on philosophy, science, religion, morals, history, literature, art, education, social science, economics, political science, etc.) pale by comparison, and Frost makes Jonah and Keeper (above) attest to this verity.

Bel sarcastically accosts Jonah in typical fashion as a rebellious woman's libber :

Is this the love of God you preached to me?²

To this rude rejection of God's truth, Jonah humbly replies :

There's not the least lack of the love of God
In what I say. Don't be so silly, woman.³
His very weakness for mankind's endearing.
I love and fear Him. Yes, but I fear for Him.
I don't see how it can be to His interest,
This modern tendency I find in Him
To take the punishment out of all failure
To be strong, careful, thrifty, diligent,
Anything we once thought we had to be.⁴

DESTRUCTION OF FOUNDATIONS AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF SOCIETY

Frost evidences again his watchful tendency to spot and abhor the decline of traditional American society and the concomitant values upon which the American ideal was built—strength of character (integrity), watchfulness and preparedness, thrift, diligence, industry, and hard work. The “modern tendency,” he warns, is to remove all incentive to uphold these traditional values, in favor of a mushy feminizing of God and society as advocated from American pulpits and in theological seminaries that have long since left their first love,⁵ specifically: *The Word of God and His Eternal Truth*. Certainly the Almighty and Eternal God, Creator of the universe, as revealed through nature and His Word, should ever be held in highest esteem, but today's humanistic religious leaders have almost totally succeeded in dragging His exalted person and

1 See The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20. 5) and footnote 4, p. 5, on “...a jealous God...”

2 Lathem, op. cit., p. 505.

3 Recalls Job's reply to his shrewish wife, in response to her blasphemous urging that he should “Curse God and die!” His humble rebuke was: “Thou speakest as one of the foolish women...” (Job 2. 9-10)

4 Lathem, op. cit., p. 503.

5 See footnote 3, page 9, *Culture and Language*, March 1979.

character down into the lowest levels of their own murky thinking and vain philosophizing, exactly as Frost asserted in 1947.

Jonah's pronouncement against the wickedness of New York (chosen and cited as a type of the modern world's deeply religious surface [face], but basic and fundamental anti-God, subsurface character¹) is climaxed by :

Then further down it seems to start from where
The city is admittedly an evil :
"O city on *insecure rock pedestal*,
So knowing—and yet needing to be told
The thought that added cubits to your height
Would better have been taken to your depth."²

At last Jonah confesses to Paul :

I am your convert...
My trouble has been with my sense of justice.³

But in the same breath he questions :

If what you say is true, if winning ranks
The same with God as losing, how explain
Our making all this effort mortals make ?⁴

This is a reflection upon earlier comments by Keeper toward the Sermon on the Mount :

A beautiful impossibility...
An irresistible impossibility.
A lofty beauty no one can live up to,
Yet no one turn from trying to live up to.⁵

Ferguson says :

In nature as in man the fall has left its mark : "Earth felt the wound,
and Nature from her seat...gave signs of woe."⁶

The wounds in nature and the flaws in man are acceptable or at least endurable aspects of the human condition, reflecting the consequences of freedom of choice. A longing for Paradise is simply romantic nostalgia for an impossible prehuman state. Yet the yearning is so intense that the world lies forever, as Frost notes in "The Grindstone,"⁷ under the shadow of the "ruinous live apple tree."⁸ And even the harvester in

1 Lathem, op. cit., p. 502: "A fracture in *the rocks beneath New York...*"

2 Ibid., p. 506.

3 Ibid., p. 517.

4 Idem.

5 Ibid., p. 512.

6 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IX, 782-3.

7 Appearing in *New Hampshire*, 1923.

8 Lathem, op. cit., p. 189.

“After Apple-Picking”¹ starts from a ladder “sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still,”² though he and all other human beings are “overtired / Of the great harvest”³ of what Milton called “the fruit / Of that forbidden tree.”⁴ What will trouble the sleep of the apple-picker is the fact of mortality, the introduction of death, change, and loss...⁵

When Paul asked Jonah, “What would you have God if not merciful?” Jonah replied: “Just.”⁶ Earlier, Paul had noted that *not* trusting God to be unmerciful is the beginning of all wisdom, and he—reflecting Frost’s own long and bitter struggle himself in a world lacking in justice—confronts Jonah with:

I’m going to make you see
How relatively little justice matters.⁷

After proceeding to do exactly that, he succeeds in demolishing all Jonah’s arguments and finally brings the contrite runaway around to the following humble understanding:

I think I may have got God wrong entirely.⁸

On the surface an honest and forthright concession. The prime requisite for a clear comprehension of the universe and of society in general is this basic concept of God as *Creator*—as *Absolute Sovereign* in the universe! With this as a launching pad or “frame of reference” for subsequent studies, the big problems pertaining to man’s life and existence, which sometimes confound the world’s sharpest experts, fall easily into place. Without first things first,⁹ however, the tendency of the world’s best systems is but to confusion, with theory compounded upon multiplied theory.

Jonah’s final and contrite admission was that he was off the deep end in his self-righteous crusade for justice. His position became untenable in the light of weightier matters:¹⁰

I should have warned you, though, my sense of justice
Was about all there ever was to me.
When that fades I fade—every time I fade.
Mercy on me for having thought I knew.¹¹

1 Appearing in *North of Boston*, 1914.

2 Lathem, op. cit., p. 68.

3 Ibid., p. 69.

4 Milton, op. cit., I, 1-2.

5 Alfred R. Ferguson in *Frost: Centennial Reflections*, p. 434.

6 Lathem, op. cit., p. 507.

7 Ibid., pp. 498-9.

8 Ibid., p. 518.

9 In philosophy, and in all true science, the great First Cause points reasonably, logically, and inexorably to God—Designer, Creator, and Life itself. (John 1. 4; 14. 6)

10 See footnote 1, p. 39.

11 Lathem, op. cit., p. 518.

Blind fanaticism and loyalty to "a cause" other than the interest and glory of the Almighty had driven him to an untenable position of his own making and almost beyond the point of no return. But for the mercy and grace of God, he well-nigh missed out on his chance to repent. The words of Christ in condemnation of hypocrisy and Pharisaism augur forcefully here :

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.¹

Only God can open the eyes of the blind—whether physical or spiritual—as Jonah in meek confession (above) at last perceived.

*

The quality of *mercy* is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But *mercy* is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When *mercy* seasons *justice*. Therefore, Jew,
Though *justice* be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of *justice*, none of us
Should see salvation...²

(To be concluded)

1 Matthew 23. 23-4.

2 Portia to Shylock, from *The Merchant of Venice*.

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