Foundations of American Literature

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The Twentieth Century

(Part Eight)

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"The Figure a Poem Makes"[1]

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As a background leading up to the present research, we have given consideration to Frost as man, as husband-father, as student-teacher, and as poet-philosopher;[2] but we have not brought to the fore his poetry for analytical attention as to its craftsmanship. It is that subject with which this paper will deal.

Previous effort has been made, however, to correlate Christian philosophy with the poetry, writings, and pronouncements of Frost.[3] Whether or not the foregoing papers have been successful in this undertaking may be open to question. Nevertheless, what is *certain* is that only the tip of the iceberg has been touched, and the future is unquestionably bright for scholarly research in the same area.

It has been often mentioned that Frost's works serve as an introduction to the man, and vice versa.[4] "Frost," Waldo Frank remarked, "is not only a beautiful poet. He is a beautiful person." The reason for this is to be discovered on close examination of the man and of his handiwork. "To know the man is to know his works; to know his works is to know the man." The human mind is so constituted as to make possible our entry into the poet's own mind by way of his poems. Thus we are able to share his judgment and innermost thoughts. Such is the virtue and glory of all poetry, and Frost's is no exception.

Frost was doggedly tenacious in character, but disarmingly sincere as well. Hence, he "oozed genuineness." It was his own opinion that, of all commendable character-

1 For the central thought in this paper, I am indebted to Robert Frost himself, whose "highly-compressed, richly metaphorical" 1500-word essay on the art of poetry, prefacing the Holt edition of *Collected Poems* (1939), bore the same title.

2 Or, "philosopher-poet." The terms may be read interchangeably.

3 Specific Biblical influence detectable in and through his life and works.

4 See *Culture and Language*, March 1981, p. 2.

istics, sincerity and individuality are the two absolute components which go to make up the backbone of all deep thinking and which, in combination, are to be found in *all* great writers.

Radcliffe Squires has observed that

> Frost's genius is impressively evident in the versatility of his poetry. It has the breadth and ideal passion of Emerson's, the ikons and incantation of Dickinson's, the pathetic irony of Robinson's. Furthermore, because at its best it has all of these things together, Frost's poetry is greater than Emerson's, Dickinson's, or Robinson's. Frost becomes so superbly the New England poet that one is not tempted to call him one.[1]

A WAY OF LIFE

Samuel Taylor Coleridge posed the question "What is poetry?" and answered it himself by saying that it is "so nearly the same question with 'What is a poet?' that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other."[2] Wordsworth called poetry "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge...the impassioned expression which is the countenance of all Science."[3]

To Frost, poetry was neither vocation nor avocation, but "a way of life." Critics find it hard to separate Frost the man from Frost the poet, for he lived as poet and dedicated his entire life to the art. It became his raison d'être, "a momentary stay against confusion," and in later years——a clarification of the purpose of life. In the works of Frost are to be found, therefore, not only a way of poetry. For him the two were interchangeable, and Ford rightly concludes that Frost has "followed consistently his greatest metaphor—that poetry is life and life is poetry."[4]

Closely observant of man and nature, he always struck a practical, down-to-earth, and direct note in all his poems addressing the problems of life. Many of them are metaphysical in nature, and all carry with them his own special little moral tags, bearing along the lesson he wanted to teach. Yet he is not known for obtrusive didacticism. In "The Lesson for Today," for example, his message is simple and explicit: *everything* on earth is subject to change, and the time allotted to man is terrifyingly limited:

> *There is a limit to our time extension.*[5]
> We all are doomed to broken-off careers,
> And so's the nation, so's the total race.

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1 Radcliffe Squires, *The Major Themes of Robert Frost*, p. 12.
2 Babette Deutsch, *Poetry Handbook*, p. 111.
3 Idem.
4 Caroline Ford, *The Less Traveled Road*, p. 49.
5 Biblical in essence and in the reality of human experience. (See Isaiah 40.7–8, James 4.14, etc.)

The earth itself is liable to the fate
Of meaninglessly being broken off.

His studied conclusion in light of the above: "The groundwork of all faith is human woe."[1]

With the passing of the years and the inevitable maturity with which they altered both man and poet, Frost penned:

They would not find me changed from him they knew—
Only more sure of all I thought was true.[2]

No doubt Frost's primary intention here is to indicate that his basic metaphysical convictions have become stronger when the ripening effect of "Time's Arrow" has been embodied within the equation. But his ideas about poetry, in fact, did change. Barry observes that "his early critical ideas were wholly those of the craftsman; later ideas were those of the philosopher. A quality of abstraction creeps in—the result not simply of age, or fame, or rationalization, but of a broader concern for the nature and function of poetry."[3]

On the matter of younger generation "philosopher-theologs" who oppose metaphysical tenets which Frost held dear, however, the poet remained adamant. This comes to light, for example, in the monologue of an elderly pastor who ponders his dilemma involving a member in his congregation (from another generation) not easily swayed by every newfangled speculative theory that comes along:

You couldn't tell her what the West was saying,
And what the South, to her serene belief.
She had some art of hearing and yet not
Hearing the latter wisdom of the world.
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.
What are you going to do with such a person?
Strange how such innocence gets its own way.
I shouldn't be surprised if in this world
It were the force that would at last prevail.

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1 A line from the same poem.

2 Last lines of the first poem in *A Boy's Will* (1913). In "The Black Cottage" (*North of Boston*, 1914) Frost concludes that certain essential truths remain *fixed* in spite of the fluctuating nature of man's whims, fancies, and "popular styles" in philosophy and thought—yes, even in "modern scientific thinking" so-called. Hence, his oft-repeated pronouncement that "Something *must be left to God.*" He wisely counsels:

...dear me, why abandon a belief
Merely because it ceases to be true.
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes.
Most of the change we *think* we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favor.

3 Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing*, p. 10.

Do you know but for her there was a time
When, to please younger members of the church,
Or rather say non-members in the church,
Whom we all have to think of nowadays,
I would have changed the Creed a very little?
Not that she ever had to ask me not to;
It never got so far as that; but the bare thought
Of her old tremulous bonnet in the pew,
And of her half asleep, was too much for me.
Why, I might wake her up and startle her.
It was the words 'descended into Hades'
That seemed too pagan to our liberal youth.
You know they suffered from a general onslaught.
And well, if they weren't true why keep right on
Saying them like the heathen? We could drop them.
Only—there was the bonnet in the pew.
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?
I'm just as glad she made me keep hands off,
For, dear me, why abandon a belief
Merely because it ceases to be true.
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes.
Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favor.
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.[1]

When he was thirty-nine (1913–4), Frost had once casually remarked that he would *never* change. To take this flatly and literally, however, would be to misunderstand "Frost, life itself, and the nature of poetry." "Firmness of belief does not mean stagnation,"[2] stated Doyle. What Frost had in mind is expressed by Whicher, who tells us that "...poets in our time are compelled to choose between being humanly complete and being contemporary," and he speaks approvingly of Frost for having "declined to be warped by the pressures of modern living."[3]

GENIUS AND GENESIS

On the making of a poet, Frost said that "the manner of a poet's germination is less like that of a bean in the ground than of a waterspout at sea. He has to begin

1 Excerpts from "The Black Cottage"
2 John Robert Doyle, Jr., *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, p. 295.
3 George W. Nitchie, *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost*, p. 147.

as a cloud of all the other poets he ever read.... And first the cloud reaches down toward the water from above and then the water reaches up toward the cloud from below and finally cloud and water join together to roll as one pillar between heaven and earth. The base of water he picks up from below is of course all the life he ever lived outside of books."[1]

The poetry-filled heart of Robert Frost, effervescent and overflowing, continuously pumped poetic liqueur into every nook and cranny of his body, mind, soul, and spirit. This is manifest even in his *definitions* of poetry. In "The Figure a Poem Makes," for example, he said: "[A poem] begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love.... Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it." Few besides Frost have ever given so many cogent prose definitions of poems and of poetry——some fragmentary, others most colorfully impressionistic, but *all* full of originality and charm, *and poetic in themselves*. Consider the following exemplary:

> The scale of heaven is in trying to say matter in terms of spirit. To be able to dip anywhere in time and connect anything in space with it. That's poetry, not only that but everything we are. Matter and spirit... the two great incommensurables...[2]
>
> A poem begins more ethereal and ends more material.[3]
>
> A poem begins more felt than thought and ends more thought than felt.[4]
>
> Poetry is a renewal of language, the dawning in you of ideas in their freshness—the freshness of having caught a feeling just as it comes over you—like mischief...[5]
>
> Poetry is both prose and verse.[6]
>
> Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat.[7]
>
> A poem [is] not merely a trick, but a performance.[8]
>
> A poem is the emotion of having a thought while the reader waits a little anxiously for the success of dawn.[9]
>
> Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements.[10]
>
> My definition of literature [poetry] would be just this, words that have become deeds.[11]
>
> A poem is a momentary stay against confusion.[12]

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1 Barry, op. cit., p. 116.
2 Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence*, p. 325.
3 Ibid., p. 281.
4 Idem.
5 Idem.
6 Idem.
7 Ibid., p. 402.
8 Philip L. Gerber, *Robert Frost*, p. 115.
9 Ibid., p. 111. (From "The Constant Symbol")
10 Idem.
11 Idem.
12 Idem.

[Poetry is] that which is lost altogether in translation.[1]

A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom.[2]

Poetry is a fresh look and a fresh listen.[3]

[In poetry...] all the fun's in how you say a thing.[4]

A rhyme should give you the feeling that it was made in heaven. You've got to learn to hover.[5]

[Ideally a poem should almost write itself...] Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.[6]

[Poetry is that which has] all the colors of an enthusiasm passed through an idea.[7]

[Poetry] is like a wild game preserve. It's where wild things live.[8]

[Poetry] is a clutch of words that gives you a clutch at the heart.[9]

I've often said that another definition of poetry is dawn—that it's something dawning on you while you're writing it. It comes off if it really dawns when the light comes at the end. And the feeling of dawn—the freshness of dawn—that you didn't think this all out and write it in prose first and then translate it into verse. That's abhorrent![10]

Poetry is a still small voice in a tempest and tumult.[11]

A poem must have both facility and felicity.[12]

Poetry is a kind of fooling that you got to get the the hang of...[13]

Poetry is a prowess and closest in kin are the sports.[14]

Education by poetry is education by metaphor.[15]

The purpose of poetry is to express the ineffable.[16]

All poetry is to me first a matter of sound. I hear my things spoken.[17]

[Two ways of coming close to poetry...] One is by writing it, and the other is by reading it.[18]

The height of all poetic thinking...is that attempt to see matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter.[19]

Poetry is life and life is poetry.[20]

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1 Gerber, op. cit., p. 46.
2 Barry, op. cit., p. 31.
3 Ibid., p. 80.
4 Doyle, op. cit., p. 20.
5 Robert Francis, *Frost: A Time to Talk*, p. 52.
6 Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (eds.), *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 20. (From "The Figure a Poem Makes")
7 Ibid., p. 36.
8 Edward Connery Lathem (ed.), *Interviews with Robert Frost*, p. 137.
9 Ibid., p. 250.
10 Ibid., p. 204.
11 Louis Mertins, *Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking*, p. 353.
12 Ibid., p. 403.
13 Nancy Vogel, *Robert Frost, Teacher*, p. 50.
14 Ibid., p. 83.
15 Ibid., p. 51.
16 Squires, op. cit., from the "Preface."
17 Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph*, p. 68.
18 Ford, op. cit., p. 3. This item appeared on page 13 of the *Amherst Alumni Council News* (1931) in an article by Frost entitled "Education by Poetry, A Meditative Monologue."
19 Ibid., p. 34.
20 Ibid., p. 49.

These definitions and his comments on poetry open a door of understanding into the life of Frost as man, his concept and view of nature's God, man's purpose in life and existence upon earth; and they afford us a key, besides, with which to fathom his works. In this respect he reveals the mastery of his own art, and gives us the added benefit of insight through association with the metaphysician as seer.

A group of Brooklyn high-society clubwomen once asked Frost how in the world he had found time to be a poet. His blue eyes atwinkle, he handed them a characteristic summary of his poetic life:

> Like a sneak, I stole some of it.
> Like a man, I seized some of it;
> And I had a little in my tin cup to begin with![1]

The foregoing are all—very typically—"drops from his little tin cup." Doyle said:

> Whoso touches the total poetry of Robert Frost touches reality as fully as man is allowed to experience it between the covers of a book. The wholeness of the best Frost poetry available to a reader is made up of a vast particularity which gives character, individuality, and creates the basis for the symbolic, by which man lives, widespread modern obliviousness notwithstanding.[2]

In 1924, Frost wrote to Louis Untermeyer:

> Since I last saw you I have come to the conclusion that style in prose or verse is that which indicates how the writer takes himself and what he is saying.... I am not satisfied to let it go with the aphorism that the style is the man. The man's ideas would be some element then of his style. So would his deeds. But I would narrow the definition. His deeds are his deeds; his ideas are his ideas. His style is the way he carries himself toward his ideas and deeds. Mind you if he is down-spirited it will be all he can do to have the ideas without the carriage. The style is out of his superfluity. It is the mind skating circles round itself as it moves forward. Emerson had one of the noblest least egotistical of styles. By comparison with it Thoreau's was conceited, Whitman's bumptious. Carlyle's way of taking himself simply infuriates me. Longfellow took himself with the gentlest twinkle.[3]

Then, in his "Introduction to *King Jasper*" (introducing Edwin Arlington Robinson's last work, published posthumously in 1935), we discover some of Frost's most brilliant and memorable prose, among which appears the following:

> The style is the man. Rather say the style is the way the man takes himself; and to be at all charming or even bearable, the way is almost rigidly prescribed. If it is with outer humor, it must be with inner seriousness. Neither one alone without the other under it will do....

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1 Elizabeth Isaacs, *An Introduction to Robert Frost*, p. 24.
2 Doyle, op. cit., p. 295.
3 Hyatt Howe Waggoner, *American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*, p. 314.

Poetry transcends itself in the playfulness of the toast.[1]

POETIC CRAFTSMANSHIP

Poetic genius, according to Frost, left to the freedom of its natural state (untrammelled and unshackled) *must* result in poetic genesis. He said that three things were always necessary elements for his "performance in words"—[2]

> The first is an evidence of self-surprise; the second, a cool-morning clarity, the brightness and freshness of growing, expanding things; the third, a ramfication with direction.[3]

He believed that "when these are magically present in the right compound, a poem is begun."[4]

"In literature it is our business to give people the thing that will make them say, 'Oh, yes I know what you mean,'" Frost told his students. "It is never to tell them something they don't know, but something they know and hadn't thought of saying. It must be something they recognize."[5] Gorham Munson records the following classroom experience as a former student of Frost:

> I do not recall just when it was that Frost first wrote a formula, famous with his classes, upon a Pinkerton blackboard. He put forward the following kinds of matter used for literary purposes:
>
> Uncommon in experience—uncommon in writing.
> Common in experience—common in writing.
> Uncommon in experience—common in writing.
> Common in experience—uncommon in writing.
>
> The last was the kind of material to search for, he told us.[6]

Frost held that any poem must combine three distinct elements:

1. Point or idea:	(Theme) (Message)
2. Details of development:	(Structure) (Mechanics) (Metaphor)
3. Technique with which it is crafted:	(Strategy) (Style)

If one begins with the principle that poetry is organic, as Frost did, then it is required that thought take precedence over form, and we become Emersonian in our approach to poetry: "The thought and the form are equal in order of time, but in

1 Cox and Lathem (eds.), op. cit., pp. 65, 67.
2 One of the many-faceted Frostian definitions of poetry.
3 Excerpt from the Charles Eliot Norton lecture at Harvard, 1936.
4 Isaacs, op. cit., p. 52.
5 Vogel, op. cit., p. 13.
6 Gorham B. Munson, *Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense*, p. 48.

order of genesis the thought is prior to the form."[1]

The most important thing about a poem to Frost was "the willfulness of its central idea, a willfulness so persistent that it should compensate for and triumph over a slip or two in technique. Indeed a faulty poem from the technical point of view may be faulty because of the very vigor of its content.... Poetry should be serious but not too serious; it should play with its seriousness."[2] "...all the fun's in how you say a thing,"[3] he insisted.

Doyle observes that a good poem is *never* an accident. "It results from a human intelligence with knowledge and skill enough to impose form, pattern, and organization upon unformed materials. It requires genuine creative ability. It is usually the manner (technique) that gives distinction to the matter (content),"[4] he stated. A poem is fashioned of intuition and form——Emersonian "intuition" first, followed by the form. On receiving the "inspiration" for any new creation, Frost himself never knew in advance how a poem might turn out. It was like "taking hold of the hem of a garment," as he expressed it, but without any previous knowledge of pattern and design. "Then, sometimes automatically and almost miraculously, under the fingers of the artist, the fabric shapes up."[5] By "proper words in proper places," Frost meant that words are placed to satisfy the requirements both of meter and of idiom. They must also please—simultaneously—both mind and ear by their logical and musical harmony.

According to Elizabeth Isaacs, "Frost's metrical practice lists the following variety of patterns: blank verse, sonnets, heroic couplets, two-stress verse, three-stress verse, four-stress verse, five-stress verse, and ballad verse. One hundred-thirty-one of his three hundred or more poems are in iambic pentameter of which forty-five are blank verse and forty-six are rhymed stanzas. According to his own distinction between strict and loose iambic already noted, Frost chose the latter for the bulk of his work; he feels that this is the most natural English meter. He has never hesitated to vary his cadence for a desired flexibility or to provide for a variety of beat when he felt that the sound posturing of sense made such deviation necessary."[6]

A comparison of the two versions of "Nothing Gold Can Stay" will illustrate what is meant by the "poetic genius of the man" in perfecting his lines. An early draft of the original version is given first. Below it is the final form as it appears in all published versions today.[7]

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1 Emerson as quoted by Gerber, op. cit., p. 108.
2 See future issues of *Culture and Language* on the subject "Frost and His Use of Humor as a Means of Accentuating the Serious."
3 Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph*, p. 38.
4 Idem.
5 Jean Gould, *Robert Frost: The Aim Was Song*, p. 250.
6 Isaacs, op. cit., p. 84.
7 Mertins, op. cit., p. 218.

B E F O R E

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaves are flowers;
But only so for hours.
Then leaves subside to leaves.
In Autumn she achieves
A still more golden blaze.
But nothing golden stays.

A F T E R

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 poet's genius in craftsmanship is obvious. In its perfected form, the poem is said to be "non-translatable;" that is, it cannot be paraphrased. It says what it says in its own language, which is separate from the thought. In its scansion, every line except the first and eighth break naturally into three two-syllable (iambic trimeter) feet. The first line is irregular, consisting of one trochee, one spondee, and one iamb. Line eight consists of one cretic and one iamb. The poem's rhyme scheme is a perfect "a-a-b-b-c-c-d-d"—all true rhymes, reproducing *exactly* the final vowel and consonant sounds. Frost deftly employs alliteration in word combinations such as "green...gold," "Her hardest hue...hold," "dawn...down...day," etc. The poet's extreme dexterity is also evidenced in light of the fact that it would be well-nigh impossible to convey in another form, equally brief and exact, his thematic idea and the emotional climax of the poem with its complex and unique mixture of feeling—*all* blended together so smoothly to form such an integrated whole.

FROSTIAN DISTINCTIVES——PLAINNESS OF SPEECH

Frost used great plainness of speech. He advocated with Emerson the rejection of "poetic diction" in favor of language reflecting life around us with precision. "Emerson was a strong supporter of intuitive speech, regardless of its conformance with arbitrary rules," states Gerber.[1] This would be "the speech of life before it is fossilized in books."[2] Gerber elaborates by saying of Frost that he

1 Gerber, op. cit., p. 116.

2 Idem. Gerber does not credit Frost with this expression, but no utterance could possibly be more Frost-like.

> ...carried this advice into his own verse, never apologizing for showing preference for the real, the genuine, and the colloquial over the more turgid literary phrase... The speakers in his poems were increasigly allowed to use their voices, never for the delivery of froth, but of "a shower of bullets" that hit their marks with rare and immediately felt accuracy.[1]

What readers hear and respond to in his poems are "the recognizable rhythms of standard American colloquial speech..."[2] "The common speech is always giving off...the special vocabulary of poetry," he stated.[3] A change to this colloquial style that marked him for life came about some time between *A Boy's Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1914), catapulting him to worldwide literary attention and success. Wordsworth, in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, had used the expression "a plainer and more emphatic language" years earlier, which phrase accurately describes the change that took place in Frost's poetry when he finally discovered his own style. He improved upon it thereafter in order to achieve new effects, but it remained fundamentally the same until his death—a genuine earmark of the man. Emphasizing colloquial speech patterns and simple meters ("strict iambic and loose iambic"), Frost insisted that all poetry could be saved from monotony by the rhythms and intonations of common, ordinary, everyday speech. "The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless,"[4] he said. And these are the very distinctives in *North of Boston* that drew universal attention and acclaim. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall.... Good fences make good neighbors," both phrases repeated for emphasis in the initial poem, are typical. His final poem of this successful publication is quoted in full:

GOOD HOURS

I had for my winter evening walk—
No one at all with whom to talk,
But I had the cottages in a row
Up to their shining eyes in snow.

And I thought I had the folk within:
I had the sound of a violin;
I had a glimpse through curtain laces
Of youthful forms and youthful faces.

I had such company outward bound.
I went till there were no cottages found.
I turned and repented, but coming back
I saw no window but that was black.

Over the snow my creaking feet
Disturbed the slumbering village street

1 Gerber, op. cit., p. 117.
2 Ibid., p. 120.
3 Louis Untermeyer, *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, p. 92.
4 Cox and Lathem, op. cit., p. 18. (From "The Figure a Poem Makes")

Like profanation, by your leave,
At ten o'clock of a winter eve.

These four quatrains of "loose iambic" tetrameter give indication as to the reason for the success of *North of Boston* and its wide reader appeal. The very first review, written by Frost's beloved fellow-poet Edward Thomas[1] for the London *Daily News*, hailed the book a masterpiece of modern poetry and stated that it was destined to become a classic of its kind. With one voice, critics began to acclaim Frost, and accorded him "a prominent place among the major poets of the world," but it must not be forgotten that it was Edward Thomas who had" set the tone for immediate recognition":

> This is one of the most revolutionary books of modern times, but it is one of the quietest and least aggressive. It speaks, and it is poetry.... These poems are revolutionary because they lack the exaggeration of rhetoric, and even at first sight appear to lack the poetic intensity of which rhetoric is an imitation. Their language is free from the poetical words and forms that are the chief material of secondary poets.... Many, if not most, of the separate lines and separate sentences are plain and, in themselves, nothing. But they are bound together and made elements of beauty by a calm eagerness of emotion....[2]

NATIVE TO THE GRAIN

Lawrance Thompson noted that "...Frost's entire work is deeply rooted in the American, even in the most vital Puritan, idiom. It is native to the grain, and yet thoroughly original."[3] Louis Untermeyer also considered Frost to be "the most American of poets" for the following reasons:

1. His characteristically plain utterances, and
2. The conversational tones of speech in his poetry.[4]

Frost never cared for ornate overburdening of poetic expression, and he never couched the meaning of his poems in obscure or abstruse language. He is reported to have said that he felt it "the utmost of ambition to lodge a few poems where they [would] be hard to get rid of."[5] In their simple profundity they are wonder-

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1 The talented life of this young literary artist was snuffed out by the explosion of a German shell in France during the forenoon of Easter Monday, 1917. Thompson states: "The British attack had opened to the east of Arras on a forty-five mile front which stretched to the north and south, at seven o'clock on the morning of the ninth of April 1917. Thomas had been among those who watched from his artillery post the first waves of British troops crossing no man's land. A few minutes later, he was killed by the concussion from an exploding shell." (Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph*, p. 93)

2 The words of Edward Thomas as quoted by Gould, op. cit., p. 133.

3 The Committee on the Frost Centennial of the University of Southern Mississippi, *Centennial Essays*, p. 442.

4 Idem.

5 Quoted from the "Introduction" to *Selected Prose of Robert Frost* by Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (eds.).

fully complete, and in this endeavor Frost was amazingly successful. It would not be at all incomprehensible if we were to ascribe to Frost the authorship of the old axiom, "Simplicity is Truth's most becoming garb," for his poems are outstanding in this regard. Gerber says:

> Frost's reputation as a poet of "simplicity" derives from the metrical tools he selects... The poems are preponderantly short, seldom running over from one page to another... Exceptions do appear, of course, notably in the longer blank-verse pieces, but they do not alter the dominant impression of brevity, hence simplicity.[1]

FROSTIAN DISTINCTIVES——SOUND POSTURING

The observation has been made that Frost's greatest contribution to American literature is to be found in the variety of sound inherent in his poetry. His appeal to the ear through all possible subtleties in the handling of language is one of the great powers of his own (and all) poetry. He is reported as having boasted to John Bartlett: "I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense."[2] He defined *sentence* as "a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung. You may string words together without a sentence-sound to string them on just as you may tie clothes together by the sleeve and stretch them without a clothes line between two trees, but——it's bad for the clothes."[3] This appeal to the ear through the many-layered subtleties in the poetry of Robert Frost is one of the factors that enhances his craftsmanship, and he has always exploited it to great advantage.

To Lewis N. Chase, American critic and professor of English, Frost wrote from Amherst on April 29, 1917: "I can't keep up any interst in sentences that don't SHAPE *on some speaking tone* of voice."[4]

In a lecture to the Browne and Nichols School on May 10, 1915 (as transcribed by George Browne), Frost explains: "And the Sound in the mouths of men I found to be the basis of all effective expression,—not merely words or phrases, but sentences, —living things flying round,—the vital parts of speech. And my poems are to be read in the appreciative tones of this live speech."[5]

In the words of William Stanley Braithwaite, writing for the *Boston Evening Transcript* (May 8, 1915): "No poet in either England or America, except this newly arrived New England poet, has consciously developed and practiced this essential and vital quality of poetry which he characterizes as sound-posturing." This poetic theory on

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1 Gerber, op. cit., pp. 88–9.
2 Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years*, p. 631.
3 Ibid., p. 434.
4 Barry, op. cit., p. 70.
5 Ibid., p. 143.

"sense-sounds" is but another indication of the poet's urge for human independence. Confident of his own judgment, Frost withstood the attractions of affiliation with poetic and philosophic schools of thought throughout life, true to his regular pattern of independence established in earlier years. Refusing as a youth to be bound by academic disciplines, he had educated himself. And now, true to form, he had also refused to be bound by prevailing patterns of thought when developing his own "sound of sense."

Excerpts from a letter to John T. Bartlett dated February 22, 1914 (Beaconsfield, England) give some indication of what Frost had in mind when he used this term to express his own distinctive concept of poetic direction:

> The sentence-sounds are very definite entities. (This is no literary mysticism I am preaching.) They are as definite as words. It is not impossible that they could be collected in a book though I don't at present see on what system they would be catalogued. They are apprehended by the ear. They are gathered by the ear from the vernacular and brought into books. Many of them are already familiar to us in books. I think no writer invents them. The most original writer only catches them fresh from talk, where they grow spontaneously.
>
> A man is a writer if *all* his words are strung on definite recognizable sentence sounds. The voice of the imagination, the speaking voice must know certainly how to behave (and) how to posture in every sentence he offers. A man is a marked writer if his words are largely strung on the more striking sentence sounds.[1]

Ear, not eye, for Frost aimed at the spoken word, not the printed page. From the beginning of his career, he was possessed of an almost uncanny "sixth sense" when it came to catching and recording authentic native speech sounds heard by the ear. "Remember that the sentence sound often says *more* than the words," he emphasized. "It may even as in irony convey a meaning opposite to the words."[2] Make no mistake: Frost did not compose wholly without keeping his frame of reference (poetic orthodoxy) in mind. One cannot merely unload the tape recorder onto a blank sheet of paper and call it verse, but the dilemma was somehow resolved by his ultimate literary resourcefulness and by his "uncanny" sense of sound. His verse does convey a most convincing illusion of actual, everyday conversation.

Carl Wilmore, for *The Boston Post* of February 14, 1916, elicited the following:

> I hear everything I write. All poetry is to me first a matter of sound. I hear my things spoken. I write verse that might be called 'free'—the free-versers have accepted me!—but I believe, after all, that there must be a cadence, a rhythm, to all that is to be poetry at all. I don't mean jingle; I hate rhyme for itself.[3]

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1 George Perkins (ed.), *American Poetic Theory*, pp. 213–4.

2 Lawrance Thompson (ed.), *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p. 113. (Robert Frost to John T. Bartlett, 22 February 1914, from Beaconsfield, England)

3 Lathem (ed.), op. cit., p. 12.

CATALYTIC CRITIQUE

Early in his career a clergyman friend, commenting on Frost's first poem to appear in *The Independent*, tried to give him some ill-advised wisdom about metrics, complaining that the poem sounded "too much like talk." Suddenly, Frost knew *precisely* what he was after. Mark Van Doren reports:

> Some time during the dark years he sent a number of his poems to a friend for criticism, saying that the magazines would not have them but that they might be worth someone's reading anyhow, and asked the friend to discuss them frankly. The friend's report was that they did not seem to him to be poetry. If he were asked what they did seem to be he would have to say: Conversation. Mr. Frost, far from being discouraged, knew that he had found out something. His poems had one quality at least. They sounded like something. There was something in them that could be named. So he said to himself: I will develop this quality until it becomes not my weakness but my strength; I will prove that conversation can *be* poetry.[1]

THE ART OF DISARMING ARTISTRY

Once completed, Frost's poems appear to be quite artless, but to achieve the illusion of artlessness is a part of the art. The raw material is simple and the diction is simple, but the completed poem represents an idea which has been developed with considerable technical skill. Let us look at "The Aim Was Song," for example:

> Before man came to blow it right
> The wind once blew itself untaught,
> And did its loudest day and night
> In any rough place where it caught.
>
> Man came to tell it what was wrong:
> It hadn't found the place to blow;
> It blew too hard—the aim was song.
> And listen—how it ought to go!
>
> He took a little in his mouth,
> And held it long enough for north
> To be converted into south,
> And then by measure blew it forth.
>
> By measure. It was word and note,
> The wind the wind had meant to be—
> A little through the lips and throat.
> The aim was song—the wind could see.

The artistry and originality of poems such as this is not apparent until one tries to imitate what appears to have been crafted so easily. Then——and only then——is discovered the fact that poems of this type are indeed inimitable. Frost's aim was

1 Doyle, op. cit., p. 260.

"the most exquisitely poised balance of beauty and utility"[1]—a song with sense, and this he accomplished magnificently.

FROSTIAN DISTINCTIVES——MORAL AND METAPHYSICAL

Frost's poetry contains definite moral concern, for those who wish to see it. It is more often than not found in poems having to do with man and nature rather than in those directly concerned with the concept of God. Those who fail to see this didactic element in the works of Frost are simply looking for something too complex. They are unable to see the forest for the trees. "A Prayer in Spring," "Fire and Ice," "Nothing Gold Can Stay," "The Lesson for Today," "The Fear of God," "Astrometaphysical," [We Vainly Wrestle]——all are typical of Frost in the realm of the moral and metaphysical.

> Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
> Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
> Deeper down in the well than where the water
> Gives me back in a shining surface picture
> Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,
> Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
> *Once*, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
> I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
> Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
> Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.
> Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
> One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
> Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
> Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
> Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.[2]

Overriding thought in the above: Believe! Believe *something*. It is better to hold some belief than nothing at all. In an article entitled "Education by Poetry, A Meditative Monologue," written for the *Amherst Alumni Council News* (1931), Frost is quoted as saying, "The person who gets close enough to poetry is going to know more about the word *belief* than anybody else knows; even in religion nowadays."[3]

One of the reasons why Frost is such a recurring phenomenon in modern poetry is his exploitation of the very bedrock of human experience——his handling of the metaphysical. Common to *all* men, for all are created "in the image of God,"[4] this is "the stuff from which great and enduring art may be wrought."[5] When examples such as the following are subjected to close scrutiny, the poet's metaphysical propen-

1 Gerber, op. cit., p. 116.
2 "For Once, Then, Something" from *New Hampshire* (1923).
3 Ford, op. cit., p. 32.
4 For explication of this important concept, see *Culture and Language*, March 1981, p. 21.
5 Nitchie, op. cit., p. 109.

sity becomes immediately apparent: "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus," "Why Wait for Science?," "Take Something Like a Star," "The Road Not Taken," "The Trial by Existence," and "The Secret Sits," among others. Some of these will be dealt with in detail in a subsequent paper on the topic "Frost as Metaphysician." For the moment, however, let us look at the last mentioned——one of Frost's rather rare but typically enchanting couplets. Its metrical pattern consists of one cretic and two anapests that make up the first trimeter (line 1), and essentially the same for the second trimeter (line 2) with the exception of two prefixed, un-accented syllables.

— ◡ — ◡◡ — ◡ ◡ —
We dance round in a ring and suppose,
◡ ◡ — ◡ — ◡ ◡ — ◡ ◡ —
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

The metaphysical aspect of the couplet is clear. It is enhanced by Frost, as always, through his adept use of the metrical. With primary accents in line one falling distinctly on "We," "round," "ring," and "suppose," it is obvious that *man* is meant. The picture obtaining is that man, in pride and rebellion against God his Creator, circles endlessly and mechanistically "round" in his self-centered and finite little social, economic, political, national, religious, educational, and philosophic "worlds" like a company of "robot circus performers" under spell of the big top——a meaningless ritual "signifying nothing and nothingness," and dismissing from the mind any semblance of individual thought processes, decision, or will. He becomes hopelessly enmeshed in a vicious circle of the materialistic universe; he finds himself being sucked deeper and deeper into the hellish jaws of this relentlessly magnetic maelstrom——a vision that Dante saw as the ever-narrowing corridor descending into Hell. In short, he is but a pitiable slave to his own status-quo systems. From such a sad state, O Lord, deliver us, *please!*

Line two, on the other hand, paints a totally different picture. Frost's metrical pattern and his unmistakable accent upon the words "Secret," "sits," "middle," and "knows" would indicate that the poet is endeavoring to get across to us the fact that there is *reality* beyond the mere physical world, and that the Almighty God[1] who *should be* willingly placed by mankind at the very center of our circumstantial existence (Alas! How often He is *not!*) sits patiently in the center of His universe still, and knows *absolutely*[2] the intricate delicacy of *all things*, which man in his *extremely finite* grasp at truth and fact[3] is able (by permissive will of the Creator) to fathom and comprehend——*but only in meager measure.*

1 How very sad that the creature's Creator, Lifegiver, Lover, and Sustainer should be rudely ignored and quite left out of man-made systems altogether (as if He did not even exist!).

2 *Nothing* can be hid from the eyes of God who is *omniscient.*

3 Via the avenue of *science* (L. *scientia*, viz., experiential, experimental, reproducible *knowledge* that results from truly empirical investigation, observation, testing, and proof).

The force of the message this couplet bears is to be found not alone in choice and arrangement of words, but more than anything else in the metrical pattern that lends emphasis to meaning: "We" as contrasted with "Secret;" "round" (indicating the *vicious circle* concept of furious, hectic, and undirected activity—resulting in mere futility) as contrasted with "sits" which would indicate a calm, king-like equanimity of will, plan, and purpose assuring us that everything is under total and absolute control; "ring" (the "outer circle," periphery of understanding, mere glimpses of the truth, wisdom, and knowledge of God) as contrasted with "middle" (indicating *absolute knowledge and power* as the nuclear foundation of all things),[1] and "suppose" (on the part of man) with "knows" (on the part of God). How excellent an exegesis on the Biblical understanding of God and man![2]

FROSTIAN DISTINCTIVES——SATIRE

In his satirical masterpieces directed against the political, religious, educational, and "scientific" big-wigs of his day (and other days!), Frost loved to point up the fact that man is really possessed of a tendency toward extreme conceit and high-handedness when he becomes inebriated by any kind of power over his fellow human beings——not only by political and religious power and authority over men but by power in other establishments as well, including the educational. "A little learning is a dangerous thing," Frost might well have quipped, especially as it augurs about the humanistic tendency to omit God from the human equation altogether. Frost could not tolerate this concept, and because of it he early entertained no little grief over such matters with professors at Dartmouth, Harvard, and Amherst.[3] "Something must be left to God," he repeatedly stated.

During the deep winter of 1934–35 at Key West, Florida, after a fall term of teaching at Amherst, he brought forth the witty satire called "Departmental," in which he poked fun at certain Amherst bureaucratic administrators with whom he had just tangled. The inspiration for this satire had come from his watching busy

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1 This concept is evident in Colossians 1.17: "And He is before all things, and by Him all things *consist.*" The Greek root for *consist* is *συνιστάω*, or *συνίστημι*, formed by two components: (1) *συν*, a primary preposition denoting *union, with* or *together* (but much closer than *μετα* or *παρα*), i.e. by association, companionship, process, resemblance, possession, instrumentality, etc., and *beside;* in comparison it has similar applications, including *completeness.* (2) *ἵστημι*, to *stand, abide, appoint, bring, continue, covenant, establish, hold up, lay, present, set up, stanch, stand by, stand forth, stand still*—all indicating the act of *setting together, introducing, exhibiting, standing near, standing with,* and *constituting.* In short, *it is God* who established by His wisdom and power the entire created universe in the first place, who holds it together now, and who keeps things from flying apart at the present moment (as in nuclear and molecular cohesion of the elements). When God's cohesive, sustaining power over elemental forces (the laws of nature) is finally released, however, the entire universe will collapse in holocaustic horror. This is clearly predicted in passages such as 2 Peter 3. 10–12, Revelation 6. 12–17, etc.

2 God, the Alpha and Omega (beginning and end of *all things* and of every concept——see Revelation 1. 11), absolute principle and unity, stands at the center of His universe.

3 See *Culture and Language,* September 1980, pp. 14ff.

trails of ants as they hurried in every direction under the hot sub-tropical sun. As the poet developed his description of the bureaucratic bungling he had observed taking place upon the demise of one member in the ant kingdom, he playfully posed the question, "Who cares when an ant dies?" Whereupon, he immediately added, and with manifold metaphysical ramifications, "Who cares when man dies?"

"To a Thinker" was so biting a satire against the Roosevelt administration that his wife (Elinor), "a more rabid anti-New-Dealer than Frost himself,"[1] begged him not to publish it, but to no avail. Among other works which fall under the category of Frostian irony or satire are "A Considerable Speck," "Build Soil," "How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King When It's in You and in the Situation," "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus," and, of course, both *Masques*.

FROSTIAN DISTINCTIVES——THE DRAMATIC ELEMENT

In his preface to the play entitled *A Way Out*, Frost wrote: "Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing."[2] He was insistent about what he called the "dramatic necessity." Lesley, in her "Foreword to Book VI" of *New Hampshire's Child*, remarks that she is continually reminded of her father's belief in this principle: "If my father did start me off by encouraging me to write my stories as if I were saying them, that would have been a first step in teaching me to understand what he later meant by 'dramatic necessity.'"[3] Frost had previously penned the following:

> A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structures will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination. That is all that can save poetry from singsong, all that can save prose from itself.[4]

FROST'S USE OF METAPHOR

Central to Frost's thinking about the meaning of meaning are his ideas on metaphor. One of the most striking features of even his prose is that nearly all his at-

1 See *Culture and Language*, March 1981, pp. 27ff.

2 Cox and Lathem, (eds.), op. cit., p. 13.

3 In her "Foreword to Book I" of the same volume she also stated: "Now that I have tried to help my own children and grandchildren read and write, I marvel that my father ever persuaded me to write so conversationally about whatever interested me when I was five years old. The sentences of my first 'story' flow into each other with the naturalness of a child talking. Perhaps I was instructed to write the story just as I would say it if I were telling it out loud. If so, I may have been the first one to benefit from my father's theory about the relation between writing and 'the sound of sense.'"

4 Cox and Lathem (eds.), op. cit., p. 14. From the preface to Frost's play entitled *A Way Out*, published in 1929, this statement may be interpreted as reflecting the poet's basic literary philosophy.

tempts at explanation or definition lead him into metaphor. His poetic nature has such a stranglehold on the man that he cannot seem to stay away from metaphorical expression even in the simplest speech. Take, for example, the following:

> [Style] is the mind skating circles round itself as it moves forward.[1]
>
> I like to drag and break the intonation across the meter as waves first comb and then break stumbling on the shingle.[1]
>
> What a writer needs...is to be able to draw forth the virtue of things by touch, the way the Syrophoenician woman did from Jesus, by putting her fingers on his robe. She got everything—the virtue went out of him—at a touch. Just touching the hem is enough. Spiritual essences provide the intoxication.[2]
>
> I believe in what the Greeks called synecdoche: the philosophy of the part for the whole; touching the hem of the goddess. All that an artist needs is samples. Enough success to know what money is like; enough love to know what women are like.[3]
>
> A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a homesickness or a love-sickness. It is reaching out toward experience, an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words.[4]
>
> Literature is a performance in words; poetry in particular is the renewal of words.[5]
>
> Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, "grace" metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have. Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another. People say, "Why don't you say what you mean?" We never do that, do we, being all of us too much poets. We like to talk in parables and in hints and in indirections—whether from diffidence or some other instinct.[6]
>
> Poetry is the legitimate means of saying one thing and meaning another, an "honest duplicity."[7]
>
> There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor. So also is philosophy—and science, too, for that matter, if it will take the soft impeachment from a friend. Every new poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing.[8]

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1 Barry, op. cit., p. 31.

2 Spoken by Robert Frost to Sidney Cox, following a public lecture at Bread Loaf (1924). Sidney Cox, *A Swinger of Birches*, p. 75. [Frost's referrence to "the Syrophoenician woman" is to be found in Mark 7. 26–30, but on careful examination we discover that Frost was in error. It was not the Syrophoenician woman who "touched the hem of His garment," but the woman "with an issue of blood" as recorded in Matthew 9. 20–1.]

3 Munson, op. cit., p. 83.

4 From the "Introduction" to *West-Running Brook*, as quoted by Isaacs, op. cit., p. 55.

5 Ibid., p. 52.

6 Vogel, op. cit., p. 51.

7 Gerber, op. cit., p. 137.

8 Cox and Lathem (eds.), op. cit., p. 24. (From "The Constant Symbol")

> Unless you are home in metaphor...you are not at ease in figurative values.... I have wanted in late years to go further and further in making metaphor the whole of thinking...all thinking, except mathematical thinking, is metaphorical....[1]
>
> I don't think there is anything very important without poetry. I don't think mathematics, science, is important without poetry, or amounts to much.[2]
>
> Education by poetry is education by metaphor.... I do not think anybody ever knows the discreet use of metaphor, his own and other people's, the discreet handling of metaphor, unless he has been properly educated in poetry.[3]
>
> Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter.... The only materialist—be he poet, teacher, scientist, politician, or statesman—is the man who gets lost in his material without a gathering metaphor to throw it into shape and order. He is the lost soul.[4]
>
> Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements.[5]
>
> Poetry is life and life is poetry.[6]

Robert Frost believed strongly that the educated person must be at home with metaphor and that reading poetry is the best way to develop confidence in metaphorical expression. His experiences with harsh reality made him basically a teacher through metaphor, which fact takes credence through examination of even his simplest couplets that depend on this technique for success.[7]

In an interview-article entitled "The 'Quietly Overwhelming' Robert Frost" that appeared originally in the November 30, 1958 *New York Times Magazine*, Milton Bracker Stated:

> He himself is perhaps the biggest metaphor of all. He even *looks* like a symbol.[8]

Frost developed affinity for, and greatly admired French philosopher Henri Bergson, whose "gathering metaphors" deeply impressed him at an early age. Bergson insisted[9] that "the flowing stream of matter moves ever downward, but the life

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1 Cox and Lathem (eds.), op. cit., p. 39. (From "Education by Poetry")
2 Donald J. Greiner, *The Poet and His Critics*, p. 268. (From "Remarks on the Dedication of the Wilfred Davison Memorial Library," 1930, no pages)
3 Cox and Lathem (eds.), op. cit., pp. 25–6.
4 Ibid., p. 41.
5 Ibid., p. 25.
6 Ford, op. cit., p. 49.
7 See, for example, "The Secret Sits," "The Span of Life," etc.
8 Lathem (ed.), op. cit., p. 185.
9 His actual words, as recorded by Thompson: "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." Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost*, p. 25.

force resists and tries always to climb back upward, through matter, toward the Source.[1] Among the hindrances to the proper individual response, Bergson said, were the scientific approach and the destructively analytical pretensions of the intellect. Frost liked Bergson's claim that the instictive and intuitive consciousness of the creative individual—the poet, the saint, the prophet—is always helping to place man in the right relationship to the Source..."[2] If we keep in mind these philosophic persuasions that Frost treasured, then his "literal, symbolic, and metaphysical" meanings take on a dimension and significance even greater. From "West-Running Brook," for example:

> 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.
> It has this throwing backward on itself
> So that the fall of most of it is always
> Raising a little, sending up a little.
> 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.
> It is from *this* in nature we are from.[3]

FROSTIAN DISTINCTIVES——THE DARK METAPHOR

The works of Robert Frost are replete with "dark metaphor," a recurring symbol of the man's tragic past, or of his basic nature, or of some unknown factor or factors,

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1 Capitalization indicates *Deity:* The Creator.
2 Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years*, p. 381.
3 *This*, the Creator. (Emphasis added)

or of a combination of these. Louise Bogan remarked: "Frost's later poems indicate that he knows more [about the darkness in human nature] than he ever allows himself to say." Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant says that even in his "shy tenderness or whimsical humor..." we can discover indications of "the heart of his starkest tragedy," referring, presumably, to the poet's experiential reasons back of his ability to compose so dramatically. Nitchie would attribute this to what Keats expressed as "negative capability":

> ...when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.[1]

This would adequately account for Frost's melancholic and depressingly funereal "Acquainted with the Night," for example:

> I have been one acquainted with the night.
> I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
> I have outwalked the furthest city light.
>
> I have looked down the saddest city lane.
> I have passed by the watchman on his beat
> And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.
>
> I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
> When far away an interrupted cry
> Came over houses from another street,
>
> But not to call me back or say good-by;
> And further still at an unearthly height
> One luminary clock against the sky
>
> Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
> I have been one acquainted with the night.

That Robert Frost lived underneath a shadow darker by far than most men ever experience is a fact that becomes axiomatic for those delving deeply into the man's life and personal history. Greiner speaks of the "unbelievably numerous personal tragedies which Frost endured between 1915 and 1938. There were so many serious illnesses that the marital strains between himself and Elinor, and between daughters Irma and Lesley and their own husbands, seemed almost minor: daughter Marjorie's repeated attacks of pleurisy and tuberculosis, daughter-in-law Lillian's tuberculosis, sister Jeanie's insanity and death in 1929, not to mention his own recurring illnesses."[2] Frost drove himself finally to these sicknesses by scheduling extensive reading tours in order to pay for the medical treatment of his family's chronic breakdowns. Marjorie died in 1934 following childbirth, and Elinor in 1938 after a bout with cancer and numerous heart attacks.

This life of tragedy does suggest a clue to the dark undertone in many of his

1 Nitchie, op. cit., p. 40.

2 Greiner, op. cit., p. 42. See also *Culture and Language*, September 1979, pp. 25ff. on the subject "Tragedy in the Life of Robert Frost."

poems. On August 9, 1974, he wrote to Louis Untermeyer: "Cast your eye back over my family luck and perhaps you will wonder if I haven't had pretty near enough." Thompson goes so far as to call him a "modern Job." The pessimistic "A Question"[1] somberly poses the dismal inquiry and reflects Frost's sad preoccupation with his unfortunate past:

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

"Bereft" is a poem intensely personal in nature. The poet is rebelliously fighting the dark side of life and of his own nature, in deep despondency, and "without a friend in the world." In his dire loneliness, he has been brought face-to-face with, and ushered (as if it were the Judgment!) almost into the presence of——God. Its tenor is both eerie and apocalyptic:

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

In "Desert Places" the loneliness theme reappears, this time in a guise of white expanse, of nothingness——both internal and external——*nothingness*.

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

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

And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less—

1 From *A Witness Tree* (1942).

A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

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

It was perhaps Frost's sonnet "Design" with its ominous overtones groping about in the dark unknown that inspired Lionel Trilling (on the occasion of Frost's eighty-fifth birthday celebration in 1959) to describe the old man as "a terrifying poet." Trilling's unprecedented bombshell kicked up a storm of controversy throughout the literary world and initiated reaction (both for and against Frost) that is still being felt. Greenberg and Hepburn describe the occasion well, and quote the critic as saying:

> We do not need to wait upon the archaeologists of the future to understand that Robert Frost exists not only in a human way but also in a mythical way. We know him, and have known him so for many years, as nothing less than a national fact. We have come to think of him as virtually a symbol of America, as something not unlike an articulate, an actually poetic, Bald Eagle. When we undertake to honor him, we do indeed honor him as a poet, but also as a tutelary genius of the nation and as a justification of our national soul....
>
> I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him...a tragic poet... The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. Read the poem called "Design" and see if you sleep the better for it. Read "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep," which often seems to me the most perfect poem of our time, and see if you are warmed by anything in it except the energy with which emptiness is perceived.
>
> But the *people*, it will be objected, the *people* who inhabit this possibly terrifying universe! About them there is nothing that can terrify; surely the people in Mr. Frost's poems can only reassure us by their integrity and solidity. Perhaps so. But I cannot make the disjunction. It may well be that ultimately they reassure us in some sense, but first they terrify us...We must not be misled about them by the curious tenderness with which they are represented, a tenderness which extends to a recognition of the tenderness which they themselves can often give. But when ever have people been so isolated, so lightning-blasted, so tried down and calcined by life, so reduced, each in his own way, to some last irreducible core of being. Talk of the disintegration and sloughing off of the old consciousness! The people of Robert Frost's poems have done that with a vengeance....
>
> Truth...is far better than a lie. For me the process by which they arrive at that truth is always terrifying. The manifest America of Mr. Frost's poems may be pastoral; the actual America is tragic.[1]

1 Robert A. Greenberg and James G. Hepburn (eds.), *Robert Frost: An Introduction*, pp. 151ff.

"Tragic and terrifying..." Well! The storm broke at once. It could have been no worse a calamity if Trilling had denounced motherhood, Americanism, or apple pie from the pulpit. Voices of protest rose in a mighty chorus and letters flooded in upon the editors of literary magazines. "Holy mackerel!" exploded J. Donald Adams in the *New York Times Book Review*. "Frost simply sees the universe as it is and accepts it. He isn't terrified by what he sees, and neither should we be."[1]

That Frost was indeed a past master in the use of his "dark metaphor" to terrify, no one questions today. The only surprising thing to us now about the whole episode is that anyone at all bothered to challenge Trilling in 1959. Modern critics state that "many of his speculations place him in the great tradition of New England writers—Hawthorne, Melville, James—who penetrated the dark undersurface of American life."[2] And for Frost, the attempt to see clearly, as expressed in the well-known lines from Bunyan,[3] required a willingness on his part to confront the frightening and the appalling——even in its darkest imaginable forms.

"Design" questions the existence of a Benevolent Designer whom we recognize as Creator of the Universe, and opens a Pandora's Box on the possibility of malevolent design, or——more frightfully unthinkable and depressing yet——of *no design at all*.

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth—
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.

"Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" Frost liked to call his "California poem, derived from mixed memories." It describes people standing along the shore and staring endlessly out to sea. Their intent gaze is subtly reflective of man's scientific but "half-defensive" watch on the universe. Doubtless the author had often personally experienced standing in the California surf looking westward (as in "Once by the

1 Gerber, op. cit., p. 86.

2 Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost*, p. 2.

3 In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Evangelist asks Pilgrim, "Do you see yon shining light?" and Pilgrim replies, "I *think* I do." Even a glimpse of faith, or the slightest hint of a glimpse, is *infinitely better than no faith at all*. Jesus said: "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you." (Matthew 17. 20)

Pacific") during those years up to the age of eleven, mesmerized into passivity by the pounding, monotonous waves, as by that one-eyed monster who usurps from modern parents their rightful authority and control over the souls of their own sons and daughters! The reader, however, unconsciously allows himself to become "hypnotized by the purity and imagery of the verse, [and] is drawn into the magicked company and led into meditation that will yield no answers." This is the really subtle and sinister side of the poem, if you allow yourself to look at it speculatively.[1]

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

As long as it takes to pass
A ship keeps raising its hull;
The wetter ground like glass
Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;
But whatever the truth may be—
The water comes ashore,
And the people look at the sea.

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

"The Night Light" also reflects a Frostian obsession with the "heartless and enormous Outer Black"[2] that takes the form of an enveloping darkness which threatens to close in tightly and engulf man. He is so weak and helpless a creature, existing only by the goodness, mercy, and grace of God alone (though more often than not he will overtly or covertly deny this truth to high heaven in proud rebellion!) that he desperately needs *something* to which to cling—no matter how small or seemingly insignificant—in order to help him resist the engulfing darkness. Gerber reminds us that "in star, snow, and water man locates scraps of heaven's light. He

1 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 300.

2 From "A Loose Mountain," Lathem (ed.), op. cit., p. 361. In that delightful whimsy that was so much a part of his writing and speaking style, Frost once promised that when he died and went to the "outer dark" he would return to earth if dissatisfied with what the dark forest had to offer. Others also have made this promise-prediction, including "The Great Houdini" (who was, of course, *dead serious!*). We have no reason to believe, however, that Frost, like Houdini, was suffering from "delusions of grandeur" or "mental aberrations." He knew full well, from his study of *The Book*, that death is the black curtain that separates *forever* the living and the dead, and that nothing—*but nothing*—once that curtain falls, will ever raise it. *Death is inexorable!* Edward Fitzgerald expresses it beautifully:

The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.

clings tenaciously to them, as reluctant to let them pass as the old woman in ["The Night Light"] resists extinguishing her lamp—and for the same reason."[1]

She always had to burn a light
Beside her attic bed at night.
It gave bad dreams and broken sleep,
But helped the Lord her soul to keep.
Good gloom on her was thrown away.
It is on me by night or day,
Who have, as I suppose, ahead
The darkest of it still to dread.

Refusing in his maturity to be categorized by philosophic creeds and scientific theories, Frost chose "something like a star"[2] on which to fix his faith. Over and over again he acknowledges the precariousness of his position as a mere human being. It has been well stated that "Once by the Pacific" contains "enough ominous warning of cosmic rage to terrorize any space-age reader." The poem is quoted here in full:

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

Some critics have suggested that the "dark metaphor" image created by Frost and to which he seems repeatedly drawn is more than a mere metaphor with him. It is actually more nearly like a formal symbol of the man in much of his poetry. A significant remark by John F. Kennedy at the dedication of the Frost Library at Amherst in 1963 reinforces this observation:

> If Robert Frost was much honored during his lifetime, it was because a good many preferred to ignore his darker truths.[3]

Even in the creations of Frost less "bizarre" than those cited above, there is to be observed that "bittersweet quality" of certain *dark* undertones. The struggle between human imagination and the "meaningless void" that confronts man (not

1 Gerber, op. cit., p. 167.
2 "Take Something Like a Star" in Lathem (ed.), *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, p. 403.
3 Quoted from Stanley Kauffman in *The New York Review of Books*, June 25, 1964, p. 11.

really meaningless from a theological point of view, however) is the recurring undercurrent of "darkness" in poem after poem. But that he did face up to life and not recoil from its "bittersweet interludes" any more than from its "tranquil moments" becomes apparent when the full range of his work is carefully considered. Immense courage was required for his outspoken frankness on matters so controversial as the topics with which he repeatedly dealt——his willingness to see, to confront, and to deal with them on their own grounds. Gerber is keenly observant of the trend:

> The predominant image of darkness recurs like a major theme against which all else is variation. Dark woods, mixing fear and desire, typify the great concern of man for knowledge of the unknown that awaits him. Dark woods, full of mystery and promise, draw man like a filing to the magnet. They do their best to suck him in. He can only plant his feet in resistance, wanting all the while to enter but in mortal terror of setting a single toe past the forest's rim.
>
> For fifty years this pattern repeats itself in poems which at times are so similar that they read like variants.[1]

EXEMPLARY CRAFTSMANSHIP

Even Frost's "best bid for lasting remembrance"[2] also falls within the category of the "dark metaphor." He said that it came to him after he had been working all night on his long poem entitled "New Hampshire." He had gone outside at the crack of dawn to watch the sun rise when suddenly—like a light from above—there it was. "I always thought it was the product of autointoxication coming from tiredness,"[3] he is reported to have remarked. He described it as his "heavy duty poem, to be examined for the rime pairs," and it has come to be regarded as the single poem with which most readers identify Frost. Truly representative of his art, this familiar and beloved poem has become one of the most discussed poems of the twentieth century. It will be seen to have a *perfect* metrical pattern: four quatrains of iambic tetrameter throughout.

Whose woods these are I think I know.	(a)
His house is in the village, though;	(a)
He will not see me stopping here	(b)
To watch his woods fill up with snow.	(a)
My little horse must think it queer	(a)
To stop without a farmhouse near	(a)

1 Gerber, op. cit., p. 168.

2 Most likely best-known of all his works, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is the one poem Frost liked to point to as the supreme example of his craftsmanship and let it do his boasting for him.

3 Reginald L. Cook, *The Dimensions of Robert Frost*, p. 33.

˘ — ˘ — ˘ — ˘ —
Between the woods and frozen lake (b)
˘ — ˘ — ˘ — ˘ —
The darkest evening of the year. (a)

˘ — ˘ — ˘ — ˘ —
He gives his harness bells a shake (a)
˘ — ˘ — ˘ — ˘ —
To ask if there is some mistake. (a)
˘ —˘ —˘ — ˘ —
The only other sound's the sweep (b)
˘ —˘ — ˘ — ˘ —
Of easy wind and downy flake. (a)

˘ — ˘ — ˘ — ˘ —
The woods are lovely, dark, and deep, (a)
˘ — ˘ —˘— ˘ —
But I have promises to keep, (a)
˘ — ˘ — ˘— ˘ —
And miles to go before I sleep, (a)
˘ — ˘ — ˘— ˘ —
And miles to go before I sleep. (a)

"Stopping by Woods..." does supremely well what Frost says a good poem should do. It "rides on its own melting, like a piece of ice on a hot stove."[1] Its rhyming scheme is almost totally "a-a-b-a," with the lone exception of the fourth stanza where Frost implants a quadruple "a-a-a-a" and makes line three conform to lines one, two, and four for effect. This variation (his "slight offishness") is arresting enough to draw just the right amount of attention, lend climactic emphasis, and strengthen the whole. Little wonder, then, that Frost considered this his "most perfect poem."

Proud as Frost was of this lyric, he felt that some people made themselves too busy over details never intended and squeezed it for meanings not present: "That one I've been more bothered with than anybody has ever been with any poem in just pressing it for more than it should be pressed for.... The poet is entitled to everything the reader can find in his poem...." But Frost felt that readers sometimes exceed themselves. Gerber says: "Frost ordinarily gained amusement from the meanings people located in his work, meaning he claimed to have been totally unaware of. Sometimes he was moved to shake his head wryly. But he became downright touchy about the 'busymindedness' that inspired the ceaseless flow of questions, some of them asinine indeed, concerning the minutiae of 'Stopping by Woods...'"[2]

We have no intention of stretching the metaphor in "Stopping by Woods..." or any other to include that which never entered the author's mind. But that this classic showpiece of Frost's *is* deeply philosophic, and bucolic, as well as "terrifying" in its use of the "dark metaphor," is an observation that meets the eye of the most casual student.

First of all, the poet's metaphorical use of *woods*. Far from habitable (indeed, *un*inhabitable!), they are presented as being dark and dreary, foreboding——yet

1 Cox and Lathem (eds.), op. cit., p. 20. (From "The Figure a Poem Makes")
2 Gerber, op. cit., p. 31.

strangely beckoning. He stops "just for a look" into these captivating woods at the most God-forsaken spot on his long journey home—"between the woods and frozen lake"—and that on "the darkest evening of the year."[1]

The purpose of his stopping here? Ostensibly, it is "to watch [the] woods fill up with snow." But why stop in the first place? Our lonely rider bears the compelling obligation for obeying the voice of duty and responsibility *first*,[2] not profligating time and energy in a useless pastime like "watching woods fill up with snow" —and that on the darkest (and coldest?) evening of the year! *He is fully aware of this;* and yet——he finds it impossible to resist giving in to the eerie siren call of the enchanted and enchanting woods. What is the reason for their bewitching "loveliness" (?) that, "like filings to the magnet," draws his heart into a forbidding "never-never land" and flouts the call to duty and to responsibility?[2] What is the significance of "dark woods" and of "white snow" in this allegorical masterpiece?

It is interesting to note that the color symbol for death in the western world is *black*, and Frost's use of the "dark metaphor" here ("The woods are lovely, *dark*, and deep...") reflects his preoccupation with this last and greatest problem of man that *must be hurdled* on life's obstacle course.[3] In the East, however, the symbol for death is commonly thought of as being white, and how natural that it should be. After frost has successfully completed his job of decapitating Nature's foliage in autumn, then snow totally submerges the landscape in "deathly white" for the whole of winter. Either metaphor is applicable and appropriate to the death symbol, however—white being the symbol of death to plant life in winter, and black (or, dark) the symbol of death to light at the end of day.

The woods, in themselves, are dark and foreboding enough. Yet Frost, as the master craftsman would be expected to do, superimposes upon them for emphasis the uncanny paleness of all Nature's death——*white*. The poetic positive that emerges from this negative is one of "the death of light" coupled with the "snow of death" that "fades away into nothingness."

Temptation confronting our lonely, wavering rider is now stronger than ever: to stop, to stay, to dream; to be mesmerized by the "snow of death" and irresistably drawn into the deep, dark woods of the unknown——yes, *into* but even *beyond* the very jaws of death itself. The rider has never before come face to face with such a formidable dilemma. It is going to require Power *stronger than death* to enable him to say "No! The time is not yet. I will *not* allow myself to be sucked into this

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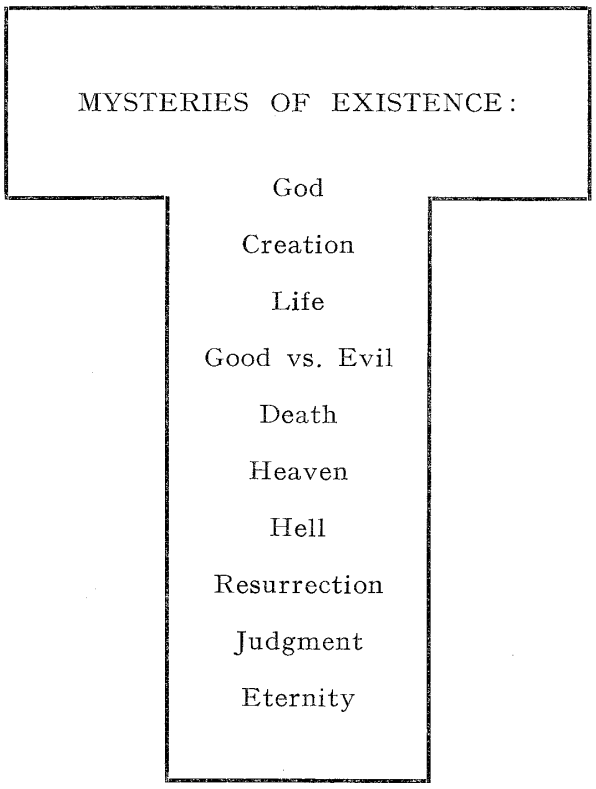
1 Speculation has it that Frost had in mind the very *dead* of winter—the winter solstice.

2 A man's first duty and responsibility is to God; his second is to family; and the third is to country—*in that order.* Love for each of these is right and proper, but the order should never be altered. For insight into the problem of man's obligation in this regard, see Exhibit B, p. 36.

3 The Bible speaks of death as man's last great enemy to be overcome, as poets also from time immemorial have done: "The last enemy that shall bestroyed is *death*... *Death* is swallowed up in victory!" (1 Cor 15.26, 54)

'foul clutch of circumstance!'" It would be *so easy* to give in to the siren song of "the only other sound"——"the sweep of easy wind and downy flake." A perfect setting for the hypnotic specialist: "easy wind and downy flake...easy wind and downy flake...easy wind and downy flake...," and the subject is transported at once into another state of consciousness.

Breathes there a man with soul so rare who never in his innermost being has ever entertained the temptation to take the "easy way out"——to end it all? The path of suicide is far removed from an "easy way out," however. It becomes, in fact, only the coward's way of *supposed* "escape"[1] from life's duty, life's responsibility, life's reality, and from his own accountability to God for the life lived in the body.[2]



— EXHIBIT A —[3]

1 Following the interval called Death (man's last and greatest enemy), there comes to every man and nation that *certain and inescapable* confrontation with God the Creator of all things which the Bible posits as Judgment: "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the Judgment." (Hebrews 9.27)

2 See No. 23 of Exhibit A ("The Unique Nature of Man"), *Culture and Language*, March 1981, p. 21.

3 Even that great Chinese philosopher and scholar, Confucius himself, was troubled, it is said, by failure to find a solution to four of the biggest problems in life: birth, aging, sickness, and death. Sadly enough, he was not introduced to the "Book of books," which contains the answer to these and *all* life's great dilemmas.

Frost's metaphorical woods—"lovely, dark, and deep"—beckon as bewitchingly as Scylla and Charybdis, and we find our romantic rider tottering dangerously on the precipice of Eternity, poised to take that forbidding leap into the deathly white stillness of the "heartless and enormous Outer Black."[1]

Suddenly, however, he wakes! He comes to his senses! He ceases to deceive himself any longer through fantasy and daydreaming. He returns to all the faculties of a right mind and is transported back into the world of reality.[2] The time for entering those woods is not yet, and the man must fight on——in life, in duty, in responsibility to his Maker and to the purpose for which God has placed him upon earth——however strong, however tempting the invitation to give up, to give in, to capitulate, to cease all effort, all striving to exist.

Our hero awakes to find himself transported back as from "among the dead" and into "the land of the living." He now comes to the realization that life is made up not only of romantic dream and a perpetual longing for "what is not,"[3] but that the very essence of life itself is duty, honor, integrity, honesty, faithfulness, responsibility, dedication, reliability, trustworthiness, purity, and such like.[4] Over roads such as these in the dead of winter and at darkest midnight in a wicked, sin-cursed society that really only gives lip-service to the great intangibles of life[5] he must travel, and he has "promises to keep," and miles to go before [he] sleep, and miles to go before [he] sleep."

That life demands effort is a truth to be found in abundance throughout the poetry of Robert Frost. He particularly liked Henri Bergson's gathering metaphors, e.g.: "...the flowing stream of matter moves ever downward, but the life force resists and tries always to climb back upward, through matter, toward the Source."[6] The Biblical cadences into which he often lapsed are not altogether fortuitous. He considered himself to be somewhat a prophet in his own right——the forerunner of a new era in America——certainly in the *literary* sense, if not the religious.

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1 Excerpt from "A Loose Mountain" appearing in *A Witness Tree* (1942).

2 The means of "escape from reality" in a highly-developed scientific and industrialized (so-called "civilized") society are many, the avenue of suicide being only one among them. It is forbidden, however, by the sixth commandment of Moses: "Thou shalt do no murder." *Unquestionably* this includes also the taking of one's own God-given life!

3 The writer recalls a quaint maxim often quoted by his mother when he was just a lad. It bears repeating here:

As a rule a man's a fool,
When it's hot he wants it cool;
When it's cool he wants it hot,
Always wanting what is not.

4 On the subject of "Love" (the genuine versus the fake) in its relation to "Life," see "Elixir of Love," Exhibit B, p. 36.

5 See *Culture and Language*, March 1981, p. 21.

6 Capitalized to indicate Deity. Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years*, p. 381.

TO LODGE A FEW POEMS...

Judging from our current crop of poets, Frost's deep love for and dedication to the Muse may never again be repeated in our "republic of letters." Distinctives cannot be duplicated, and Frost is distinctively important as "a kind of American culture hero, an index of certain persistent American characteristics."[1] "Native to the grain, yet thoroughly original...deeply rooted in the American, even in the most vital Puritan, idiom,"[2] stated Thompson. Little wonder that he has earned a place of distinction, both at home and abroad, as a major American poet.

It is the commonly held belief of many that in years to come people will be able to know what life was like in America by reading the poetry of Robert Frost. In this respect he has already taken a stately place beside such giants as Bryant and Emerson, Longfellow and Whitman, and the other "immortals of verse."

Robert Frost himself declared it his ultimate goal to do what any serious poet ought to do: "...lodge a few poems where they will be hard to get rid of."[3] This he had already done long before he died. Gerber, among others, has voiced the opinion that there is little doubt but that Frost will be remembered.

> But only time will tell whether he is to be recalled as a physician who distributed placebos to his troubled age, or as a good Greek out of New England who drew back the dark curtain of Eternity and directed men's eyes into the realm of final mysteries.[4]

Yes, that most precious element of our earthly existence called "Time" *will be* the last great judge of all such matters.[5] But it is the writer's studied opinion that the works of Robert Frost themselves will also prove him to have been a prophet in his own right, and will yet earn for him that coveted, elusive place as *seer* in American society, history, civilization, and literature. Frost, however, would doubtless have disagreed with me. In a critique on Amy Lowell, written shortly after her death and published in the *Christian Science Monitor* of May 16, 1925, he stated;

> It is absurd to think that the only way to tell if a poem is lasting is to wait and see if it lasts. The right reader of a good poem can tell the moment it strikes him that he has taken an immortal wound—that he will never get over it. That is to say, permanence in poetry as in love is perceived instantly. It hasn't to await the test of time. The proof of a poem is not that we have never forgotten it, but that we knew at sight that we could never forget it....[6]

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1 George W. Nitchie in "A Momentary Stay Against Confusion." See James M. Cox (ed.), *Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 174.

2 Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost*, p. 41.

3 Cox and Lathem (eds.), op. cit., p. 7.

4 Gerber, op. cit., p. 87.

5 God is the *ultimate* Judge, but "Time" is a leveler of *all* men.

6 Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing*, p. 136.

In his remarks on accepting the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1939, however, he said the following:

> The sensible and healthy live somewhere between self-approval and the approval of society... Still an artist, however well he may fare, within and without, must often feel he has to rely too heavily on self-appraisal for comfort. For twenty years the world neglected him; then for twenty years it entreated him kindly. He has to take the responsibility of deciding when the world was wrong. He can't help wishing there was some third more disinterested party, such as God, or Time, to give absolute judgment.

And then he concluded by saying,

> Oh Time, whose verdicts mock our own,
> The only righteous judge art thou.

We are much the richer for all the poems that Frost forged in pain and loss, in fear and disappointment, and—*in his dogged determination to survive*. In an age hostile to almost everything he deeply believed and felt, he not only continued to write, but bravely overcame mountainous obstacles in the midst of dealing with his critics, and in a very difficult—often tempestuous—battle with life itself.

He has summarized his own life and works succinctly well:

> People have sometimes asked me to sum up my poetry. I can't do that. It's the same with my feeling about God. If you would learn the way a man feels about God, don't ask him to put a name on himself. All that is said with names is soon not enough.
>
> If you would have out the way a man feels about God, watch his life, hear his words. Place a coin, with its denomination unknown, under the paper and you can tell its mark by rubbing a pencil over the paper. From all the individual rises and valleys your answer will come out.[1]

(Next: *Frost as Metaphysician*)

1 Lathem, op. cit., p. 149.

What is the real meaning of *love—the genuine article* as opposed to and contrasted with deceptive fabrications of the modern day? Contrary to popular Hollywood-induced pornographic orientation, the physical act of sex is only a very minute fraction of the whole equation, but it has been so distorted and disproportionately magnified that we "moderns" find ourselves totally brainwashed into relegating it *first place;* indeed, we have for long years been "off on a sex binge."

In genuine love's radical structure, however, are embodied the following indispensable elements. If you would know to distinguish the true from the false, ponder them long and well:

THE MEANING OF LOVE TOWARD:

God
Family
Spouse
Children
Country
Friend
Neighbor
Humanity

DUTY	—	義　務
RESPONSIBILITY	—	責　任
FAITHFULNESS	—	忠　実
DEDICATION (DEVOTION)		献　身
TRUTHFULNESS (HONESTY)		真　実
TRUST (CONFIDENCE)		信　頼
KINDNESS	—	親　切
COURTESY	—	礼　儀
RESPECT	—	尊　敬
PURITY	—	清浄無垢
SINCERITY	—	誠　実
HUMILITY	—	謙　遜
MEEKNESS	—	柔　和
PATIENCE	—	忍　耐
PERMANENCE	—	永　遠

— EXHIBIT B —

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