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# Freedom and Association in the Poetry of Robert Frost

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FREEDOM AND ASSOCIATION  
IN THE  
POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of English  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by  
Adrian Marcus Thirkell

1991

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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MASTER OF ARTS

Adrian M. Thirkell

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## ABSTRACT

In a letter from England to Sydney Cox (2nd May 1913), Frost expressed admiration for the virtue of having leisure enough to "dig in the ground for the unutilitarian flower." Frost liked his flowers "wild," and distinguished himself in his search for them: "[f]ar as I have walked in pursuit of the *Cypripedium*, I have never met another in the woods on the same quest...No one will charge me with having an eye single to the main chance." The letter is noteworthy for what it points to of the preoccupations of Frost's later poetry. Frost defines his sense of separation from others in describing the singularly isolated figure of his last collection of poems, In The Clearing. Frost's skepticism toward what may be achieved by the sort of attachments to people that prominently figure in the writings of Emerson and Whitman, attenuated his isolation, but he offered a counterpoint to solitariness in realizing his responsibility as much to his wife and family as his poetic ambitions. Frost's role in what he saw as an increasingly indeterminate world, was to both discover his creativity and establish what he referred to as strongholds to come back to. This thesis explores how Frost negotiated the distances between such strongholds as he had constructed and the world he encountered in his pursuit of the ephemeral and always unrealized "something" lying beyond the limits of the everyday.

FREEDOM AND ASSOCIATION  
IN THE  
POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

But in the end I would say to the optimists, since optimists there are, your only chance lies in a modest, not a fevered, optimism. Everything I have tried to express....surveys the condition under which mankind might perhaps attempt a new departure--without too much confidence in ever arriving.

--Claude Levi Strauss

A person...should know when to say, 'I am too much out of myself--too overt'...The tendency for preservation of his individuality draws him back.<sup>1</sup>

--Robert Frost

Who got up these misgivings?  
Oh, we know well enough to go ahead with.  
I mean we know well enough to act on.

--A Masque of Reason

Frost said of himself that he was "mostly interested in solitude and in the preservation of the individual." He wanted to see people "sufficiently drawn into themselves": "[m]ost of oneself should be within oneself." Frost lacked neither the acuity nor the impulsive desire to reach out to others, stretching a hand, as he referred to it in "To a Moth Seen in Winter" (A Witness Tree 1942) "[A]cross the gulf of well nigh everything." But he recognized that his reaching out left the fate of the other untouched: "I cannot touch your life, much less can save, / Who am tasked to save my own a little while." Frost spoke of his need to "hold [his] own"<sup>2</sup> in a world that had claims of love and

attention upon him: "[t]hat's the daily problem: how much am I a member; how much am I an individual."<sup>3</sup>

Frost most often portrays himself as the solitary figure resisting the temptation to accede to a "[c]ollectivistic regimenting love" by which his own individuality would be compromised: "I want to be a person. And I want you to be a person".<sup>4</sup> He set boundaries between himself and others, and spoke of the need for "reserve and withholdings"<sup>5</sup>--not only to safeguard himself but to allay suffering in those he loved: "[m]en should learn to contain their own poison," he said, "[y]ou've got to go it alone."<sup>6</sup>

In the early poems (A Boy's Will 1913) the circumstances in which Frost's speaker finds himself are friendless and menacing. The cry from the woods in "The Demiurge's Laugh" is of "one who utterly couldn't care." In "Stars," the possibility of seeing each star as a point of illumination guiding man toward a "fate" already laid out is proffered only to be immediately withdrawn. The stars "neither love nor hate" because the natural world recognizes no particular worth in the lives of men, but is "blind" to them all. Although Frost saw himself and nature as parts of the same world, it is only in the later work that the "blind" planet is lent a purpose by man himself. The apprehensive regard for what is around him gradually gives way to the assurances and bravado of his mature work. The fear expressed in "The Exposed Nest" is a fear of being

subject to "too much world at once." The nest "full of young birds on the ground" which has been exposed by the harvester, is emblematic of the condition in which Frost sees himself. The instinct of the lovers in the poem who discover the nest is to shelter the birds with a screen-- that is, to interpose something to protect the birds from their suddenly vulnerable state. The lovers debate whether their "meddling" will do more harm than good, asking the question of how long innocence should be sheltered--a theme Frost takes up again in the later poems, where his appeal is not for something to be interposed, but for an unmitigated exposure to the elements. The lovers, deliberating on whether their actions were for the best, can only leave things unresolved--"it was a thing we could not wait to learn"--having done all they could to protect the birds regardless of their uncertainties. The couple, looking back at the event, question "[w]hy is there then / No more to tell?" Their turning to other things is the lesson of experience, that they grow into a world of increasing uncertainties, where efforts for good have to be left unfinished.

In "I Will Sing You One-O" (New Hampshire 1923), the speaker, discomforted by sleeplessness, finds expression for his need to fathom the uncertainties of his place in the scheme of things by looking outward to the stars. He hears the striking of the clock as a "grave word / Uttered alone,"



and speculates on its repercussion in space:

The utmost star  
Trembled and stirred,  
Though set so far  
Its whirling frenzies  
Appear like standing  
In one self station.

What seems far away order and stillness is actually chaos and violence. Frost knew from his reading of William James that it was impossible to find in the drifting of the cosmos anything but a kind of aimless randomness:

The bubbles on the foam which coats a stormy sea are floating episodes, made and unmade by the forces of the wind and water. Our private selves are like those bubbles--epiphenomena....their destinies weigh nothing and determine nothing in the world's irremediable currents of events (The Varieties of Religious Experience).

Between living things there can be either conflict or cooperation, and when the perspective in the poem contracts, Frost finds similar violence on earth: human history is the tale of man dragging down man.

It is from this sort of frenzied interaction with others that he seeks to preserve his individuality. Although there is a capacity to believe the world to be benignly ordered, the possibility of it actually being so is never forsworn. In "A Boundless Moment," a sound heard within a forest on an early spring day might be interpreted, punningly, as the earth renewing itself in a newly unfallen state--a "Paradise-in-Bloom"--but this pretence, or deceit,

which makes the world "strange"--that is, something other than it really is--has to be given up with the admission of what Frost calls "the truth." The sound is heard again as the lingering of death: "[a] young beech clinging to its last year's leaves." The change of the seasons was for Frost a sign of vital forces in the natural world causing continual renewal and change. Such moments of transition attracted him because of what they suggest of a renewing of possibilities: "the springing of the year...begins in delight and ends in we don't know what kind of crop."<sup>7</sup>

Frost's coming to terms with things in this manner is more rigorously asserted in West Running Brook (1928), where the world is configured as displaying neither spiritual significance nor any possibility of solicitude from others: "Word I was in my life alone, / Word I had no one left but God" ("Bereft")--a God, moreover, who has already taken the veil and withdrawn. What persists, though, is the seemingly unwilled impulse to life and to faith despite the quietness of his otherwise dispiriting surroundings: "[o]ne impulse persists as our breath; / the other persists as our faith" ("Sitting By A Bush In Broad Sunlight"). Frost's world is never meaningless; there is always something to be asserted: "[t]here is at least so much good in the world that it admits of form and the making of form."<sup>8</sup> In the "Oven Bird" (Mountain Interval 1916) Frost found a correlative for his own experience--and a motif for much of his later work--in

listening to the bird's song, which he hears as a questioning of what sort of response can be made to a world being gradually depleted of its significance: "[t]he question that he frames in all but words / Is what to make of a diminished thing." "To Earthward" similarly traces the fading away of something more fulsome: as love falls off, there is "[n]ow no joy that lacks salt / That is not dashed with pain / And weariness and fault." Frost felt at times his stature, when compared with God or with space, to be "belittled." In "The Lesson for Today" he portrays himself as "small / As a brief epidemic of microbes."

It is Frost's awareness of how things diminish, and an innate inclination felt in the early poems as a "strangely aching heart," that provokes the need to respond more creatively with the material that is left to him:

"I thank the Lord for crudity, which is rawness, which is raw material, which is the part of life not yet worked up into form, or at least not yet worked all the way up."<sup>9</sup>

He appeals, in "Accidentally On Purpose" (In The Clearing 1962), for "intention, purpose, and design"--not assenting to a "Divine" ordering of things, but hoping for something that so approximates it as to make up for its loss. It is what Frost calls a "small, man-made figure of order and concentration" that he sets against the hugeness and confusion of the universe. Although the design of the universe could be summed up in miniature--as a spider lurking

a moth to its death--he also felt an instinct to respond to the world with uncurbed spontaneity:

How happily instinctive we remain,  
Our best guide upward further to the light,  
Passionate preference such as love at sight.

Instinctiveness, though, is partly craftiness and guile. Frost's speakers--and Frost himself as he becomes much more the persona of the later works--are the wily and astute personifications of the drumlin woodchuck in A Further Range (1936): knowing the guileful and beguiling strategies of survival, how to be precocious, wary, bluffing, shrewd and opportune. The woodchuck has his "crevice and burrow," and Frost his means to dispassionately draw back into himself.

The poems of A Further Range, A Witness Tree, Steeple Bush and In The Clearing, develop Frost's contradictory impulses toward love and withdrawal. The "opposing forces" in Frost were toward and away from people.<sup>10</sup> He anticipates in "Desert Places" an inevitable deepening of his solitude: as "lonely as it is" it "[w]ill be more lonely ere it will be less." The "desert places" in which the lonely figure finds himself are emblematic of an inward state of being: "I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places." The figure subsumed within and infused by loneliness sees in his furthest imagining--musing on "stars where no human race is"--a paradigm of how things are at "home." What Frost imagines, Patricia Wallace writes, is

"what the worst...sense of human separateness might mean."<sup>11</sup> There is neither an expectation of the possibility of touching the fate of another, nor any consummation of an imaginative longing or physical yearning to rejoin the milieu of other lives. In her essay on the later poems, Wallace distinguishes Frost's "single, sharply defined self" as "most easily Whitman's antithesis; he is not large, he does not contain multitudes." The 1855 edition of "Leaves of Grass" is Whitman's testament to having achieved the sort of identification with other lives that Frost discovered with far more acute circumspection. Whitman assimilates himself to a world of almost sacred unities in exhilaratingly profane performances of erotic--and homoerotic--love. He felt a "muscular urge" ("From Pent-Up Aching Rivers")<sup>12</sup> compelling him toward people, and the ecstatic dissolving, merging and blending that follows is evoked in startling images of the fluidity and interchangeableness of identities, which flow in and out of each other. Frost knew, but mistrusted, the sort of urge that provoked such an idealized desire to be part of the body of people again. His longings are more elusively, discreetly acknowledged. Whitman consummated his ideals imaginative and physical couplings with crowds of others. The infinities and eternities that he speaks of as he unites himself ecstatically with the world, are in Frost the more apprehensively discerned momentary stays against what he

calls "confusion". Frost offered "asylum" to others, but asked for no dues: "[m]eanwhile feel obligation free. / Nobody has to confide in me" ("Bereft"): "There is none I / Am put out with / Or put out by" ("Away!").

The gap between what Frost's lonely figure desires, and the satisfying of desire is kept open by the uncertainty that exists "between being members and being individuals." The figure in "An Old Man's Winter Night" is a "light....to no-one but himself." He is capable of looking out on others and conceiving of the possibility of a loneliness that although greater than his is still bearable: "[t]he miles and miles he lived from anywhere / Were evidently something he could bear." Whitman closed the gap between himself and what he desired by unashamedly emphasizing in his poetic practice "the thought and fact of sexuality,"<sup>13</sup> which allowed him to conceive, in his densely populated world, of "lovers by the thousand" ("Give Me The Splendid Silent Sun"). Frost also wrote in terms that powerfully evoked his sexual self. He spoke of his poetry in terms of "prowess" and "performance," and in a letter to his son, wrote of Carol's ability to "ram" his poetry "full of all sorts of things." The poems Carol sent his father displayed "a man's vigor" and went "down to a man's depth." In "Putting in the Seed," Frost's "passion for the earth" is expressed in the language of phallic insemination:

How love burns through the Putting in the Seed  
On through the watching for that early birth

When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,  
 The sturdy seedling with arched body comes  
 Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

Frost finds in the language of sexuality an analogy for the processes of the earth. He said in "At Woodward's Gardens," "[i]t's knowing what to do with things that counts," and he found a use for sexual language in displacing the idea of personal intimacy upon descriptions of working the land--the very activity that kept him apart from others: "Men work alone, their lots plowed far apart."

In In The Clearing, the figure in the poems, rather than looking for "stays" is a seeker after a desired object which is perpetually receding from him. In the long central poem "Kitty Hawk," Frost's seeker pursues what is sententiously referred to as the "hidden"--an undefined and unexplained realm that expands the seeker's spiritual horizons beyond the diminished reality in which he finds himself. In place of the sort of promise necessary to Whitman's vision, that isolation is eventually compensated by a coming together of bodies, the prospect in Frost is that the lonely condition will inexhaustibly continue. Poirier writes that Frost's representation of solitude is posited not as something that is "preferred," but as one of the Frostian "conditions of life."<sup>14</sup> The habitual and obsessive loneliness of the figure in the poems exemplifies a stubborn, uncompromising insistence on the distinctness and uniqueness of a

meditative self.

The search for the "hidden" is not Frost's metaphor for a return to a human relatedness that his poetry, in fact, obscures. Solitude is the consequence of the way in which seeking becomes an end in itself, and life "a pursuit of a pursuit forever" ("Escapist--Never"). Whitman, also in pursuit, affirmed in "Song of Myself" that "[a]ll goes onward and outward" in a "perpetual journey"--but he travels in company: "I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself." In "There Was A Child Went Forth," he expresses how he contains the world within him, and becomes part of it:

There was a child went forth every day,  
And the first object he looked upon, that object he  
became,  
And that object became part of him.

Such unities allow for a participation in cohesive and inclusive relationships from which nothing and no-one is excluded. In place of the distinctly separate identity of Frost's figure, Whitman dissipates his individuality such that all are "averaged": "one is no better than the other."

Frost is radically skeptical of the sort of merging of identities that Whitman aspired to. His "penetration" "deeper into matter" ("Kitty Hawk") is not the fluid movement Whitman celebrates, of one body acting as a sort of conduit into another--"they shall flow and unite--they unite now." Frost's movement "out far" and "in deep"--realms he



describes in "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep"--leave him singularly alone. Although both Frost and Whitman speak of "daring" to transgress beyond certain forms and conventions, it is only Whitman who creates out of separateness and detachment the more overt forms of reciprocity. His own penetration in "In Paths Untrodden"--"[i]nquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound"--leads back again to a "hands on" relationship with people, to the thrusting of fingers through his beard, and to all manner of unabashed promiscuity:

Here by myself away from the clank of the world,  
 Tallying and talk'd to here by tongues aromatic,  
 No longer abash'd, (for in this secluded spot I can  
     respond as I  
     would not dare elsewhere,)  
 Strong upon me the life that does not exhibit itself,  
     yet contains all  
     the rest,  
 Resolv'd to sing no songs to-day but those of manly  
     attachment,  
 Projecting them along that substantial life...  
 I proceed for all who are or have been young men,  
 To tell the secrets of my nights and days,  
 To celebrate the need of comrades.

Having dared, Whitman has secrets "to tell" and "nights and days / To celebrate." His will is to conceal nothing: "Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" (51) Frost's daring, which reaches its height in the late poem "Bravado," is unaccompanied, and tends only toward a more emphatic sense of the individual self. His world keeps its "secrets" elusively ahead of him, and the poems define an oeuvre which

has as its central idea an aspiration for something that is provokingly uncertain. As there are, in the life of Frost's seeker, none of Whitman's final unities--"every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you"--so the desire for fulfillment in Frost is altered. The perpetual unattainableness of what he pursues, and the recognition of his own imperfection in the face of his ideals, is a constant source of regret and melancholy. Frost's cerebral "passion," which makes Whitman's seem brash and labored, is perpetually and purposively unrequited. His "chief guide in the world" is not the proximity of other lives with whom he might associate, but something remote and not yet existing, a "passionate preference for something we can't help wishing were so--wishing were true."<sup>15</sup>

Frost spoke of man as "the knot where all his connections meet,"<sup>16</sup> but the image is not of a life touching many others, but of the threads of individual character bound up within itself. He resists the sort of connections Whitman repeatedly discovered in the intense, palpable, cohesiveness of one body pressed close to another--"the long sustain'd kiss upon the mouth"... "the bedfellow's embrace in the night"... "that woman who passionately clung to me." In place of even the sparest of associations is the solitary figure wholly disconnected. Whitman identifies himself with, and becomes all people. Frost said "[y]ou can only know your own life."<sup>17</sup>

Frost retreated from the depressing thought of being alone with the knowledge of his own searching complexities and the world's indifference. He appealed for "the night be too dark for me to see / Into the future." "Acceptance" sets a boundary to what he wishes to experienced in order to defray a greater sorrow. In "Come In," the already isolated seeker "almost" reads the bird song heard in the forest as an invitation to a yet deeper solitude--"a call to come in / To the dark"--but the call is resisted: "I would not come in. / I meant not even if asked, / And I hadn't been."

In The Clearing is a rigorous redefinition of such cautiousness. The seeker, at times almost spectral in his isolation, is continually pushing at the limits of his loneliness. Michael Cooke interprets what Frost refers to as "hidden" as something that offers the possibility of a way out of a "singular marginalism" and into an "ampler human domain" of "infinite evolutionary possibilities of consciousness."<sup>18</sup> In "Kitty Hawk," the penetration toward the "hidden" is figured in terms that keep open the possibility of significant accomplishment. Man's instinctive impulse to go on extending himself beyond what is familiar and mundane is unambiguously part of his being: "Mind you, we are mind. / We are not the kind / To stay too confined." By "Mind," Frost refers to the inevitable pouring forth of his perceptions of the real world. What he describes as a spirit of "derring-do" keeps him from yielding to the

drudgery of "crawling around on foot" and "just staying put." The boundaries that the figure in the poems comes up against in movements outward and inward suggest his fate is partially hooped in, rather than "unbounded." But Frost does not see such boundaries as intrinsically setting limits upon his ambition, which would leave him having to make do with a more material world, rather than perpetually aspiring beyond it. Individual freedom has to do not with an absence of restraint, but the presence of a creative power. The inventive "mind" is continually making things new out of the old and recalcitrant material. Limits in Frost do not hem him in amongst people, but turn out merely to mark the extent of his moving onwards. He takes the example of the successful flight of the Wright brothers' biplane as symbolic of what man may aspire to. It is only a lack of imagination that keeps him confined, although a conflict remains between the free imagination and the forms of order which the imagination itself creates:

Little I imagined  
 Men would treat this sky  
 Some day to a pageant  
 Like a thousand birds.  
 Neither you nor I  
 Ever thought to fly.  
 Oh, but fly we did,  
 Literally fly.

That "neither you nor I / Ever thought to fly" is Frost's admission of how assuming a limit to what he might do partially determines his place in the scheme of things.

"The Holiness of Wholeness" section of "Kitty Hawk" is Frost's meditation upon what man "can't or can." There are "limitations to all things" Frost said,<sup>19</sup> but ambition is never sated: "What comes over man, is it soul or mind-- / That to no limits he can stay confined?" In "There Are Roughly Zones", the attempt to "extend the reach / Clear to the Arctic of every living kind" by planting peach trees "very far north" is scuppered by the harshness of the climate, and leads him to "admit" that "though there is no fixed line between wrong and right, / There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed." Frost acquiesces not to a limit to his ambition, but to what may still be practically accomplished as limits and resistances to his ambition to assert his purposes upon a recalcitrant reality are tested and chafed against. Humankind cannot be defined in terms that exclude a need to satisfy the "limitless trait" in his heart ("There are Roughly Zones")--a venturesomeness Frost describes as a "stirring [of] ...the God within you."<sup>20</sup> Frost's "God-belief" is not an acquiescence to certain dispensations that are already established and which determine what man can or cannot do, but "a relationship you enter into with [God] to bring about the future."<sup>21</sup> The Incarnation is an archetype of man's instinct to breach confinements--a "demonstration" prompting him to express the felt but unrealized ambitions of his inquiring mind:

God's own descent  
Into flesh was meant

As a demonstration  
That the supreme merit  
Lay in risking spirit  
In substantiation.

The association of "risk" with "flesh" is pure Whitman, whose naked, risks-in-the-flesh substantiate his spiritual yearnings. "The most conservative thing in the world" Frost said, "is that like produces like. Human beings give birth to human beings. The most radical thing is a certain dissatisfaction that this is so."<sup>22</sup> Frost's "certain dissatisfaction" with what procreation offers as an image of human connection might have led straight back to Whitman, whose radicalism takes the form of establishing connections that wholly disregard cultural and social proscriptions on sexual relationships. Frost's wish is that "something" will "go always unharvested" ("Unharvested"). His wish stemmed from the belief that there is always something left to do. His interest is not in the type of associations that consummate Whitman's vision, but compounded in part by the less idealistic and more cautionary knowledge that is most clearly demonstrated in "Provide, Provide." Frost pursued a life as a poet, but he knew his needs and responsibilities to provide for himself and his family. He worked, reluctantly, as a farmer, in order that he would not compromise the filial duties that were incumbent upon him. By virtue of his social constraint to work the land, Frost develops a laboring consciousness, with many of the poems

written as if he is at that moment performing an actual task. The work on the farm, though partly resented because he wanted to write for a living, is a type of muse. "My object in living," he wrote in "Two Tramps in Mud Time," "is to unite / My avocation and my vocation."

The future that Frost's seeker aspires to is not something ready made and given, but something as yet indeterminate--unfinished, unharvested--that he is obliged to progressively think into shape. In "The Constant Symbol" Frost defines creativity by distinguishing between "conformance" and "performance."<sup>23</sup> He is both "believing in things"--accepting the truths that are already laid down and which demand conformity--and "believing things in"--creating a future that needs man's active imagination to bring about. It is this shaping idea of performance that informs a world which has a chancy, self-made character, rather than a fatal or necessary one:

The most creative thing in us is to believe a thing in, in love, in all else. You believe yourself into existence. You believe your marriage into existence, you believe in each other, you believe that it's worthwhile going on...And the ultimate one is the belief in the future of the world. I believe the future in. It's coming in by my believing it.<sup>24</sup>

Frost reserves judgement on the character of a world that is yet to be determined. "Calculation"--that is, an attempt to determine a course of action by judgements which anticipate a future that has a certain character--"is usually no part

in the first step in any walk" ("The Constant Symbol.")<sup>25</sup>

His intentions are not declared--as they are, almost predatorily, in Whitman--but rather held in reserve.

"[U]nnecessary commitment" to a particular course of action--saying too much too early about a future course of events--is "reckless." It is better, rather, "to talk in parables and hints and indirections" ("Education By Poetry.")<sup>26</sup> His instinct is to keep open many possible courses of action--to have "freedom to squander"--before becoming committed to any one of them.

As there is no ready made design shaping the future, Frost's exhortation in "Kitty Hawk" is to confront an uncertain reality with a belief in the limitlessness of what might be affirmed.

Have no hallowing fears  
Anything's forbidden  
Just because it's hidden.  
Trespass and encroach  
On successive spheres  
Without self-reproach.

Just as Whitman sees the apparently fixed, benign structures of nature, culture and morality not as intrinsic properties but as mere proprieties that can be done away with, Frost's world similarly has no absolutes to keep things in place. What might be assented to as sacred givens or preordained injunctions, confining him and limiting his imagination, are counted by Frost in his essay "On Emerson," as "formal laws"<sup>27</sup>--that is, imperfect, temporary and changeable human



constructs. Reality in "All Revelation" is merely a "strange apparition of the mind."

"A great civilization" Frost wrote, "can afford to indulge in all sorts of deviations and aberrations."<sup>28</sup> In "On Emerson" he defines freedom as "nothing but departure--setting forth--leaving things behind, brave origination of the courage to be new."<sup>29</sup> Frost spoke of "a whimsical desire to see all civilization obliterated in order to stand, timeless at some cosmic vantage point and watch the slow, painful process of rebuilding."<sup>30</sup> But in place of the complete newness that Frost imagines following the cataclysm, he actually writes, in "The Amherst Student," of his place within a world neither totally determined nor wholly without form, and upon which he asserts some sort of order:

The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration.<sup>31</sup>

Against such a background man seems a "mere lilliputian" ("Kitty Hawk") but he remains capable of ordering his affairs unperturbed by either a lonely or diminutive place in things. He keeps "this feeling of everyday that you can handle it, that you can give it shape:"

[A]s long as so many of us, nearly all of us, have a chance to make a little rounding out of something.... that is what keeps the sanity and that is what keeps and saves us from the sense of confusion.<sup>32</sup>

Compared with the sort of extravagant fulfillment that Whitman seeks, Frost's vision is more accessible. The "something" he refers to might be "a basket, a letter, a garden, a room, an idea, a picture, a poem" ("The Amherst Student."<sup>33</sup> But these, for Frost, are preliminary, incidental things, not ultimate truths. The encroaching upon successive spheres--in "art, politics, school, church, business, love...marriage...work ...career" ("The Constant Symbol"<sup>34</sup>)--does not end so familiarly. Although things get finished, or "rounded", they make up the incidental character of a world where nothing is fully perfected: the "plunge of the mind, the spirit, into the material universe...can't go too far or too deep."<sup>35</sup> Frost does not allow for the idea that there is a realm to be reached where he might come to a point of rest. His mind is never caught in a realized dream. The spirit of his creativity remains a restless striving forward, requiring everything of the mind to avoid complacency and stagnation.

With the emphasis on seeking, Frost need not define the "hidden" that is sought for. The role of the seeker is what is given to man when a lack of certainty about his place in the universe opens up a world of continual possibilities. Instead of despondency, there is brio at the risks--the "little trespasses and excesses"--to be taken: "[t]he beauty of life....lies in struggle and change and taking tough decisions."<sup>36</sup>

That Frost posits the "hidden" into which he inquires as outside of the mind--a "stuff" that is to be "made up into something" ("The Constant Symbol")<sup>37</sup>--proves him to be no solipsist. In "For Once, Then, Something", "looking down well-curbs / Always wrong to the light" allows for the impression that only the self exists, and that the world can be arranged with the self always central within it:

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.

The reflection in the water, which makes the world a mirror showing the viewer to himself, is only a momentary deception. Although the delusion might be sought after, Frost's actual view of things demands a "far out" and an "in deep" perspective, a world "beyond" and "through" which emerges as the surface picture is penetrated:

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.

The concern is not with what is lost or excluded when inquiry is forestalled; the elusiveness of what is sought affirms the role of the seeker. To "lose" something is not to have had it one moment and then be without it the next--which would be to define inquiry as the attempt to restore a previously lost order from a position of deficiency or

inadequacy. The "lost" is what might still be, rather than what once has been.

"For Once, Then, Something" expresses Frost's fidelity to the pursuit of something that is vaguely, but sufficiently intimated, but which remains unknowable. The "hidden" cannot be encompassed in fact, which would be to make it finite, but continues to be an uncertain, hallucinatory "something" of boundless, diaphanous possibility, endlessly playing up to his curiosity. In "The Mechanic Mixture" he writes "Matter mustn't curd, / Separate and settle" and in "For Once, Then, Something" it gets "blurred" and "blotted":

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 the bottom,  
Blurred it, blotted it out.

Frost does not compensate the vagueness of what he looks for by casting himself as a mystic or visionary, or by assenting to a particular ideology in a world that is only suggestively knowable. Instead of augury--and in place of the idea that looking down wells is the means to an archaic knowledge--Frost affirms uncertainties: By acknowledging his separateness from what he barely perceives, he defines alienation--always and necessarily cut off from what he desires--as the ground of experience. Beyond the material world Frost reserves the possibility of there being something more. "We are not talking until we know more" he wrote

in "Education by Poetry," "until we have something to show."<sup>38</sup>

Frost is indifferent whether the inquiry leads to something of universal significance ("Truth"), or to an inconsequential fragment (a "pebble of quartz"). In the postulating and questioning of what is apprehended as nothing more than a "whiteness," he defines what is definite enough to sustain curiosity and indefinite enough to keep things open and limitless. This is, for Frost, a stance which "answers everything" and which he exemplifies in his reading of John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress:

I think one of the things that has stayed by me best in reading is the story of Evangelist in Pilgrim's Progress who asked Pilgrim, "Do you see yonder shining light?" and received the reply, "I think I do." To merely go on the assumption that he thought he saw the light was enough, no more needed. That answers everything for me. Just to think I see it. There's no room for dogmatism.... Suppose we just continue with Pilgrim and think we see the shining light. Not much room for dogmatism in the world for us.<sup>39</sup>

Rather than adhering to dogmatic certainties which would seal in truth, and seal off anything beyond, Frost posits "adaptability" as the response necessary to getting on with life when things may be experienced only by trial and error:

What has brought about our ability to "do things"? All our adaptability to circumstances? Go back to Walden and Robinson Crusoe. These experimenters found themselves, when trial came, able to, and did, pit themselves against an infinitely unfriendly nature, and they provided some part of, no inconsiderable part of,

creature comforts sufficient.<sup>40</sup>

In "Afterflakes," the isolated figure "[i]n the thick of a teeming snowfall" appears to anticipate the type of revelation of truth that would provide some solace in an overwhelmingly shapeless world. All that he receives from his inquiry--turning and looking up at the sky--is the impression that his shadow is the only form that he can look to for assurance. In place of the looked-for revelation, he gets only a clearer view of the local scene as the weather clears:

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

.....

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

"Just set a man against the elements. Let him battle. If he's worth his salt he'll make it."<sup>41</sup> Frost spoke of being "on the side of adversity." "Progress", he said, "is in conflict."<sup>42</sup> The conflict is the resistance man puts up to the constantly shifting reality epitomized in "Afterflakes," by the changeableness of the weather. The figure in the poem creates a "pause" in the teeming unmanagableness of the storm by setting against the storm's "shapeless shadow" the

"form" of his own shadow. The confusion of the storm does not tempt him to form idealized assurances, but to assert, tentatively a dogged, weather-beaten resilience:

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

It is moment by moment adaptation to things that is important. The opposite view, that there is more to be known from looking into a more distant reality, is satirized in "On Looking Up By Chance At The Constellations":

You'll wait a long time for anything much  
 To happen in heaven beyond the floats of cloud  
 And the Northern Lights that run like tingling nerves.

It is necessary to "look elsewhere than to stars and moon and sun / For the shocks and changes we need to keep us sane." What keeps Frost sane is his ability to affirm man's place in things even in the middle of an existential uncertainty. He claimed he was "not so dispiriting a spirit as to believe a people must be lost who don't know where they are."<sup>43</sup> In "Lost in Heaven," the seeker retracts his wish to know where he is--"Where, where in heaven am I? But don't tell me," preferring to have his lostness "overwhelm" him: "Oh, opening clouds, by opening on me wide / Let's let my heavenly lostness overwhelm me." In "Dust in The Eyes," the name Frost gives to the sudden coming into contact with

the real world, his appeal is for a more intense interaction with reality: "[l]et it be overwhelming, off a roof / And round a corner, blizzard snow for dust, / And blind me to a standstill if it must." To be lost, or to be without direction, is not to be without hope of happiness:

"[Life] goes on....I don't hold with people who say, 'Where do we go from here?' I wouldn't get up in the morning if I thought we didn't have a direction to go in. But....if you ask me what the direction is, I don't answer....I'm a little coy about where the human race is headed."<sup>44</sup>

In "A Cabin In The Clearing," the lostness of those who are asleep in the cabin is no reason for them to feel forsaken. The extent of man's attempt to determine where he is, is figured in the clearing that has been made in the woods. The poem is a dialogue between "Smoke"--a "guardian wraith" which rises upward from the hearth of the cabin through the chimney, symbolizing the unformed ambitions of man's spirit--and "Mist" which "gives off from a garden ground at night," and symbolizes the equally formless spirit of man's social concerns. The wraiths comment on what man has achieved despite not knowing where he is in the universe:

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

The path does not represent the possibility of obtaining solitude from others, but is merely for "the comfort / Of



visiting the equally bewildered." Despite having asked "anyone there is to ask" those in the cabin have no better idea "where they are." "Smoke, though, "will not have their happiness despaired of," and "Mist" "would not give them up for lost / Simply because they don't know where they are." Although the men have retreated from their encroachments and become mere "sleepers" in the cabin, the grimness of their condition does not exclude the potential of further activity. Frost's view is exemplified when he speaks of the need of a "good cellar"--that is, always having enough stored up for the bleak, unproductive periods when imaginative activity is curtailed:

'Fill your cellar and fill your larder' so that you can go into the siege of winter with zest....Have a good cellar. That is a part of the good life.<sup>45</sup>

For Frost, not knowing something--and keeping things hidden--is preferable to being certain or knowing "too much" about things:

If the day ever comes when they know who  
They are, they may know better where they are.  
But who they are is too much to believe--  
Either for them or the looking world.  
They are too sudden to be credible.

The poem embodies Frost's resistance to any absolutist stance which would stultify any further shaping of the future. He works with "insufficient information" by affirming the need to leave things unfinished: "[t]here must

always be something left undone."<sup>46</sup> In "The Cabin In The Clearing" the sleepers are totally in the dark but "[p]utting the lamp out has not put their thought out."

In "Escapist--Never" Frost counters the accusation that to see all experience as a perpetual search, and to leave the seeker uncommitted to any particular person or place, is escapist. His "runner out ahead" is "no fugitive." He is not fleeing from circumstances he can no longer be party to: "[n]o one has seen him stumble looking back," neither was he going back on an orthodoxy generally assented to: "I'm a pursuitist, not an escapist."<sup>47</sup> The future takes the form of "an interminable chain of longing," made up of "ever breaking newness" ("The Courage To be New"):

He seeks a seeker who in his turn seeks  
 Another still, lost far into the distance.  
 Any who seek him seek in him the seeker.  
 His life is a pursuit of a pursuit forever.  
 It is the future that creates his present.  
 All is an interminable chain of longing.

The endless pursuit of something not yet existing is not a grim principle of existence but the stimulus at the heart of Frost's work, and his most necessary fiction. The need is to perpetually shape a true course when present reality "on either hand" is wholly undetermined and offers no assurances:

His fear is not behind him but beside him  
 On either hand to make his course perhaps  
 A crooked straightness yet no less a straightness.  
 He runs face forward. He is a pursuer.

The crookedness of the "general direction" ahead comes from having to adapt to a reality that does not "give" as the seeker makes his way forward within it--when he is turned aside as a particular desire is thwarted or complicated by resistant matter. Compromises must be made to work within what Frost calls, in "The Mechanic Mixture," nature's "vague design":

The way will be zigzag, but it will be a straight crookedness like the walking stick he cuts himself in the bushes for an emblem. He will be judged as he does or doesn't let this zig or that zag project him off out of his general direction.

In "Escapist--Never", "the future"--as yet partially dependent on him for the form it will take--"creates his present." The need is always to be "hurling...paths ahead,"<sup>48</sup>--what Frost describes in "Range Finding," as the putting of as much possibility into the future as possible:

[L]ike giants we are always hurling experience ahead of us to pave the future with against the day when we may want to strike a line of purpose across it somewhere ("The Figure A Poem Makes").<sup>49</sup>

Frost's experience in a world that is partly determined is always impromptu. In "Four Room Shack Aspiring High" the future is an unassimiliable excess of possibilities: "the visions in the sky / That go blindly pouring past." Although Frost is uneasy about believing the future in when all the circumstances of reality are utterly indetermined--

"[s]ometimes I feel one way and sometimes I feel the other"-  
 -he does not equivocate between the past that is given up  
 and the future that is to be claimed: "I never look  
 back....I am always ahead of myself."<sup>50</sup> His pursuer runs  
 "face forward....forever." He is not "escaping," neither  
 recreating likenesses of a culture left behind, nor "kicking  
 from one chance suggestion to another in all directions."<sup>51</sup>  
 He has, rather, all the appearance of tipping himself into a  
 vortex, asking questions and questing on, holding nothing to  
 be final. Human connectedness, and all the attendant  
 possibilities of love, happiness and wisdom, and for the  
 deepening of the self that come with community, are created  
 in the avowal to keep on questing.

Frost said "[t]wo fears should follow us through  
 life....the fear of God ....[a]nd the fear of man--the fear  
 that men won't understand us and that we shall be cut off  
 from them."<sup>52</sup> His poetry fully expresses his fear of being  
 cut off from men. The figure in "In Winter in the Woods  
 Alone," encroaches upon the "hidden" by making short sallies  
 out into the woods, each time cutting down a tree as if  
 penetrating the wilderness in a type of frontiersmanship:

In winter in the woods alone  
 Against the trees I go.  
 I mark a maple for my own  
 And lay the maple low.

At four o'clock I shoulder ax,  
 And in the afterglow  
 I link a line of shadowy tracks  
 Across the tinted snow.

I see for Nature no defeat  
 In one tree's overthrow  
 Or for myself in my retreat  
 For yet another blow.

The figure affirms the need, the will and the means to augment the clearings that are made as the boundaries of the knowable are extended. The repeated task of cutting down trees is interposed between complete stasis, or inertia, or entropy, or death. The particular significance of the individual life is found in the embracing of solitary labor, with the promise that nature will not be wasted by his ax-work: "[w]hen a tree is cut down, another grows" he said<sup>53</sup>: there is always "something for hope." the figure in the poem returns each time to what Frost calls a "stronghold": "we can make raids and excursions into the wild, but it has to be from well kept strongholds."<sup>54</sup> It is the Frostian figure withdrawing in order to "come out again amongst folks" in an inspired state:

[A] person has to be withdrawn into himself to gather inspiration so that he is somebody when he comes out again amongst folks--when he 'comes to market' with himself. He learns that he's got to be almost wastefully alone.<sup>55</sup>

This is the drumlin woodchuck in Frost, necessarily retreating in order to preserve himself and "be there for you." Frost's personal belief, and the accomplishment of finding a place and a purpose within things, was in the anticipation of coming out again that the poetry prepares

him for. What he affirms is both the need to go on speculating and to go on providing, and in doing so he proffers not love but "courage" as "the human virtue that counts most....the daring."<sup>56</sup>

Frost's world is one of profound uncertainty, of deep solitude and heartbreak, offering no consistent image of his place within it. In "The Census Taker" the living have gone. In a "Disused Graveyard" the dead have gone. In "The Birthplace" the children have scattered. In "The Last Mowing" there is just wilderness. In "Home Burial," love ends in incomprehension. In "Out! Out!" each turns away, after tragedy, to his own affairs. The lesson of "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" is that "you can come down from everything to nothing." In all this, Frost's ability to stoically and candidly assert the possibility of reciprocity and love is his most profound and risky "transgression."

Emerson saw that there are in human relationships "things that make no impression" and "are forgotten." He wrote of the tragic difficulty of sustaining a relationship even with those amongst whom he was most intimately concerned. All objects "slip through our fingers": "[s]omething which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me nor enlarging me, falls off from me and leaves no scar." But the solitude Emerson returns to as a solace from personal grief and ineffectual interaction with people, is a restorative for furthering

subsequent connections: "in the solitude to which every man is always returning, he has a sanity and revelations which in his passage into new worlds he will carry with him." The Emerson of "Experience," almost Whitmanesque in his suggestiveness, sees the "inscrutable possibilities" of life deriving not from isolation, but from being with people: "I never know, in addressing myself to a new individual, what may befall me." He discerned an unseen "Ideal always journeying with us," which allowed for the idea that in every relationship "all are a little advanced."

"We do what we must do," Emerson wrote in "Experience," "and call it by the best names we can." He knew the arc that took him from vaunted possibilities to destitution: "[u]nspeakably sad and barren does life look to those who a few moments ago were dazzled with the splendor of the promise of the times." But the "dislocation and detachment" which he said in "The Poet," "makes things ugly," was not only the ground of a new cycle of beginnings--"never mind the defeat....up again, old heart!"--but the means to the "deeper insight" of a fundamental attachment to all things. The "deeper" the solitary figure "dives into his most private, most secret presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, most universally true." In Frost's poems of withdrawal and return--and particularly so in "Birches," he also wished to "come back" and "begin over."

"Of what use is genius," Emerson wrote in "Experience," "if the organ is too convex or too concave and cannot find a focal distance within the actual horizons of human life." Whitman, in "The Sleepers" affirmed "love" as "the keelson of creation," and announces "all the men ever born are....my brothers....and the women my sisters and lovers." In "Song of Myself" he wrote "[w]hoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral." But for Frost, the procreant urge is felt not in Whitman's "knit of identity," but in the amplification of the uncertainties that surround him. Frost saw "no defeat" in knowing that knowledge and experience is never more than speciously complete." His life and his poems have as material all that remains "unfinished" and waiting to be worked into form. The poems read as a sacrifice of ease for the sake of the something more that is yet to be achieved, with Frost perched always on the edge of what Hopkins termed "cliffs of fall": "I should be worried if a single one of my poems stopped....anywhere....My poems are all set to tip the reader foremost into the boundless."<sup>57</sup> Out of the "boundless" come the "few connections"<sup>58</sup> that he made reaching out "across the gulf of well nigh everything."



## Notes

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