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# The Concept of Man in the Poetry of Robert Frost

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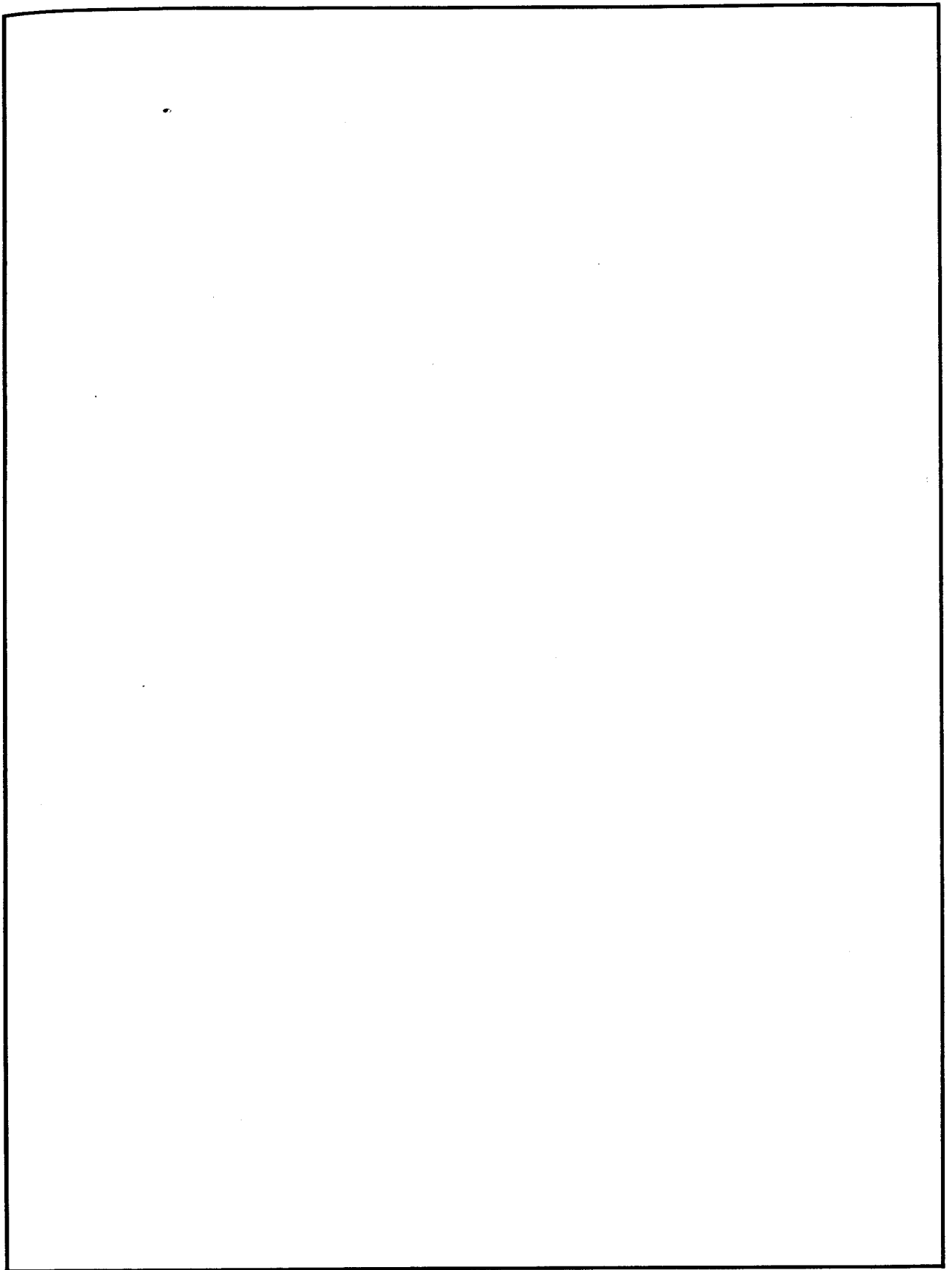
THE CONCEPT OF MAN IN THE POETRY OF  
ROBERT FROST

by  
William W. Adams

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master  
of Arts degree from Loyola  
University of Chicago.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

A thesis on a contemporary poet must necessarily run the risk of becoming obsolete even while it is being written. This is more true in an evaluation of the man's contribution than in a simple analysis of what his works contain. Therefore this study will not attempt to pass judgment on the merits of Robert Frost's poetry or to gauge his influence, if any, on those who have come after him. Rather, this will be an attempt to ascertain what Robert Frost has said, an attempt to extract from the volumes of his poetry those concepts which are basic, which underlie his work.

To call this an exposition of Frost's entire philosophy would be too optimistic. The primary objective is to provide a fundament for future study, to supply the groundwork for an appraisal of his philosophy, his concept of man, and establishing its content and limits.

There shines through the mass of Robert Frost's poetry a consistent attitude on man. From his earliest volumes to those of the present day there comes a picture of man, alone and self-reliant in this world of ours. He is at the same time in this world of ours and at odds with it, but in the ensuing struggle man has reason for hope.

This is man as Robert Frost visualizes him, isolated and struggling for existence, but reasonably confident of his ability to succeed. A mere statement of this is of course not enough. This whole thesis is dedicated to proving the assertion that this concept of man is Robert Frost's. This will be done by quoting from the poet himself and from various of his critics who have glimpsed this concept, wholly or in part, from their readings in the man.

By way of introduction to this work some consideration of Frost the man is essential, for seldom in the history of literature has a man, his background, and his works been so closely interrelated. For the philosophy that Robert Frost develops in his writings over the years reflects various phases in his life. His origins, literary, geographical, and occupational, have all had their influence on his point of view.

No single influence is more marked than that of Frost's days as a farmer. The basic concepts on the poetry of Robert Frost are trademarks of the New England farmer. The accent on the individual, his isolation and self-reliance, the struggle with Nature, and stoic unemotional optimism and faith in man's ability to overcome his environment if only by the slightest margin; these are at once typical of Maine and New Hampshire and Massachusetts, and of Robert Frost. The philosophy of the Vermont farmer is the philosophy of Frost.

There is another marked influence that seems to have originated in the New England tradition and temperament. The typically New England literature of other days has much of the spirit that is found in Frost.

The writings of Emerson and Thoreau give the best examples of this. Much of America's spirit of rugged individualism had its roots watered by the outspoken "individualistic" literature of these men. Even in the poems of Emily Dickinson can be seen a kindred spirit to the singer of the "Wall" and "The Mountain" and the "Hired Man".

Still there is a quality in his philosophy and in his poetry that transcends any geographical region. England discovered him, the mid-west and California have rejoiced in his presence and in his poetry. Mark Van Doren has written of Frost that "He is a New England poet, perhaps the New England poet, . . . But he is in the same breath a poet of and for the world." <sup>1</sup>

A brief chronicle of the highlights in Frost's life will show him as a New Englander with wide appeal. It will also help the reader to understand the man's philosophy of life and choice of subject matter.

New England's greatest contemporary poet, the man who has incorporated the dialect of New Hampshire and Vermont into his poetry, was born a continent away in San Francisco in 1874. <sup>2</sup> Though he has New Englanders among his paternal ancestors through eight generations, he is a native of the west coast, because his brilliant, but erratic father had run away from a law career to edit a newspaper in San Francisco.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Van Doren, The Private Reader, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1942, 87.

<sup>2</sup> Though most books have 1875, this is the date Frost now gives. cf. Time, October 9, 1950, 76 n.

When Robert Frost was eleven his father died and the family-- his mother and younger sister-- moved back to New England. He was from that time on to make the northeastern section of the United States his center of activity save for a three year sojourn in England from 1912 to 1915, and two brief periods at the University of Michigan and in California.

He was on his return to the east, among other things, a shoemaker, a teacher, the editor of a small newspaper, and a farmer. This last occupation particularly has left its mark on his poetry. Frost's doggedness and his earthy wisdom are typical of the farmer. Years of struggling with the soil, of battling nature for a livelihood have given him an insight into human nature and life at its most fundamental level that has made his poetic expression unique in the poetry of the English language. As one critic writes:

If the farm had not grudgingly yielded him a living, it had done something else; it had toughened his respect for nature, it had disciplined him by its immalleability to aught but extremely hard labor. It put, in short, a fibrous quality in his living which has been expressed in the poetry. <sup>3</sup>

This is found not only in the subject matter of Frost's poems, "Gathering Leaves", "The Death of the Hired Man", "Mending Wall", but in the expression, the outlook, the philosophy of life behind every line.

Since he has become famous, Frost's chief source of income

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<sup>3</sup> Gorham B. Munson, Robert Frost, George H. Doran Company, Murray Hill, New York, 1927, 39.



has been his lectures. He has lectured at Dartmouth, Wesleyan, Harvard, Vassar and many other Colleges and Universities. In 1925 President Burton of the University of Michigan founded a special life-time Fellowship at that school specifically for Frost, but the lure of New England brought him back to Vermont in 1926.<sup>4</sup> At this present writing (1953) he is "Poet in Residence" at Amherst College in Massachusetts, the school that has longest called him its own.

While the man goes on quietly about his work of educating by lecture, in classroom, and through poetry, the number of his admirers steadily increases. Whatever the judgment of future generations may be concerning Frost, his contemporaries have calmly and persistently acclaimed him. There have been no Frost fads, a la Eliot and Auden. His works are not sufficiently esoteric to warrant a school of followers. But once his A Boy's Will and North of Boston were published, he became a poet to be read. Not only did his poems appear in anthologies and text books in the United States, but also in England and even at the Sorbonne and at Montpellier.<sup>5</sup>

He has won the Pulitzer prize for poetry four times and his books have sold some 375,000 copies in all editions.

He has twice made a Master of Arts, . . . three times a Doctor of the Humanities, . . . and twelve times a Doctor of Letters . . . . He has been chosen as a Phi Beta Kappa poet by Tufts,

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4 Ibid., 74-75.

5 Ibid., 72-73

William and Mary, Harvard (twice) and Columbia . . . He has been awarded four Pulitzer prizes . . . He has received the Loines medal for poetry, the Mark Twain medal, the gold medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the Silver medal of the Poetry Society of America. <sup>6</sup>

Critics and students of poetry have come out strongly for Robert Frost as this paragraph from a book written in 1929 indicates.

The editors of the London Spectator 'can think of no poet of his generation who seems to (them) more worthy to survive,' and . . . the senior professor of English in one of our best American colleges declares him the superior of Wordsworth, and the best poet America has ever had. <sup>7</sup>

A modern-day critic, Peter Viereck is more conservative claiming merely that Frost "is one of the world's greatest living poets." <sup>8</sup> Time featured him in a six-page article and stated that Frost is unsurpassed by any American poet since Walt Whitman. <sup>9</sup>

While thirty-five years of favorable criticism does not of itself establish a poet among the great, it does indicate that there is something in Robert Frost's poetry that defies the ephemeral. He has captured enough of the universal in his lines to be appealing to four very diverse generations of readers. In any case it would seem he is

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<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Cowley, "Frost: A Dissenting Opinion," The New Republic, September 11, 1944, 312-313.

<sup>7</sup> Sidney Cox, Robert Frost, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1929, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Viereck, "Pharnassus Divided," Atlantic Monthly, 184, October, 1949, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Time, October 9, 1950, 82.

sufficiently important to justify this present study.

Since this paper is concerned with basic concepts in the man's poetry, the logical question now is whether or not his development, if any, has brought with it a change in his fundamental philosophy. One critic writes:

Basic changes have been taking place in Frost all along, but from the beginning the clarity of his verse has obscured the complexities of his development.<sup>10</sup>

Another observes that "there is more Lucretius now than Horace, more granite than herbs."<sup>11</sup> Some few others, considering for the most part Frost's last two works, the "Masques," claim they see a change in the man's attitude. Randall Jarrell says "Frost was radical when young . . . and now that he's old he's sometimes callously and unimaginatively conservative."<sup>12</sup> But Mr. Jarrell admits he is not sure he understands the "Masques" and later singles out as their main theme, an idea that has long held Frost's interest, that courage is one of man's principle virtues.<sup>13</sup>

Allowing for a somewhat unusual Frost in the "Masques," there

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<sup>10</sup> W. G. O'Donnell, "Robert Frost and New England: A Revaluation," Yale Review, 374, June, 1948, 700.

<sup>11</sup> Donald A. Stauffer, "The New Lyrics of Robert Frost," The Atlantic Monthly, 180, October, 1947, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Randall Jarrell, "The Other Robert Frost," Nation, 165, November 29, 1947, 590.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 592.

still seems to be a continuity in his work, a recurrence of basic themes. As Caroline Ford has written: "To study Frost is to realize that his poetry is based on convictions of life's meaning, which show amazing consistency with all that he has written."<sup>14</sup> This thesis is an attempt to prove the truth of the above statement inasmuch as it is aimed at establishing and exemplifying the basic ideas on man that run consistently through Robert Frost's poems. As Frost himself has written:

They would not find me changed from him they knew--  
Only more sure of all I thought was true.<sup>15</sup>

Taking four themes that the poet is most persistent in presenting, four ideas on man that seem to underlie all his work, this study will examine each of his volumes of poetry in an attempt to find the expression of these ideas down through the years.

To this purpose the four subsequent chapters will point out and illustrate in order the individuality of man, his isolation and self-reliance; nature as the context and antagonist of man; the struggle for survival as man's task in life; and through it all an optimistic strain, a hope that man can conquer his environment if only he does his part. The fifth section following will gather the findings of the preceding

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<sup>14</sup> Caroline Ford, The Less Traveled Road, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1935, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Frost, "Into My Own," Complete Poems of Robert Frost, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1949, 5. All subsequent quotations from Robert Frost's poetry will be taken from this volume.

chapters together and show their relation to one another. This last chapter will give then a glimpse of Robert Frost's philosophy, i.e., his fundamental outlook on man and man's context.

The frequency with which these four concepts appear in Frost's work (as will be exemplified in the following chapters) is reason enough why they should be singled out as most fundamental. But in addition at least one critic has consciously or unconsciously gathered them together in an article. J. McBride Dabbs, writing in the Yale Review, has said of Frost:

The fact remains that he is deeply concerned with nature, for he sees it as man's source and environment, and feels strongly its influence upon him. Nature holds man, as the mountain held the town, in a shadow. In its passive mood, it is solid, unyielding; in its active almost resistless.

Yet, though nature threatens man with destruction, its very challenge creates courage, and so life, within him. Nature exists--so far as man is concerned--to be fought against, but not to be destroyed, even were that possible, for that would be the destruction of man himself . . . But, going still further, Robert Frost is also concerned with the individual in nature . . . it might be argued that this delicate balance between interest in man and interest in nature, this breadth of vision, is Frost's best claim to the title of classicist. <sup>16</sup>

Here in two neat paragraphs is the essence of what Robert Frost has said concerning man in more than forty years of writing poetry.

Here is the individual, strong in courage, standing against awesome nature. It is a picture of mankind. The above glimpse is also a com-

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<sup>16</sup> J. McBride Dabbs, "Robert Frost and the Dark Woods," Yale Review, March, 1934, 516-517.

pact pre-view of this thesis, a forecast of what is to come.

On the rest of the paper falls the burden of proof.

## CHAPTER II

### THE INDIVIDUAL

Any attempt to extract a man's fundamental concepts on life from his writings is subject to error. Lawrence Thompson expressed this difficulty well when he pointed out " the impossibility of finding or expecting that isolated poems, flashes of insight, should relate themselves into a singleness of attitude toward life." <sup>1</sup> But this does not mean the persistent reader must despair of ever knowing an author even to his basic outlook on life. Just as a minute study of the various movements in a symphony will eventually yield a single powerful impression of the whole work, so by examining each of a man's poems we can eventually arrive at some valid conclusions concerning the man and his works taken as a whole.

That some few pieces seem to contradict or be out of place does not destroy the totality. A gloriously jeweled crown may carry some inferior gems without losing either its total beauty or its effect.

So it is with the works of Robert Frost. Even Professor

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Thompson, Fire and Ice, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1942, 177.

Thompson admits this and specifically in relation to the poet in question writes:

A large group of one man's poems will furnish guides, however, because the poems are never completely isolated from the moral viewpoint of the man, as contrasted with the artist. The cumulative expression of a consistent perspective inevitably asserts itself above the inconsistencies during a period of years. And if growth has made the poet only more sure of all he thought was true, the problem is even further simplified.<sup>2</sup>

When the individuality and self-reliance of man is singled out as a basic trait in the poetry and tenet in the philosophy of Robert Frost, the assertion finds support, sometimes explicitly, sometimes by implication, in dozens of his poems from his earliest down to those of more recent years. This conclusion is further supported by prose statements of the author, in prefaces, lectures, and recorded conversations.

This outlook on the part of Robert Frost has been observed by a number of eminent critics, many of whom will be quoted in the course of this chapter. These men have based their assertions on what Frost has written and published in the nineteen twenties, the thirties, and in more recent times.

If Frost is pre-occupied with the individual and his self-reliance, a natural question to ask is whether or not he approves or disapproves of this trait. He does neither in a striking or persist-

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2 Ibid., 177.



ent way. It seems he is more concerned with presenting the fact, than with giving an opinion on its merit.

He seems to say that this is how he finds man and for the most part how man finds himself. This concentration on solid fact is as much a part of Frost's New England heritage as is his appreciation for self-reliance. As one critic has written:

Frost's love of reality is so pronounced as to constitute a danger, though so far eluded, the danger to which Thoreau succumbed, of coming to feel that any fact, however, insignificant, was important. None of his lines is more characteristic than the early 'The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.'<sup>3</sup>

Here as always, when commentators look for writers with whom to compare Robert Frost, they go to New Englanders like Emily Dickinson and Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson the patron saint and most outspoken apostle of self-reliance. This shows that it is not the subject matter that most stays with the reader, but the attitude of mind behind the characters and comments. Readers persist in explaining Frost by New Englanders. If this were not true, Frost should be compared with James Whitcomb Riley or Edgar Lee Masters. He never is. He is sooner studied with Edwin Arlington Robinson,<sup>4</sup> because, though they differ in subject matter, their common origins give them a basis for compari-

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<sup>3</sup> T. K. Whipple, Spokesmen, D. Appleton-Century Company, New York, 1928, 101.

<sup>4</sup> Robert P. Tristram Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1938.

son.

From this common heritage of the Emersons and Dickinson and the Frosts comes that common sense self-reliance that does not in any sense despise companionship, but that realizes man's inevitable isolation in his relation to God and the world. As one man puts it in speaking of Robert Frost:

He does not even propound a philosophy of life. On the whole, if we are to deduce one from his collected works, it is the philosophy that a cheerful, persistent man of hard-headed common sense might be expected to have . . . He feels that while this is not the best of all possible worlds, it is the best one that he knows, and that as far as his life in it is concerned it is pretty much a world of his own making. <sup>5</sup>

Frost early established his stand in this matter. His first volume contained several stanzas that echo man's isolation. Later works show the author more content to stand alone, but "Revelation" finds loneliness a burden, though still a fact.

We make ourselves a place apart  
Behind light words that tease and flout,  
But oh, the agitated heart  
'til someone really find us out. <sup>6</sup>

Also in A Boy's Will and in a more mature poem "The Trial by Existence,"

Frost writes:

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<sup>5</sup> Percy H. Boynton, Some Contemporary Americans, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1924, 45-46.

<sup>6</sup> Frost, Poems, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 30.

'til of the essence of life here,  
 Though we choose greatly, still to lack  
 The lasting memory at all clear,  
 That life has for us on the wrack  
 Nothing but what we somehow chose; <sup>7</sup>

Here is Frost's acknowledgment of self-reliance and of the freedom of the human will. To him, it would seem, those who deny freedom take the easy way out, afraid of the responsibility of their actions.

If a single poem were asked for which in itself embodied and symbolized Robert Frost's deep-seated awareness of man's isolation and individuality, "Mending Wall" would be a happy choice. The wall that separates the two farmers is like all the walls between man and man. "We keep the wall between us as we go." <sup>8</sup> And Frost, realizing the gulf, asks why it must exist.

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
 What I was walling in or walling out. <sup>9</sup>

In this poem he seems to say that this is how he finds man. He asks: why is man isolated, or rather why does he isolate himself? Is it natural to build walls between neighbors, or does nature tend to level? Frost here might be inclined to answer that walls and isolation are unnatural. That they are fact he cannot deny. The "why" of it all intrigues him. Is wall-building where walls are not needed, the part of the unenlightened? The reference to his neighbor's appearance as

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 48

as an "old-stone savage" might indicate this. But again it may be natural for man to wall off what is his. Since he cannot hope to understand all, he departmentalizes. He walls off his plot of land and his family, a simple unit he can comprehend. Frost might have written "Good fences make good families" and been closer to the truth than his unreflective neighbor.

There are other examples in Frost's work to illustrate his concept of the aloneness of man. Silas in "The Death of the Hired Man"<sup>10</sup> is another lonely figure that early appears in the poet's work, but a more striking example comes in "Home Burial"<sup>11</sup> where two people who have been married for years still remain painfully isolated from one another. Neither knows the other well enough to bridge the gap and appreciate the other's feelings. They have their own thoughts and emotions. They seem unable to appreciate any point of view but their own.

In his next volume, Mountain Interval, Robert Frost again showed himself much concerned with this sense of isolation. He still sees man as self-dependent and sometimes lonely because of it. "An Old Man's Winter Night"<sup>12</sup> gives a vivid portrait of this latter.

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10 Ibid., 49

11 Ibid., 69

12 Ibid., 135

A light he was to no one but himself  
 Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,  
 A quiet light, and then not even that.

The poem gives an excellent portrayal of desolation without ever quoting the man in question. His silence adds to the impression. Speech can only prove frustrating to the man completely alone.

The first poem in this volume is "The Road Not Taken." <sup>13</sup>  
 In the course of commenting on this particular piece and its spirit, Professor T. K. Whipple has given us this analysis of Frost's concept of man as alone and self-reliant. He writes of Frost:

One of the plainest signs of this ascetic temperament, this instinctive holding in, is the sense of loneliness and isolation which he often expresses, most emphatically in "The Road Not Taken" . . . and the same sense of separation, of a temptation to seclude himself from the world, appears in the first poem of A Boy's Will and again in a 'Grace Note' to New Hampshire . . . sometimes the fascination of solitude, sometimes the terror of it--in either case he feels it strongly. He carries the matter a step further in 'The Tuft of Flowers' <sup>14</sup>

And he continues with a comment on the symbol-poem, "Mending Wall."

In this paragraph he touches on that anomaly in Frost and in life too for that matter which has opposites attracting.

The sequel of this poem, 'Mending Wall,' by implication sets forth the mystery of isolation and comradeship; the one is somehow necessary to the other, the sense of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>14</sup> T. K. Whipple, Spokesmen, D. Appleton-Century Company, 1928, 105-106.

solitariness whets the longing for companionship. 15

This somehow softens any harshness in Frost's stand on self-reliance and isolation. For the poet, while pointing out the fact that this is life, that men stand apart from one another in their thoughts and feelings and in their need to succeed by their own power alone or to fail, does not say companionship is nonexistent or undesirable. When Frost writes that

'Men work together,' I told him from the heart,  
'Whether they work together or apart.' 16

he does not deny their self-dependence or inherent aloneness. A Catholic interpretation would say he expresses here a desire and need for complete union that will never be entirely satisfied in this life.

One critic has said that Frost emphasizes the fact that "all hum human beings, from the cradle, crave to be understood." 17 They never fully will be as each man must work out his own salvation, so Frost depicts him struggling with life, encouraged by love and friends, but ultimately on his own. No two men have the same point of view. They live as it were on islands alone and apart, relying on themselves or on <sup>ing</sup>one. This is Frost's concept of man. In corroboration of this

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15 Ibid., 106.

16 Frost, "The Tuft of Flowers," Poems, 32.

17 Robert P. Tristram Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1938, 74.

Lawrence Thompson writes:

Robert Frost's attitude toward the individual in his relation to Society grows consistently from his initial concern for the development, first, of that inner strength and worth of the individual which permits one to be worthy of the Society in which he lives. <sup>18</sup>

Speaking of the isolation mingled with yearning, to be found in Robert Frost's poetry, Mark Van Doren has this to say:

Let each thing know its limits even as it strains to pass them. No limit will ever be passed, since indeed it is a limit. Which does not mean that we shall never stare across the void between ourselves and others. <sup>19</sup>

These critics pass their judgments after reading Frost's poetry over long periods of time. What was true in the early volumes remains true down through the years. In New Hampshire is a poem about which this same Mark Van Doren comments:

The poem called "The Runaway" is . . . though there are no words in it which say this, the reminder of a universe full of lost things, of a universe in which every creature, indeed, lives touchingly and amusingly alone. <sup>20</sup>

In West-Running Brook the poet has his most explicit statement of the point in hand. "Bereft" ends with these lines:

Word I was in the house alone

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18 Lawrence Thompson, Fire and Ice, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1942, 214.

19 Mark Van Doren, "Robert Frost's America," The Atlantic Monthly, 187, 6, 34.

20 Mark Van Doren, The Private Reader, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1942, 94.

Somehow must have gotten abroad,  
 Word I was in my life alone,  
 Word I had no one left but God. 21

The title here is especially well-chosen. It paints man as an individual, in fact, to be bereft is to say isolation and aloneness. Frost sees this as man's lot.

There is no philosophic confusion in Frost about a single World Soul or a projecting Ego. Nor on the other hand does he preach that extreme shoulder-to-shoulder camaraderie that some English writers professed at the turn of the century. There are no faceless masses in Frost. Each character is clearly etched. Each character is an individual and fights to maintain his individuality.

In A Further Range the poet comments on "The Figure in the Doorway" 22 saying:

The miles and miles he lived from anywhere  
 Were evidently something he could bear.

This man was, if nothing else, independent, or maybe better, self-dependent and self-reliant. Here there is courage in the midst of isolation and desolation. Later on in the same volume there is a poem called "Desert Places" 23 in which isolation brings only fear and loneliness. This same reaction of fear was expressed earlier in "A Servant

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21 Frost, Poems, 317

22 Ibid., 378

23 Ibid., 386



to Servants" <sup>24</sup> and "The Pauper Witch of Grafton." <sup>25</sup>

This almost fierce concern with the self-reliant individual becomes somewhat diluted in the later poems of Robert Frost. The individual is still there. He is still independent of other men, but his self-reliance is now tinged and softened by something very much like God-reliance. The fifth chapter will examine into this point more closely. It is enough to say here that the accent on the individual is present in the last volumes. The point of view is most often a personal one. The sometimes harsh stoicism of the early volumes is merely mitigated.

Professor Lawrence Thompson has caught both Frost's concern for the isolated man and the translation of that concern in his later poems. He also gives us some interesting background information on the man himself, information that gives good indication of how deep this "individual-accent" runs in the poet's thinking. Professor Thompson tells us that Robinson Crusoe and Walden are Frost's favorite books. Records of "how the limited can make snug in the limitless . . . Both (principle characters) found themselves sufficient," <sup>26</sup> and he goes <sup>on</sup> to say:

Frost reads the metaphor of Crusoe's experience as the story

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25 Ibid., 252

26 Thompson, Fire and Ice, New York, 1942, 207.

of a man who accepts his situation in life and makes the best of what is at hand, without querulousness, impatience, or bitterness. He manages to survive with a modicum of comfort and with considerable satisfaction. <sup>27</sup>

This estimate incorporates Frost's work early and late while giving us further proof of the man's concept of his fellow men. The final picture bears a striking resemblance to the typical New Englander, the man who emerges from the history and literature of that part of the country.

It is also a picture of Robert Frost himself, a man who has patiently suffered the attacks of a too formal education, poverty, and literary revolutionists. With his lectures and the royalties from his books of poetry, he lives "with a modicum of comfort and with considerable satisfaction" from a labor of love well done. The intimate sketches of the man which have appeared from time to time lend weight to this assertion. Two of the best such have been featured in the New York Times in recent years. They are written by friends of long acquaintance, David Daiches and John Holmes. Professor Daiches writes that "Frost sees men in elemental postures," <sup>28</sup> while John Holmes says of Frost that "he loves nothing better than to work away at his talking

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27 Ibid., 207.

28 David Daiches, "Enduring Wisdom from a Poet-Sage," New York Times Book Review, May, 1949, 1.

until he surprises himself into saying a new thing." 29 Both authors are English professors and critics as well as personal friends of the poet and can speak of him and his work with authority.

Seeing Robert Frost as he appears to his friends, makes his stand on the individual clear. His poems reflect his own self-reliance, independence, and clearly chiseled individuality. He is friendly without being gregarious. He conveys ideas, without every emptying his vast personal resources of wisdom. In this sense he is isolated from the world about him.

There seem to be only two poems which might presumably be brought up as contradicting the assertions of this second chapter. One, "The Tuft of Flowers," 30 has been dealt with above. This shows man's desire for companionship, but still portrays him as alone. The second, "Haec Fabula Docet," 31 is one of Frost's last poems and possesses that whimsical irony that marks many of his later pieces. It tells of a blind man who refused help only to fall in a hole, because of his independence. Then with a formality that heightens the twistedly humorous poem, Frost adds this epilogue:

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29 John Holmes, "Close-up of an American Poet at 72," New York Times Magazine, March 26, 1950, 12.

30 Frost, Poems, 31-32

31 Ibid., 561.

## Moral

The Moral is it hardly need be shown,  
All those who try to go it sole alone,  
Too proud to be beholden for relief,  
Are absolutely sure to come to grief.

Presuming the author is fairly serious in the thought, if not in treatment, what is to be said of this statement in the face of the findings of the rest of this chapter? In any case, the vast preponderance of evidence favors the "individuality" concept of man in Frost's poetry. But even apart from this, the poem in question is in keeping with the thesis. The Blindman, La Fontaine by name, proved his independence with fatal finality. The fact that he was blind merely heightened the emphasis on his isolation. He could have used assistance. He was not compelled to accept it. He is condemned not for being proud and aloof and self-reliant, but for being bitter in his isolation. It must be admitted, however, that in his later years Frost's stand on isolation is mitigated to allow the desirability of some companionship.

Emerson preached self-reliance, so did Thoreau. Emily Dickinson exemplified it in a non-belligerent way. Robert Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson painted people who had it. As one critic has observed:

I think it is significant of something very broad and vital in the history of sympathy that one of Robinson's best poems and one of Frost's are both about a drunken man who is going home

alone and has to manage his destiny for himself.<sup>32</sup>

This managing of one's own destiny is of course not exclusively the property of New Englanders, but they seem to maintain it with a tenacity and persistence that marks it out as a virtue synonymous with the Yankee temperament.

Robert Frost has proved himself very much in this tradition. His concept of man as an individual is clear and strong. There is a wall around every man, sometimes high, sometimes low, but always present. Man's destiny for Frost is in man's hands. As another talented poet has put it:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,  
But in ourselves.<sup>33</sup>

Frost might well have written these immortal lines. It is in keeping with his general concept of man as individual, self-reliant, isolated and responsible ultimately for his fate.

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32 Coffin, New Poetry of New England, 143. The poem referred to could be "The Death of the Hired Man." Professor Coffin does not say.

33 William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, 1-2, 138-139.

## CHAPTER III

### NATURE

#### THE CONTEXT FOR MAN

In looking for a better understanding of Robert Frost's concept of man we naturally examine man's context and its relation to him. This present chapter treats of nature and of Frost's presentation, his attitude and his treatment. The fourth chapter will take up the relationship of man and his environment.

In any philosophy there must be something constant, some backdrop against which to compare and evaluate the changing parts. It may be completely changeless as in the case of God. It may be changing, but constant in its change as in Bergson's elan vitale or the "change as such" of Heraclitus. In Frost's down-to-earth philosophy there is a more earthly constant, and that is Nature, changing accidentally, while essentially constant.

Primarily this is the nature that surrounds every man, the trees, the weather, the universe. It is also, to a lesser degree, human nature. It is human nature as man's potency, his personal weakness, the limitation from within as well as from without. Nature in general then, to Frost's way of thinking, is man's medium. As one

critic has written: "Nature is not only a metaphor of love (in Robert Frost's works), but a medium for the growth of the individual." <sup>1</sup>

Robert Frost sees Nature as the farmer must. In a sense he loves it. The farmer has teamed with this force to produce the fruit of the fields. The farmer has ploughed and planted and fertilized, while the earth and the rain and the sun have co-operated with him to yield the ripened crops. There is a working arrangement between the farmer and Nature, and yet the farmer and Frost know that Nature can never be completely trusted. She yields crops with reluctance and, for all her beauty, she is ever ready to turn on man and destroy the work of his hands. Critic Louise Bogan captures this attitude of Frost and farmer in a delightful passage when she writes:

He (Frost) has a deep love for natural things, for things of field and pasture, for birds, flower, weed, and tree; and for the motions and rhythm attendant upon man's age-old cultivation of the land . . . Frost also sees with great clearness the wayward and frustrating elements which run counter to nature's abundance and man's efforts on nature's behalf and on his own. <sup>2</sup>

She goes on to highlight the contrariness of man's context when she adds concerning Frost that "what he cannot bear to contemplate at length are the evidences that veins of evil run deeply through the

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<sup>1</sup> Caroline Ford, The Less Traveled Road, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1935, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Bogan, Achievement in American Poetry, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1951, 48.

natural scene."<sup>3</sup> Frost, as most other keep thinkers, has wondered at the mystery of evil in the world. His ignorance of anything above the natural makes him especially vulnerable in considerations of a mystery like that of evil. He finds it in his study of nature. It remains an enigma for him.

That Frost is concerned with nature is obvious from a perusal of the table of contents in his complete works. Flowers, the wind, butterfly and stream, and especially woods and trees appear constantly among the titles. Even more often do these latter appear in the contexts themselves.

While interested in man, Robert Frost is also aware of what is on every side. Nature surrounds man, sometimes to harass, other times to teach. This last trait is clearly manifested in a poem from A Boy's Will, "In Hardwood Groves."<sup>4</sup>

The same leaves over and over again  
They fall from giving shade above  
To make one texture of faded brown  
And fit the earth like a leather glove.

Before the leaves can mount again  
To fill the trees with another shade,  
They must go down past things coming up.  
They must go down into the dark decayed.

They must be pierced by flowers and put  
Beneath the feet of dancing flowers.

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3 Ibid., 48.

4 Frost, Poems, 37.



However it is in some other world  
I know that this is the way in ours.

This is reminiscent of Our Lord's "who would live, must die to himself."

There is here the mystery of death and of life, the cycle that finds nothing wasted as the apparent evil of dying is turned into life. The changing seasons recall this to the poet. There is loneliness in this poem, and frustration, and yet there is also resignation. Frost uses leaves again in a later work to exemplify the same lesson. "Gathering Leaves" <sup>5</sup> shows the futility of so unrewarding an occupation as the title indicates.

I may load and unload  
Again and again  
Till I fill the whole shed,  
And what have I then?

But resignation is present also, resignation and unemotional wonder.

Next to nothing for use.  
But a crop is a crop,  
And who's to say where  
The harvest shall stop?

A man has battled nature only to win a most dubious victory. What has he for his trouble? Very little. Only a knowledge that this is what he was made to do, this is the context in which he must work out his destiny. Frost sees the value of work for maintaining man in existence and in dignity, but where it all leads he does not know. This is an example of the man's reaching out for the ultimate. Not finding it, he

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 290.

contents himself with the hard facts of here and now. He questions the present state of affairs, but finding no answer goes on about his work.

As exemplified in this poem and in many other places, leaves and trees and woods hold prominent places in Frost's poetry. They have a faculty of evoking ideas. They are always speaking to the poet, giving him more than their passing beauty. Leaves have symbolized his unhappiness as in "Leaves Compared with Flowers." 6

Leaves and bark, leaves and bark,  
To lean against and hear in the dark.  
Petals I may have once pursued.  
Leaves are all my darker mood.

They have challenged his right to live as in "A Leaf Treader." 7

They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips  
with an invitation to grief.  
But it was no reason I had to go because  
they had to go.

A tree falls across his path and it symbolizes for him Nature's challenge. 8 Always there is some lesson to be learned.

But "woods" have most often stood as a synonym for Nature itself. Where most other poets found the great, boundless, and mysterious sea the ideal metaphor for nature, Robert Frost the farmer, the landed poet, sees the woods as most illustrative when looking for a simile. Several critics have noted this. J. McBride Dabbs writes:

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6 Ibid., 290.

7 Ibid., 388.

8 Ibid., "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road," 296.

As we consider this image, it will appear that, with exceptions, the woods, for Frost, symbolizes nature itself with its challenge and its fascination.<sup>9</sup>

And in support of this statement Professor Dabbs quotes the first poem in A Boy's Will, "Into My Own"<sup>10</sup> and the splendid "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."<sup>11</sup>

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

Professor Dabbs has a wonderful example here. Seldom have four stanzas of poetry contained so much. If these woods resemble Nature, then what pages of conjecture could be written on the opening line: "Whose woods these are I think I know." And again of the repeated last line:

And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

A mid-westerner of fine literary taste once said that his understanding of this poem was greatly increased by his meeting "typical" New Englanders while in service. He claimed that impatience was part of their very nature. They are always anxious to get on. They given the impression of having "miles to go" before they sleep. Yet they are willing, as

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<sup>9</sup> J. McBride Dabbs, "Robert Frost and the Dark Woods," Yale Review, March, 1934, 517.

<sup>10</sup> Frost, Poems, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 275.

here, to stop for a moment in the contemplation of beauty. Only the impatient urge of Nature pushes them on. The farmer catches a glimpse of beauty and pauses. The horse cannot appreciate the reason for the delay and, as the irrational in nature and in man, is impatient with something it cannot comprehend. The farmer moves off, because time and nature are too relentless to allow for much contemplation, and because beauty is essentially fleeting. Life and his own limitations would not long permit him to enjoy the vision of the woods on a snowy night.

Robert Frost's preoccupation with woods, and trees, and the like could easily be illustrated by referring the reader to poems in the later volumes. "On Going Unnoticed"<sup>12</sup> is a melancholy example.

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

Less than the coral-root you know  
 That is content with the daylight low,  
 And has no leaves at all of its own;  
 Whose spotted flowers hang meanly down.

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

You linger your little hour and are gone,  
 And still the woods sweep leafily on,  
 Not even missing the coral-root flower

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 309.

You took as a trophy of the hour.

Another example of Frost's use of woods and their symbolic meaning for him comes in a poem that has beauty and meaning on several levels.

Robert Frost speaks thus in "Come In." <sup>13</sup>

As I came to the edge of the woods,  
Thrush music-hark!  
Now if it was dusk outside,  
Inside it was dark.

Too dark in the woods for a bird  
By sleight of wing  
To better its perch for the night,  
Though it still could sing.

The last of the light of the sun  
That had died in the west  
Still lived for one song more  
In a thrush's breast.

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

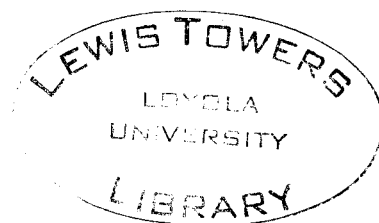
But no, I was out for stars:  
I would not come in.  
I meant not even if asked,  
And I hadn't been.

Another critic makes a curious, but not contradictory, interpretation of Robert Frost's "woods." Malcolm Cowley writes:

The woods play a curious part in Frost's Poems: they seem to be his symbol for the uncharted country within ourselves, full of possible beauty, but also full of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 309.



horror. 14

This could well be the human nature spoken of above. Mark Van Doren observed something similar when he wrote of Robert Frost that "His many poems . . . are the work of a man who has never stopped exploring himself--or, if you like, America, or better yet, the world." 15 Then Professor Van Doren added, a little further on, this comment that is certainly very much to the point of this chapter.

The subject (of Robert Frost's work) is the world: a huge and ruthless place which men will never quite understand, any more than they will understand themselves; and yet it is the same old place that men have always been trying to understand . . . lovable, for what it is. 16

Here is that mixture of affection and distrust already noted. The attitude of the farmer toward Nature. The attitude of Robert Frost toward man's milieu.

While woods certainly are an important metaphor in the poet's work, there is another symbol which stands out, if not in frequency of use then at least in appropriateness, as a prime exemplar of Nature as understood in this chapter. That symbol is of a mountain, and as "Mending Wall" 17 was the key poem for the second chapter, so "The

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14 Malcolm Cowley, "The Case Against Mr. Frost: II," The New Republic, September 18, 1944, 346.

15 Mark Van Doren, "Robert Frost's American," Atlantic Monthly, 187, 6, June, 1951, 32.

16 Ibid., 33.

17 Frost, Poems, 47-48.

Mountain,"<sup>18</sup> holds the same place for chapter three. The mountain that "held the town as in a shadow"<sup>19</sup> has much in common with Nature that holds man in like fashion. They are both great and close and limiting. They both exist and act heedless of man, trampling him if he errs.

Near me it seemed: I felt it like a wall  
 . . . . .  
 'We can't in nature grow to many more:  
 That thing takes all the room!' <sup>20</sup>

This comparison between Nature and the mountain has been noted by critics who have considered this poem. Shortly after it appeared in Frost's second volume, North of Boston, Garnett wrote: "'The Mountain' shows that the poet has known how to seize and present the mysterious force and essence of living nature."<sup>21</sup> An even deeper analysis of the poem and its relation to Nature was made eight years later by a Frenchman, Albert Feuillerat. The following is a translation of what he wrote in a French review;

Nature is here, a mass which imposes itself on one's attention, and object which 'stood there to be pointed at' like that mountain which 'held the town as in a shadow,' and no one knows exactly what is at the summit. It is an indeterminate being, living its life, occupied only with itself;

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18 Ibid., 56-60.

19 Ibid., 56

20 Ibid., 56-57

21 Edward Garnett, "A New American Poet," Atlantic Monthly, 116, 2, August, 1915, 219.

the conditions and the reasons for its existence do not clearly appear. It experiences birth, growth, and death, and thus it has a bond with us. It acts, and its acts strangely resemble those of a human creature. <sup>22</sup>

While giving a good picture of the imposing place Nature has in the philosophy of Robert Frost, this quotation also reveals another characteristic of the poet. In his treatment of Nature he tends to personify, to give this big, mysterious, and dangerous adversary flesh and bones, or at least a mind of its own. This is not to say that he considers Nature human in a philosophical sense. His conception is poetic. It is also the attitude of the farmer who finds it encouraging to look upon his opponent as someone very much like himself. Poets and farmers have been doing this for as far back as man can trace.

A striking example of this personification of Nature that also combines two other ingredients made familiar through this chapter is a poem in West-Running Brook, called "The Birthplace." <sup>23</sup>

Here further up the mountain slope  
 Than there was ever any hope,  
 My father built, enclosed a spring,  
 Strung chains of wall round everything,  
 Subdues the growth of earth to grass,  
 And brought our various lives to pass.  
 A dozen girls and boys we were.  
 The mountain seemed to like the stir,  
 And made of us a little while--

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22 Albert Feuillerat, from an article in the Revue des deux mondes, 7, 17, 1, September 1, 1923, 185-210, as given in Recognition of Robert Frost, ed. Richard Thornton, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1937, 274-275.

23 Frost, Poems, 339.



With always something in her smile.  
 Today she wouldn't know our name.  
 (No girl's, of course, has stayed the same).  
 The mountain pushed us off her knees.  
 And now her lap is full of trees.

Not only is Nature here captured in the figure of the mountain with trees at its beck, but there is a great, imponderable humanity about it that is reminiscent of Washington Irving's Wouter Van Twiller. Then of course there are those whimsical lines at the end of "The Mountain" that also bear out this personification assertion.

'You've lived here all your life?'  
 'Ever since Hor was no bigger than a--' 24

A similar treatment is found in another poem from the same volume, "On Taking From the Top to Broaden the Base," 25 The speaker addresses the mountain with contempt,

Roll stones down on our head!  
 You squat old pyramid,  
 Your last good avalanche  
 Was long since slid.

only to have it take its revenge by burying its tormentor.

These poems also reflect that constant struggle between man and Nature that will be treated more fully in the next chapter. These considerations are so closely interrelated that they inevitably overlap. This is true of any philosophic study that attempts to categorize and

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24 Ibid., 60.

25 Ibid., 389.

divide what is ineluctably one. The following quotation is equally applicable to man's struggle with nature, just as many critical comments in the fourth chapter emphasize the part Nature plays as a backdrop as well as an antagonist of man. In speaking of Robert Frost's work, Caroline Ford writes:

He enjoys describing her (Nature's) faculty for showing people with too much self-confidence that they are only pawns of an unsympathetic power.<sup>26</sup>

And she goes on to add:

Although man bustles around with the assurance that he can regulate nature, Frost sees that it is difficult to determine what man has regulated when he is through.<sup>27</sup>

The reason Nature has been singled out for special consideration in a thesis on a poet's concept of man, is that an understanding of it is essential to a full appreciation of the Frostian individual. Man, in Robert Frost's poetry, is related not so much to other men as to Nature. It is the isolated man against the storm, or the elves that knock down walls, or madness, or time. This is not the mystic's isolation which leaves a man free to give all to God. It is a barren state wherein man must almost be a god unto himself. The fight for survival is a personal one and it is had, to Judge by the poet, not with one's fellow men, but with the forces outside and inside us that would hold

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26 Ford, Less Traveled Road, 20.

27 Ibid., 21.

us back. Nature is man's foe. She may be beautiful at times, but she is not to be trusted. She is at one and the same time man's context and his limit.

You linger your little hours and are gone,  
And still the woods sweep leafily on,  
Not even missing the coral-root flower  
You took as a trophy of the hour. <sup>28</sup>

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28 Frost, "One Going Unnoticed," Poems, 309.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

Having considered the strongly-etched individual in Robert Frost's work and having looked at this individual's context and environment, we now examine the relationship of the two.

Man's attitude toward Nature was seen to great extent in the preceding chapter. He may admire Nature for its beauty, he may use it, but he cannot trust it. Nature is an enemy, and if man is to hold his own, to survive the struggle against extinction, he must fight Nature. He must fight his limitations within and without. This is man's lot in life, his work. It is that secondary act consequent upon (and in this case necessary to) the primary act of existence.

In this struggle no man can remain passive and survive as an individual. As the fish must constantly fight the current even to hold his own, so likewise with man. There is always a pull downward that seeks to drag man into the common maelstrom. He needs but give up to be sucked down and lost. It is against these forces, this Nature, that individual battles.

Just as Robert Frost has shown himself well aware of man's individuality, dignity, and isolation, so too he is aware of man's lot

in life. As a farmer, he has experienced the sometimes bitter struggle, and this is reflected in his poetry and in his concept of man. In "Birthplace" <sup>1</sup> there is recorded a case where Nature has beaten off man.

The mountain pushed us off her knees.  
And now her lap is full of trees.

"On Taking from the Top to Broaden the Base" <sup>2</sup> is an example of Nature crushing the individual in a very literal way. The mound landslides to bury her antagonist. Robert Frost knows the truth behind these poems from personal experience. Sidney Cox says of Frost that "He never talks of loving nature. He has . . . experienced beyond forgetting how much our relations with her are a warfare." <sup>3</sup> This warfare is reflected in his poetry, but with it there is nobility, that of a fight well and fairly fought. There is a dignified combat with a dignified opponent. If this nobility is not quite chivalry, then at least there is a fairness about the combat that reminds one of the medieval jousts. Gorham Munson caught this spirit in Robert Frost's presentation of struggle when he wrote:

Nature we feel as a sort of friendly antagonist, dangerously strong sometimes, but on the whole a fair opponent. In combat with her one cannot laze or cheat: but honest struggle brings fair returns. Especially is the line between Nature

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1 Frost, Poems, 339.

2 Ibid., 389.

3 Sidney Cox, Robert Frost, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1929, 32.

and Man<sup>4</sup> always present in Frost's mind, though never insisted upon.<sup>4</sup>

To emphasize this point the critic refers to Frost's "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things,"<sup>5</sup> a poem of beauty in the midst of desolation. Man is nowhere mentioned, but he has left signs of the battle he lost, the dry pump and the broken fence. Nature has moved in where man has failed and moved on.

In another place this same Professor Munson has this to say of man's unending struggle as reflected in Robert Frost's poetry.

I believe in the philosophy of the part for the whole . . . Nature does not complete things. She is chaotic. Man must finish and he does so by making a garden and building a wall.

On reading this, "Mending Wall"<sup>7</sup> naturally comes to mind, and the validity of such consideration is further substantiated by this comment on the same poem by Caroline Ford. She says that "in it is focused man's impulse to regulate nature, which is otherwise too great to be understood or controlled."<sup>8</sup>

Some critics and readers have seen this struggle as something

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<sup>4</sup> Gorham B. Munson, Robert Frost, George H. Doran Company, Murray Hill, New York, 1927, 103.

<sup>5</sup> Frost, Poems, 300.

<sup>6</sup> Munson, Robert Frost, 83.

<sup>7</sup> Frost, Poems, 47-48

<sup>8</sup> Ford, The Less Traveled Road, 39.

dark and menacing. Peter Viereck had this estimate to make. "Frost's benign calm, the comic-mask of a whittling rustic, is designed for gazing--without dizziness--into a tragic abyss of desperation."<sup>9</sup>

This statement, modified by the realization that Mr. Viereck is also a poet and sometimes indulges in poetic license, can be seen as a good picture of the age-old Anglo-Saxon attitude on life. This is the grim, stoic outlook that can be found in Boewulf, The Seafarer and Hemingway's The Old Man and The Sea. Here is the eternal mystery of life from death as seen through the eyes of a man close to the soil, a man who has fought Nature. Robert Frost early showed his realization of the struggle. In the poem "in Hardwood Groves"<sup>10</sup> he writes:

The same leaves over and over again!  
They fall from giving shade above  
To make one texture of faded brown  
And fit the earth like a leather glove.

Before the leaves can mount again  
To fill the trees with another shade,  
They must go down past things coming up.  
They must go down into the dark decayed.

They must be pierced by flowers and put  
Beneath the feet of dancing flowers.  
However it is in some other world  
I know that this is the way in ours.

The poem is similar in theme to some of the work of T. S. Eliot, especially in his Four Quartets, though Eliot has a more spiritual

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Viereck, "Parnassus Divided," The Atlantic Monthly, 184, 4, October, 1949, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Frost, Poems, 37.

perception. Frost grasps the fact well, but lacks Eliot's depth and insight in treating it. The difference lies in the men's "religions." It is pure reason on the one hand, and reason enlightened by Revelation on the other.

Frost again showed this reluctance on the part of man to give in to Nature in his poem "Reluctance." <sup>11</sup>

The heart is still aching to seek,  
But the feet question 'Whither?'

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

This fragment, as the whole poem, shows the deep-seated refusal on the part of the strong to shift with every breeze. Man hates with his heart to see anything come to an end, as he yearns for immortality, but reason tells him "all this will pass away." Man prefers to go along with his heart, refusing to hear the message of instability and death preached by the fickleness of a love or a season.

"The Investment" <sup>12</sup> gives a good example of this spirit. It is a poignant story of a man and woman who refused to drift with the tide, and be drowned by Nature. The couple has invested in a piano and it stands as an oasis in a barren farmer's life. They had made the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 337.



purchase as a blow struck for freedom.

Was it some money suddenly come into?  
Or some extravagance young love had been to?  
Or old love on an impulse not to care--

Not to sink under being man and wife,  
But get some color and music out of life?

Here are two people who cannot afford a piano. They count out their winter dinners by hills of potatoes. Yet they cannot afford not to own it if they would be victorious in their grim struggle against Nature.

This grim struggle inevitably takes its toll, too. In "They Were Welcome To Their Belief"<sup>13</sup> there is a man whose hair has turned white from the wear of living. This poem reflects the pains of the struggle. It shows that "Frost is uncompromisingly aware of an agonizing universe."<sup>14</sup> This strain and agony that is the struggle for existence, the fight against Nature, is reflected in a different way in another poem, "The Grindstone."<sup>15</sup> Gorham Munson has this to say of the story of man versus an old and lethargic tool.

Among other things conveyed in 'The Grindstone' we are deeply aware that a sense of the inertia of nature has been induced. We are aware of the aching strain of making nature malleable and the tear and wear made on the straining human being by time.<sup>16</sup>

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13 Ibid., 390.

14 Donald A. Stauffer, "The New Lyrics of Robert Frost," The Atlantic Monthly, 180, October, 1947, 115.

15 Frost, Poems, 232-234.

16 Munson, Robert Frost, 108.

Herein a man overcomes by working. He reflects man's strongest weapon against Nature, work. The farmer rises before dawn and retires in the dark. All day he works, hard manual labor, and in the end, with luck, he has a small reward. Robert Frost knows the pain and nobility of such labor. He has done it himself. He has lived among and listened to men who struggle thus every day of their lives.

Frost knows that man cannot live by love alone, even though it is reputed to make the world go round. Work is a necessary second love. It is man's art, and if he fails to believe in it he is likely to lose his faith in himself, in love, and in God. <sup>17</sup>

While Frost holds work in high esteem, he knows there is another way. This alternative is well illustrated in one of Robert Frost's last books, Steeple Bush, in his poem "Directive," <sup>18</sup> This is at the same time a simple story and a deep symbol. From the opening line "Back out of all this too much for us" <sup>19</sup> (reminiscent of "The world is too much with us") there is a tale of discovery and a lesson. An old, long-dead town is uncovered to the reader. It shows signs of having lost its struggle with Nature. Still the poet finds peace and rest here in the contemplation of what has been. Here he can "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion" <sup>20</sup> Here he finds a defense that

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17 Ford, Less Traveled Road, 25.

18 Frost, Poems, 520-521

19 Ibid., 520.

20 Ibid., 521.

is not work." He finds the isolation discussed in chapter two. While enjoying it himself, he invites the reader in this fashion:

And if you're lost enough to find yourself  
 By now, pull in your ladder road behind you  
 And put a sign up Closed to all but me.  
 Then make yourself at home.<sup>21</sup>

While this alternative to work lacks the nobility of the struggle, it has peace. Temporary peace, it is true, but real nonetheless. The poet never says that this is all, that man can persist in this wise. Isolation and forgetfulness and dreams merely provide a refuge when the struggle leaves us weary and wounded. They give us surcease and a refreshing pause, a moment of fancy along the way. They do not win for you the battle against extinction, or even shield you from the consequence of not doing your part. In "Directive" Robert Frost makes no extravagant claims. He has invested the poem with a child-like quality. He seems to say that this living in the past is a pleasant experience, a relief from the tedium of life, but it is a child's game, or the day dream of the grown. In real life the contest cannot be avoided. It can only be delayed for a time. This poem's ghost town stands very literally as a directive to Robert Frost's readers, a symbol of life's inevitable struggle, a warning of what it means to lose.

The permanence and necessity of this trial by combat is mani-

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21 Ibid., 521.

fested in Robert Frost's poetry as already shown. He has also expressed this apart from his poems. An article in Time magazine quotes Frost as follows: "Whatever progress may be taken to mean, it can't mean making the world any easier a place in which to save your soul." 22 This is no new idea for Robert Frost even apart from his poetry. He is quoted to similar effect by a man who was an associate of his on the Amherst College faculty, George Whicher, who wrote this back in 1943. "In an address to Amherst seniors a few years ago Frost declared that the thought of coming to condone the world's sorrow is terrible to contemplate." 23

This is Robert Frost, the farm-hardened New Englander, who has seen what Nature has done to men. He has seen Nature's handiwork as he walked over the countryside. He has experienced it personally. Barren wastes, ghost towns, relics of lost struggles with Nature, are not uncommon in that part of the country. But while Robert Frost admits the fact of sorrow in this world, he won't condone it. He would rather fight the specter, as he knows man must if he is to succeed. To his way of thinking, the fight against extinction is a necessary part of man's life. This is the individual's "operation." This is also another important factor in a full picture of the concept of man

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22 Time, October 9, 1950, 80.

23 George Whicher, "Out for Stars," The Atlantic Monthly, 171, 5, May, 1943, 67.

as painted by Robert Frost.

This picture is to great extent a reflection of Robert Frost's own life. He refused formal education at both Dartmouth and Harvard, because he felt it forced him into an unnatural mold. He farmed for several years and this hand-to-hand battle with Nature barely yielded him a living. He sold his home and staked all on the chance that his poetry was worthwhile, at an age when most men are wary of endangering their security in any way. He has fought and won as much as any man can win. His poetry is very much like himself.

## CHAPTER V

### AN OPTIMISTIC STRAIN

Since Robert Frost is greatly concerned with the individual in his struggle to maintain personal dignity, a logical question is whether in the poet's mind man is more likely to succeed or fail. In the battle for existence can man overcome Nature? Several of Frost's works deal with people who have lost. "The Census-Taker"<sup>1</sup> comes upon a deserted village and is struck sad by the sight. One house in particular captures his attention.

This house in one year fallen to decay  
Filled me with no less sorrow than the houses  
Fallen to ruin in ten thousand years  
Where Asia wedges Africa from Europe.

The melancholy of having to count souls  
Where they grow fewer and fewer every year  
Is extreme where they shrink to none at all.  
It must be I want life to go on living.<sup>2</sup>

This man echoes the sadness inherent in human nature at the sight of death. Before the relics of a lost battle the man is made sad. He would live forever, but cannot. This poem, however, is not pessimistic.

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1 Frost, Poems, 216-217.

2 Ibid., 217.

Frost never claims that man can conquer death by refusing to die. The census-taker does not despair; he is merely made sad by what he sees.

His are the lacrimae rerum.

But there are many other poems that reflect victory, not total victory for death stops everyone, but examples of men and women who have maintained their dignity and individuality in the face of great difficulties. Clara Robinson in "A Fountain, A Battle, A Donkey's Ears, And Some Books" <sup>3</sup> is a fine case in point, the old lady in "The Black Cottage" <sup>4</sup> is another, the maimed nature-lover in "The Self-Seeker" <sup>5</sup> is still a third. The first and third were cripples who refused to permit their souls to be hobbled, the second is a person whose character is strong enough to guide others along the right path without any extra effort.

These and other of Frost's characters are "living" examples of the dignity of man and the ability on the part of human beings at maintaining their self-respect come what may. But the question still remains as to whether this reaction marks rare cases in a world of defeat, or whether in Robert Frost's mind this need not be the exception, but the rule. Frost seems to say that though most men succumb in the

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3 Ibid., 258-263

4 Ibid., 74-77

5 Ibid., 117-124

struggle with environment and lose their personal dignity to a decadent society or an encumbering nature, this does not mean they must. To Robert Frost's way of thinking, as expressed in his poetry, man has a slight advantage in the struggle with Nature if only he puts forth the effort. An illuminating insight into the poet's thought on this matter can be gained by quoting at some length from an article on Frost written by a close friend. John Holmes writes of the poet:

He said he thought the balance of life and death--the forces of positive and negative, good and evil, success and failure, whatever one calls them--are roughly fifty-five for life and forty-five for death. He said he thought God or something, call it what you would, had given man a slight advantage, maybe only two points over fifty.<sup>6</sup>

Professor Holmes continues in the next paragraph:

Maybe that is where God comes in, he said, in the dark. I asked him how he figured man's advantage at fifty-five, then. Oh, he thought man by his everlasting stubborn effort had lifted it that far. That was where man comes in, and in that narrow margin, he said, we can find out almost all of what it's about. We have to remember always, he said, what a small hold we have and how hard we have to work even to keep it. I asked him, somewhere toward 2:30 or 3, if he had ever said this in a poem. He said he thought not, not that he could remember.

I would like to think that his poem, "Our Hold on the Planet," was being tried out against me and the Vermont night:

Take nature altogether since time began,  
Including human nature, in peace and war,  
And it must be a little more in favor of man,  
Say a fraction of one percent at the very least,  
Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,

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<sup>6</sup> John Holmes, "Close-up of an American Poet at 75," The New York Times Magazine, March 26, 1950, 12.



Reading it, I was amused that by the time he wrote the poem he had so much more cautiously estimated man's margin of hope. He'd kept in touch with the times.<sup>7</sup>

This long extract from a very interesting and informative article has several features worth noting. The expression of mild but dogged optimism in Frost's outlook on life is very much in support of the assertions of this chapter. The part of God, "or something" in this universe is also worth considering. There seems to be a "God" in the picture, but his part in man's victory is less than what man does for himself. The accent here is consistent with most of this poet's work. The emphasis is on the natural, not necessarily to the exclusion of the supernatural, but because that is what Robert Frost knows. God to him is the God of Emerson and the Transcendentalists, someone vague and big and aloof. In single poems Frost reaches out toward God just as every man does on occasion, but it is the groping of a blind man sure in instinct, but failing of vision. This is not to say Frost is to be condemned, because his optimism and all are on a natural level. As far as he goes, he is correct. It is just that he never reaches God. There is no layer of theology. He is separated from Truth by the margin of God. Frost reaches out, his instincts are sound as in "Choose Something Like A Star."<sup>8</sup>

O Star (the fairest one in sight),

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7 Ibid., 12.

8 Frost, Poems, 575.

We grant your loftiness the right  
 To some obscurity of cloud--  
 It will not do to say of night,  
 Since dark is what brings out your light.  
 Some mystery becomes the proud.  
 But to be wholly taciturn  
 In your reserve is not allowed.  
 Say something to us we can learn  
 By heart and when alone repeat.  
 Say something! And it says, 'I burn.'  
 But say with what degree of heat.  
 Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.  
 Use language we can comprehend.  
 Tell us what elements you blend.  
 It gives us strangely little aid.  
 But does tell something in the end.  
 And steadfast as Keats' Eremité,  
 Not even stooping from its sphere,  
 It asks a little of us here.  
 It asks of us a certain height,  
 So when at times the mob is swayed  
 To carry praise or blame too far,  
 We may choose something like a star  
 To stay our minds on and be staid.

The poet here is seeking God. He desires something bigger than himself, something permanent and infallible. He wishes this mysterious something spoke clearly to him, but he feels he still can learn of it. It is a little sad that the best he can hope from this great force is something "To stay our minds on and be staid." But of course in this he is looking for an infallible touchstone by which to gauge life and literature.

The spirit of hope mixed with sadness is particularly well illustrated in "The Onset" <sup>9</sup> This poem deals with a theme that has

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 278.

long been of interest to poets. Horace observed Diffugiunt nives (4,7) and was made sad and uncertain. The passing of the snows, the changes of season can shake man's confidence, can remind him that we "have not here a lasting city."

Robert Frost has felt this and "The Onset" marks the expression of his reaction. "Always the same, when on a fated night" writes the poet in the opening line. This reaction to the first snow of the year is not unique to any particular first snow on the part of Frost. The roots of the ensuing melancholy are deep in Frost's nature as they are in the natures of most men. Why a "fated" night? The word suggests a certain mystery, the mystery of the universe, the enigma of life and death as seen in Nature. The falling snows descend upon the poet and he feels

As one who overtaken by the end  
Gives up his errand, and lets death descend  
Upon him where he is, with nothing done.

His sadness comes from a sense of frustration, a feeling that he has not fulfilled his nature. He has won no victory over evil. The world is no better for his having lived. There is here the fear of leaving an important task incomplete, the task of life. There is the sense of futility in the face of wasted potentiality. This fear and the conviction of personal inadequacy in the face of Nature, is so deep-seated that all the reasoning of the second part of the poem is not enough to dispell it.

The man is caught on this particular evening out in a woods.

The cascade of "gathered snow" seems enough to bury him. He feels fear, is frightened at the possibility of dying here in the "dark woods."

All this symbolizes to his mind the power and wrath of Nature which has gathered as an ominous cloud above him and now sees fit to challenge his right to life. The terror is increased by his being still in the dark woods of confusion and doubt. He is not sure he has found truth, so how can he ever hope to strike a blow against what is evil and false? If he does not know life's purpose, how can he be sure his living has really meant anything? He feels a need, but lacking insight into the whole of life, he can only grope toward an explanation and satisfying solution.

Still there is some reason for hope. Sober reflection apart from the turmoil of meeting Nature head-on, yields evidence which, if not enough to put aside all fear and doubt, at least gives reason for a modicum of optimism. In the struggle for existence (here symbolized by the battle of the countryside with the snows) the weight of past experience makes the land the favored contestant. "All the precedent is on my side" for the poet knows that

winter death has never tried  
The earth but it has failed.

And this despite the ferocity of the onslaught which sees the land buried beneath four feet of snow. The birds refuse to be checked. So likewise man. Finally the snow will

all go down hill

In water of a slender April rill.

To the poet these winding rills resemble disappearing snakes. The simile is not only visually accurate, but carries with it the overtones that attach to snakes. They are considered loathsome, even hateful. The enemy of man, they have been distrusted since the Garden of Eden. Thus it is with Nature to the poet's way of thinking.

Then Frost recalls what is left after the snows have fled.

There is nothing

left white but here a birch,  
And there a clump of houses with a church.

The sturdy tree that stands for the solidity of inanimate nature, and the clump of white houses with their church are trade-marks of a community of solid, dependable people. Their houses are painted and grouped together in solid community fashion. In their midst is a church, symbol of man's resistance to darkness and fear and the mystery of death.

Here in the second part of the poem is the evidence of experience. Nature for all her inroads has not conquered, and yet, even with this in mind, it is "always the same." The first snowfall brings on a temporary fear and a sense of frustration. There is a basis in fact for this fear, however. For it is true that in the end the poet will be downed, he will die, overpowered, if not by snow, then by some other manifestation of Nature's power. He may die in bed, or while crossing a street, or while he works, but ultimately he will fall.

The thought of death is not the appalling element. To die is an indifferent thing inasmuch as it is inevitable. To die "with nothing done" is a terrifying possibility even on a purely natural plane. This is the shadow that hovers over the poet in "The Onset." The tone is not one of pessimism. The concern over man's purpose in life is healthy even though the particular stimulus and response are out of proportion. There goes with this concern a realization that the countryside and her inhabitants have overcome in their way the attacks of Nature and that while life remains there may still be triumphs over evil, and that man still may emerge from the dark woods and accomplish something worthwhile despite the obstacles that may confront him along the way. The spirit throughout is Anglo-Saxon and basic.

This poem has within it many of the characteristics of Robert Frost's poetry and philosophy. He is meditative and philosophical in most of his works. Nature speaks to him. It is not enough merely to contemplate nature's beauty. You must learn from it. There is the close observation manifested in the second part of the poem, the austere beautiful picture of nature as she is in fact. Frost's dignified groping for truth and light is apparent throughout.

Another poem which is similar to "The Onset," and about which much the same could be said is "A Leaf Treader."<sup>10</sup> This shows well poet's stubborn determination to struggle on. His hope is in his self-

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 388.

confidence. "

Many of Frost's critics have noted this optimistic strain in his work. Ludwig Lewisohn has expressed it better than most and has augmented his observations with reference to the poet's work.

Very greatly he admits the force of human passion in 'Fire and Ice' and accepts ultimate and tragic consequences in such poems as 'The Impulse.' But though he is no conventional optimist, he is not hopeless either. Mankind has a way of striving; there is, at the least, a fundamental moral energy in human life; the 'Tree Fallen Across the Road' cannot really halt us. These are his two recurrent notes: the acceptance of life as tragic, for himself as in that remarkably fine sonnet, 'Acquainted With the Night,' for others in all the objective pieces and in the statement rare but recurrent, of a frugal but gallant hope. <sup>11</sup>

"On A Tree Fallen Across The Road" is a good illustration of this spirit. Frost states it well (and states possibly much more than he realizes) in these lines:

And yet she knows obstruction is in vain;  
We will not be put off the final goal  
We have it hidden in us to attain. <sup>12</sup>

Caroline Ford also has caught this spirit in Frost's work as seen in his approach and tone.

The tone is distinctly optimistic in the many poems dealing with the seasonal changes of nature. From the depths of February slush, Frost is apt to view trees and

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<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Lewisohn, Expression in America, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1932, 499.

<sup>12</sup> Frost, Poems, 296.

landscape with an eye to their appearance in June. <sup>13</sup>

Even in the face of difficulties, Frost finds reason to hope. Perhaps it would be better to say especially in time of trial. Troubles have a way of bringing out a man's real worth. They make him struggle to maintain his self-respect and individuality. They breed courage in the strong, just as they crush the weak:

Frost likes his people in individuals, not mass formation. He isn't blaming their troubles on the capitalists or the environment, but on the way life is built and the way they are built. . . . And, anyway, troubles may be good for a man. Frost has found it so. <sup>14</sup>

This introduces what is the prime virtue for Robert Frost. It is courage. Courage is cardinal to every manly phase of life. There is a hint of the stoic here. He sees man standing alone against Nature, sometimes winning at other times suffering set-backs and wounds, but courageous through it all. In man's tenacity and toughness, in his courage lies all his hope. Frost can call on history to support him in this. He does so in "Sand Dunes." <sup>15</sup> The sea and the sand, Nature, have striven for centuries to conquer man, but only to fail.

She may know cove and cape,  
But she does not know mankind

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13 Ford, The Less Traveled Road, 45.

14 Coffin, New Poetry of New England, 70-71.

15 Frost, Poems, 330.



If by any change of shape,  
She hopes to cut off mind.

Men left her a ship to sink:  
They can leave her a hut as well;  
And be but more free to think  
For the one more cast-off shell.

By "She hopes to cut off mind" Frost seems to show his realization of the superiority of spirit (here mind) over matter, that man need not be governed by his surroundings. Courage will out over any obstacle.

Frost also exemplifies this in the poem, "In Time of Cloud-burst,"<sup>16</sup> wherein all the subject needs is courage and patience to ward off Nature. His esteem for this virtue is apparent to the careful reader, just as is its intimate connection with stoic optimism.

Courage, says Frost, is the human virtue that counts most--courage to act on limited knowledge, courage to make the best of what is here and not to whine for more.<sup>17</sup>

It might be worthwhile noting here that hope and courage, optimism, increases as Robert Frost grows older. This is very natural. Youth has no need to affirm hope in words. It is part of its nature. As a man grows older and meets the disillusioning set-backs of life, he must find reason to go on hoping or give in to despair. Robert Frost has chosen hope after contemplating the courage and dignity of man. The older he gets, the more strongly he holds to this.

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16 Ibid., 369.

17 Time, October 9, 1950, 81.

Frost's mind grows clear and sharper, less sentimental, with the years. Although he may protect the independence of 'all those who try to go it sole alone,' although he may assume the value of skepticism and the need for reticence, Steeple Bush contains its trinity of intimations on hope, courage, and love. He still knows that the withered leaves of a young beech in March may be, in some strange world of truth, 'the Paradise-in-bloom.'<sup>18</sup>

Critic Randall Jarrell developed the point of this chapter in a study of Frost's last published poem, the verse-drama, Masque of Mercy. He writes:

Frost lavishes some care and a lot more self-indulgence on this congenial subject (that justice doesn't really matter): he has a thorough skepticism about that tame revenge, justice, and a cold certainty that nothing but mercy will do for us. What he really warms to is a rejection beyond either justice or mercy, and the most felt and moving part of his poem (Masque of Mercy) is the unshaken recognition that

Our sacrifice . . .  
Be found acceptable in heaven's sight

To feel this Fear of God and to go ahead in spite of it, Frost says, is man's principal virtue, courage.<sup>19</sup>

Frost's attitude here is consistent, but a little extreme. Because justice is imperfect for Frost (and he knows no place where it could be made right) he disregards it. He denies a partial good, because it is not totally and perfectly good.

Somewhat earlier than the "Masques" Frost wrote this in his

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<sup>18</sup> Donald A. Stauffer, "The New Lyrics of Robert Frost," The Atlantic Monthly, 180, October, 1947, 116.

<sup>19</sup> Randall Jarrell, "The Other Robert Frost," Nation, 165, November 29, 1947, 591-592

whimsical "The Lesson For Today." <sup>20</sup> How far it is to be taken as expressing Frost's mind is debatable, but there is reason to believe from his other works that the poet was more than a little serious in the utterance.

The groundwork of all faith is human woe.  
 It was well worth preliminary mention.  
 There's nothing but injustice to be had,  
 No choice is left a poet, you might add,  
 But how to take the curse, tragic or comic. <sup>21</sup>

This may seem to smack of pessimism, but it is really more like stoicism, a realization of what life holds in store and resignation to the inevitable. For the good man, as a matter of fact, will seldom if ever find complete justice in this life. That there is "nothing but injustice to be had" is putting it strongly but must not be taken too literally. It is quite true that faith often is built from contemplation of one's own and the world's misery. For Frost this seems to be true. His faith--a little vague at the edges, but essentially a confidence in the dignity of man--has grown from his groping for "something like a star," and from his knowledge of man's inner strength. He views man with natural eyes, but he is aware of something there beyond the natural. He has seen man looking out beyond the limits of the material.

They cannot look out f̄r.  
 They cannot look in deep.

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20 Frost, Poems, 471-476.

21 Ibid., 472.

But when was that ever a bar  
To any watch they keep? <sup>22</sup>

Robert Frost never claims to see the goal. He sees man striving to better himself in a world that would drag him down. He views man's fight for dignity amid degradation, but not with the blind optimism of the Victorians. He is realist enough to say to the strivers

That the millennium to which you bend  
In longing is not at a progress-end. <sup>23</sup>

Rather he looks for what many would call the kingdom of heaven within man himself. The millennium is not, to his mind, to be found in wealth or in any political ideology.

But right beside you book-like on a shelf,  
Or even better god-like in yourself. <sup>24</sup>

Still he realizes that this isn't satisfactory for most people's taste. He never affirms dogmatically that it should be. He is well aware that for most, being a kingdom unto one's self is not enough.

He trusts my love too well to deign reply.  
But there is in the sadness of his eye,  
Something about a kingdom in the sky  
(As yet unbrought to earth) he means to try. <sup>25</sup>

One of the more astute of the recent critics, Professor W. G. O'Donnell, has seen this reaching out on the part of Robert Frost for

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22 Frost, "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," Poems, 394.

23 Frost, "The Lost Follower," Poems, 484.

24 Ibid., 484.

25 Ibid.

the spiritual. He has seen that Frost has no final answer, that he only points. In discussing the poem, "Directive,"<sup>26</sup> this critic has commented:

As usual, Frost's directive points to no short cut through current problems. What the poem affirms is the difficulty of finding a true source of spiritual strength. But you must find it. You can't get saved if you don't drink from the mountain brook:

'Here are your waters and your watering place,  
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.'<sup>27</sup>

Thus we see in Robert Frost's work a stoic optimism based on a confidence in the toughness of the individual. He sees people with hope. Their self-confidence, their reaching out, their doggedness in the struggle for survival, has helped them increase and multiply. If they can do so well with their limited powers, there is reason, thinks Frost, for optimism. He places his hope not in "pie in the sky," or in any other creed, political, social, or religious, but in the simple dignity of man. He goes no further, except to affirm the presence in himself and others of a yearning for infinity expressed by stars and the boundless sea.

Without the direction of a definite religion and nurtured as he was in the atmosphere of a vague, half-pagan Transcendentalism, Robert Frost has done well to come this far. His philosophy is limited,

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26 Ibid., 520-521

27 W. G. O'Donnell, "Robert Frost and New England: A Reevaluation," Yale Review, 374, June, 1948, 712.

but it is sound as far as it goes.

God plays a small part in Robert Frost's poetry, or rather the God of the Christians does. God to Frost is a deity above who may co-operate, but who does not do so in a very intimate way. God somehow is the top foreman who puts his final stamp of approval on man's work. Frost has written:

Now I think--I happen to think--that those three beliefs . . . the self-belief, the love-belief, and the art-belief, are all closely related to the God-belief, that the belief in God is a relationship you enter into with Him to bring about the future. <sup>28</sup>

As a theologian, Robert Frost leaves much to be desired as can be seen by a study of his "Masques." Fortunately he does not try very hard to be one. Any spiritual message to be found in his work must be extracted. It could come from contemplating a man with his feet firmly planted on the ground who nevertheless manifests a terrible need for God and a cold bleakness for having lived and philosophized without Him. Frost's strength lies in down-to-earth common sense about what he knows. He knows the world about him. In this field he excels, and that is sufficient. As critic Lawrence Thompson has written, it is "enough for Frost to confine his attention to the here and now." <sup>29</sup>

It is for another and more significant poet to show the goal

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Frost, "Education by Poetry, A Meditative Monologue," Amherst Alumni Council News, 1931, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Thompson, Fire and Ice, 190.

and satisfy the need for God. Robert Frost has what the desire.

## CHAPTER VI

### BASIC CONCEPTS IN PERSPECTIVE

Having considered at some length the basic attitude of Robert Frost on man, the reader has inevitably grown aware of the poet's underlying philosophy. Though this thesis does not purport to exhaust the philosophical possibilities of Frost's work, in the process of treating the basic concepts of the poet in regard to man some exposition of the inherent philosophy has been found necessary. While the study of man in a poet's work does not give the whole picture of his philosophy, it does suggest a major portion of it. A metaphysics for Robert Frost is meaningless apart from its relation to the human being. Thus man becomes the pivotal point for an understanding of the philosophy of Frost.

As in any philosophy, you start off with first principles. For Frost the starting point is man. He is always the main subject and all else is evaluated and categorized in relation to man. But man is not something vague or universal. He is always an individual, and so much so that, to Frost's mind, his prime vocation in life is to maintain this individuality, his personal dignity as a man. Though in many phases of life a man needs and welcomes companionship, in this



struggle he is inevitably alone. Any intrusion here, in the inner sanctum of a man's heart, would mean defeat. For success is not measured by externals. In "The Self-Seeker" <sup>1</sup> Willis, the crippled man's friend, tries to help by driving a harder bargain with the lawyer. He doesn't realize that all he can win is money, or rather he is unaware of how relatively unimportant money is in the light of the flower-lover's loss. The man on the bed knows he has lost more than any amount of money can satisfy, and his human dignity will not let him quibble over the settlement. He will make no attempt to evaluate freedom and flowers and love of beauty. His primary consideration is to salvage what he can. His flowers were so much to him and he knows that "Money can't pay me for the loss of them." <sup>2</sup> And adds:

You didn't think  
That was worth money to me? <sup>3</sup>

Crippled though he is, he has kept hope alive for the future as personified for him in the person of little Anne whose sound feet will somehow take the place of his own and through whose eyes he will again see the wild flowers of the countryside.

As a starting point, then, Frost seems to place man, and in him the power to maintain his self-respect and human dignity if he makes

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1 Frost, Poems, 117-125

2 Ibid., 119.

3 Ibid., 120.

the necessary effort. In the way of potentiality or limitation, Frost posits Nature. This is man's environment, his personal weaknesses, and unyielding nature. If man does not strive against it, he will fall by the way. A decadent society is one that has ceased to wage war on things as they are, a class that is satisfied with itself. Thus struggle is the operatio of man. This struggle can take many forms. In most cases work is the key to success. A good example of this is Silas in "Death of the Hired Man." <sup>4</sup>

He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,  
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,  
So he wont have to beg and be beholden. <sup>5</sup>

His brother is wealthy but Silas will not be a charity case. He has a little talent for haying and he wishes to exchange it to maintain his human dignity. Mary chides Warren to give the old man a job.

Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man  
Some humble way to save his self-respect. <sup>6</sup>

They talk about Silas, recounting his friendly feud with the young college boy when they worked together on the farm. Silas argued with the lad to maintain his confidence. He had no college education, but "He could find water with a hazel prong." <sup>7</sup> What hurt was that Harold

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 49-55.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 52.

did not believe him, "which showed how much good school had ever done him." <sup>7</sup> Silas the drifter had to fight to keep his pride. Mary realizes this.

'He don't know why he isn't quite as good  
As anybody. Worthless though he is,  
He won't be made ashamed to please his brother.' <sup>8</sup>

Silas put up a fight against taking the easy path. He engaged, if weakly, in the struggle everyone must make if he is to maintain his personal dignity. This spirit of struggle is not limited to this one poem of Frost. It is, as has been shown in chapter four, a frequent factor in his poems and thus in his philosophy. Critic Lawrance Thompson has seen this clearly. He writes:

'West-running Brook' takes us back to that conflict between 'the drift of things' and the vital resistance against 'the stream of everything that runs away.' Through love, the poet seems to say, he found the answer to the question which bothered him most. Through love he found the justification for the tragic aspect of life itself. And again, the crux of the poem rests upon the aggressive action of life, the instinctive struggle up the stream: . . . The poet has finally answered his own questions in his analogies. 'As if regret were in it and were sacred.' His meaning is clear: that this regret and yearning for persistence and for permanence is the sacred essence of life itself. Out of the struggle, the conflict, comes all that 'raises a little.' And all the sacrifice, all the spending, all the transience suddenly changes from tragic meaninglessness to sacred purpose. It relates itself to an integrated scheme of the universe. 'And there is something sending up the sun.' <sup>9</sup>

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7 Ibid., 52.

8 Ibid., 54.

9 Thompson, Fire and Ice, 186-187.

As this fight against the current of mediocrity means a constant change of scenery and relative position, so Frost sees the whole of life. There runs through his work a deep realization of this change in the world. It too has become an important ingredient in Robert Frost's philosophy. It partially explains the need for struggle to maintain personal dignity. Frost has on occasion treated the matter with apparent lightness, but real insight.

Most of the change we think we see in life  
Is due to truths being in and out of favor <sup>10</sup>

But here he speaks of the changes of outlook on the part of man. The change which obsesses him is that of the world about him. As a poet who wishes to crystalize and hold beauty, he views the passing of things with reluctance. By his vocation he sets himself to counteract its effects.

Like Herrick, he has a desperate desire to halt change,  
in order to grasp the meaning of a moment. He too regrets . . . that beauty is too fleeting to allow him  
time for study. <sup>11</sup>

This feeling of regret at beauty's passing mingled with a realization of the inevitability of such a course is well expressed in "Nothing Gold Can Stay." <sup>12</sup>

Nature's first green is gold,

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10 Frost, "The Black Cottage," Poems, 77.

11 Ford, The Less Traveled Road, 46.

12 Frost, Poems, 272.

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.

But this change has its good side. For just as beauty may fade and what is good grow bad, so may the converse develop. While his poem "Carpe Diem"<sup>13</sup> exhorts one and all to rejoice in the happiness of the present, he also preaches patience, and hope for the future. He feels that as life changes, so some day the unthinking neighbor of "Mending Wall"<sup>14</sup> will cease to move in darkness that is "Not of woods only and the shade of trees,"<sup>15</sup> and will see the light of reason and let the wall that separates men go nature's way. While change can be a source of sadness for Frost, it is also a reason for optimism.

One of the reasons why Frost remains an optimist, despite his discouragement about walls, is that he knows change to be at the core of life. He realizes that whatever seems unsatisfactory now, needs only the passage of time to make it different.<sup>16</sup>

The important point is that change holds a basic position in Frost's

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13 Ibid., 448.

14 Ibid., 47-48

15 Ibid., 48.

16 Ford, The Less Traveled Road, 44.

philosophy. Many critics have recognized this,<sup>17</sup> though they may not relate it directly to a philosophy.

Change for the poet does not necessarily mean progress. In fact, as has been indicated in the previous chapter and especially in the poem "The Lost Follower,"<sup>18</sup> Frost thinks little of most men's dreams of progress.

He already knew . . . that 'the most exciting movement in nature is not progress, advance, but expansion and contraction, the opening and shutting of the eye, the hand, the heart, the mind.'<sup>19</sup>

Frost here is saying that what men call progress must come from inside man. Achievement must flow from within out. This ability on the part of man to change and develop gives Frost reason for optimism.

From the presence of change as an essential in the thinking and philosophy of Frost, the temptation is to compare him with Heraclitus, the first known advocate of panta rei. This is one temptation where to yield seems the wisest move. The similarity in the philosophies of the two men of course is not exact all along the line, but they are strikingly close. Frost can be said to be implicitly in the tradition of vital movement in philosophy that is best exemplified

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17 E. G., Cox's Robert Frost, 25; Freeman, London Mercury, 1925, 186; Wm. Gropper, "The Literary Spotlight," The Bookman, LVII, 3, 308.

18 Frost, Poems, 483-484.

19 Cox, Robert Frost, 25.

by the system of Heraclitus. This is partly explained when the student becomes aware of Frost's broad learning in the Greek and Latin Classics. Philosophically speaking they were closely allied and they combined to influence this poet in his vision of man and the world.

Frost's thinking is not identical with the vitalist doctrine of entelechy, but is more closely related to the persistent and varying Greek doctrines of forms which actively expressed the potential character . . . of the individual.<sup>20</sup>

Frost revealed some of his knowledge of the Greek schools and his awareness of the indecision of man in his satiric poem "The Bear."<sup>21</sup> But he is more serious, and more like Heraclitus in "In The Home Stretch."<sup>22</sup>

'You're searching, Joe,  
For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.  
Ends and beginnings--there are no such things.  
There are only middles.'<sup>23</sup>

This is enough for Frost. He does not worry about where man came from or where he is going. His philosophy stretches out like an infinite line and he worries no more about life's ends than the mathematician about the line's. Or again, life is all middle because a circle.

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20 Thompson, Fire and Ice, 194.

21 Frost, Poems, 347.

22 Ibid., 139-146

23 Ibid., 145

We are balls,  
 We are round from the same source of roundness,  
 We are both round because the mind is round,  
 Because all reasoning is in a circle. <sup>24</sup>

His eternity, if such it can be called, is in keeping with  
 this idea. There is just more of "thisness" as "The Master Speed" <sup>25</sup>  
 indicates.

No speed of wind or water rushing by  
 But you have speed far greater. You can climb  
 Back up a stream of radiance to the sky,  
 And back through history up the stream of time.  
 And you were given this swiftness, not for haste  
 Nor chiefly that you may have the power of standing  
 still--

Off any still or moving thing you say.  
 Two such as you with such a master speed  
 Cannot be parted nor be swept away  
 From one another once you are agreed  
 That life is only life forevermore  
 Together wing to wing and oar to oar.

The proximity of the philosophy to that of Heraclitus is interesting.  
 Not that Frost took any philosophy whole and incorporated it. Rather  
 it should be said that Frost with his Greek literary background and his  
 applied common sense arrived at a philosophic position which resembled  
 that of the Greek of the panta rei. They both, as it were, started  
 from personal experience and attained like conclusions. These extracts  
 from the writings of Heraclitus will show some of the points where they  
 come closest.

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24 Frost, "Build Soil--A Political Pastoral," Poems, 427.

25 Frost, Poems, 392.



Homer was wrong in saying: 'would that strife might perish from among gods and men!' He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for, if his prayer were heard, all things would pass away. <sup>26</sup>

Here are Frost's sentiments exactly. Strife, he too has discovered, proves men and helps them to maintain their human dignity. The struggle is essential to man if his individuality is to survive. In another place the Greek has written: "We must know that war is common to all and strife is justice, and that all things come into being and pass away through strife. <sup>27</sup>

Heraclitus again says "Men would not have known the name of justice if these things were not." <sup>28</sup> Professor Burnet says that by "these things" he probably meant all kinds of injustice. <sup>29</sup> As we have seen above, Frost holds this also. And the poet might have added with Heraclitus that "it is not good for men to get all they wish to get. It is sickness that makes health pleasant, evil, good; hunger, plenty; weariness, rest."<sup>30</sup> Frost learned this from his life as a farmer and as a friend of men who strain for existence.

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26 This quotation and all subsequent ones of Heraclitus are taken from Professor John Burnet's Early Greek Philosophy, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1948, 4th ed. This quote appeared on page 136.

27 Ibid., 137.

28 Ibid., 137.

29 Ibid., 137n

30 Ibid., 140.

It is interesting to observe this comment of Professor Burnet on those who followed Heraclitus most closely. It shows why Frost with his stoicism is in close harmony with this Greek philosopher.

Most of the commentators on Herakleitos . . . were Stoics. Now, the Stoics held the Ephesian in peculiar veneration, and sought to interpret him as far as possible in accordance with their own system. 31

These similarities may be mere chance, but they are nonetheless striking. Mark Van Doren among others is very cognizant of this fact. He writes:

We can guess that his own philosopher is Heraclitus, who said: 'If you do not expect it, you will not find out the unexpected . . . Let us not make random guesses about the greatest things . . . The attunement of the world is of opposite tensions, as is that of the harp or how . . . what agrees disagrees . . . Strife is justice . . . The beginning and the end are common . . . A dry soul is wisest and best . . . For men to get all they wish is not the better thing . . . It is the concern of all men to know themselves and to be sober minded . . . A fool is wont to be in a flutter at every word.' Yet the guess could be wrong, for Frost does not say these things, however strongly his poems suggest them. 32

Bergson can be introduced to further the comparison. He is the closest of all the modern philosophers to Heraclitus and if the comparison of Frost's philosophy to that of the Greek is valid, then there should be a similarity between Frost and Bergson. Lawrance

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31 Ibid., 142.

32 Mark Van Doren, "Robert Frost's America," Atlantic Monthly, 187, 6, 31-33.

Thompson has not only marked the similarity, but he has stated in a neat paragraph a good summation of Robert Frost's outlook.

In Frost's poetry, as in the writings of Bergson, life is a positive force which grows through the very persistence of its desires. And it seems clear that Bergson's images and ideas influenced Frost's images and metaphors; the struggle of life against the constant stream, the undertow of matter; the stubborn and endless fight of the spirit toward death . . . Frost's belief in the value of contraries in life is similar to Bergson's; but the poet's belief in the constant dissolution of matter is closer to Spencer's. Frost's conviction that we live wisely and dangerously at the confluence of opposing forces . . . and that the dangers are converted through struggle into strength--these are similar to ideas expressed by Bergson . . . Frost's interest in the relationship between contraries is not Hegel's interest. It comes closer to that of Aristotle, who said that 'the knowledge of opposites is one.' 33

This is not to say that Robert Frost's work as far as its *philosophy is concerned can be placed in any one* philosophic system. He is his own philosopher and so has his own system. The foundation for his thought is common sense and he thus manages to steer a middle path with only occasional veering from side to side.

He (Frost) is not willing to be consistent in any philosophic system because he constantly fluctuates between the darkness and the light of these two positions, exactly as the earth moves back and forth through day and night. 34

Frost himself has stated this as his position in the poem, "To A

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33 Thompson, Fire and Ice, 197-198

34 Ibid., 202.

Thinker." 35 In it he reveals his position, applied common sense without aid of revelation or any formal guidance.

Suppose you've no direction in you,  
I don't see but you must continue  
To use the gift you do possess,  
And sway with reason more or less. 36

Robert Frost has done well with his analysis of the world.

It is unfortunate that he has not yet discovered the supernatural life, that he is satisfied with partial truth. "I take my incompleteness with the rest." 37 he has written, and for all his yearning after stars and after "God" it must be admitted that while his philosophic relations of man to man are sound, he has no known ultimate goal to give life a true and convincing purpose.

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35 Frost, Poems, 431-432.

36 Ibid., 431.

37 Ibid., 476.

## CHAPTER VII

### IN CONCLUSION

The sixth chapter has already served in part as a summation of this paper's findings. That Frost is interested in people has been clearly shown. The individual in the struggle to maintain his human dignity and self-respect has been to Frost a matter of concern and a source of hope. The need for work just to survive is a truth Frost has long preached. It is a truth he has learned from bitter experience in his own life. That he is still optimistic after the trials of his earlier days is encouraging. His ability to hope after contemplating the world about him shows his realization of the innate toughness and tenacity of man. His poetry reflects this attitude.

A modern critic, Louise Bogan, has summed up his work very well. She has written of Frost:

He described (in North of Boston) a dying region's ingrown life; its joys and fears; its stubborn strength still opposed to decay; its terrors and stratagems; its common sense and its groundwork of human dignity.

In West Running Brook (1928) he began to play with the role of self-conscious homespun philosopher. He began to give reasons for his innate, countryman's conservatism, and not only reasons, but arguments which were half-apologies. . . . 'Let what will be, be' became his creed . . . We see in this attitude the ancient conservatism of the man who depends upon the earth for his

living. <sup>1</sup>

His conservative approach has given him a philosophy which, as such, is quite sound. It is merely limited. This limitation and inability to look beyond this world could very easily be the reason why Frost has remained cautious and conservative through the years.

That Robert Frost is a man close to the soil, there is no doubt. He is a farmer like Robert Burns or, to a lesser degree, like Horace. He is, as in a sense they were, a gentleman farmer, a man who has learned from the earth without allowing himself to be lost in it. He is also a teacher who uses the farms and farmers of New England to teach a lesson that goes beyond any geographical boundaries. His poems are pastorals without any artificial ornateness. But he is first and foremost a poet and a seer. His vision is true, though limited. He is a philosopher or homey common sense. He lays claims to nothing more. He looks to causes and motives which while they remain for the most part on a natural plain, nevertheless are worthwhile. He is constantly turning up new ideas on facts. He is provocative, a philosopher on the order of Plato whose greatest contributions to the world were not the answers he gave, but the questions he raised. While limited, he is not shallow. Lawrence Thompson has observed that

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Bogan, Achievement in American Poetry, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1951, 49-50.

Beneath the intricate structure of Robert Frost's poems may be found not only wide technical range of intent and extent but also a spiritual depth of sight and insight.<sup>2</sup>

Frost has done well in wedding poetry and natural reason.

While occasionally he becomes a little dry and dogmatic, his best poems are compounded of real beauty and wisdom. Caroline Ford has shrewdly observed of Frost that

Just as he finds provinciality of subject-matter necessary to universal appreciation, he feels that the limited gateway of poetry helps one to understand the major beliefs of life.<sup>3</sup>

He has used this medium of poetry with distinction. He has shown a laudable confidence in man and a belief in his future. Miss Ford and many other students of the poet have found that "belief to Frost is the keynote of man's development."<sup>4</sup> His optimism is refreshing.

A final estimate on Robert Frost probably will not come until after his death. The literary world likes to evaluate works apart from the worker. But if four decades of critics and readers have not been deluded, Robert Frost will emerge as a poet of stature and distinction.

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2 Thompson, Fire and Ice, xii.

3 Ford, The Less Traveled Road, 17.

4 Ibid., 17.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Mr. William W. Adams has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Jan. 22, 1954

Date

H. S. Hughes

Signature of Advisor