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Abstract

This paper uses the work of Robert Frost to give insights into the diverse meanings that work holds in daily lived experience. We use this analysis to discuss general ways in which the content and formal properties of poetry allow unique insights into the world of work. Through a series of passages in Frost's works, we show how these illuminations of the poet's own experiences hold insights by which scholars can understand the experience of work more generally, giving insights into how work can be experienced as personally liberating but also culturally stifling, a tool both for and against human self-fulfillment. After a brief discussion of the use of poetry to understand organizational life, we analyze various excerpts from Frost's well-known and lesser known works. Finally, we argue that an understanding of poetry is a way for scholars to expand their understandings of the world of work, both through paying attention to the contents of poems and, more generally, from considering a poetic form of expression as shot-through with theoretical and epistemic insights.

The Sweetest Dreams that Labor Knows:

Robert Frost and the Poetics of Work

The role of poetry in understanding organizational life has been both acknowledged (e.g., Essex & Mainemelis, 2002; Kostera, 1997) and understudied by organizational scholars. While organizational studies has been heavily influenced by the fields of psychology, sociology, and economics, the influence of literature, and the humanities in general, is often overlooked (Whyte, 1994). We argue in this paper that one reason for this may be that literary texts, and poetry in particular, offer distinct ways of understanding the emotions, motivations, and experiences of human beings that, while essential for a profound understanding of the world of work, are difficult to integrate into a literature whose rigor is defined by the criteria of replicability and falsifiability (e.g., Popper, 1969). While good poetry holds general truths, the poetic experience is also irreducibly individual, and the poetic standards of authenticity versus insincerity often supplant social scientific notions of truth and falsity. We argue in this paper that, despite these differences, the study of poetic works reveal fundamental dilemmas about the meaning of work that may be overlooked in other approaches. We use the work of Robert Frost to give insights into how work can be experienced as personally liberating but also culturally stifling, a tool both for and against human self-fulfillment. After a brief discussion of the use of poetry to understand organizational life, we analyze various excerpts from Frost's[i] well-known and lesser known works, showing how these illuminations of the poet's own experiences hold insights by which scholars can understand the experience of work more generally.

Poetry and Organizational Thought

It would be a mistake to take the idea of poetic expression, as some have (e.g., Huxley, 1958), as being opposed to factual, intellectual or theoretical knowledge. While poetry can offer pleasure to the reader, its value extends beyond the purely decorative or lyrical adornment of ideas that could have been stated more directly through prose. Central to the understanding of poetry is the idea that the metaphors, figures, and rhythms embedded in verse are themselves central to an intellectual message that could not have been stated as propositional knowledge (Naylor, 1991). In the words of Frost (1966: 19), "It begins in delight and ends in wisdom".

Poetry allows lessons to be stated indirectly, and thus where theory offers ideas which, if we accept, still remain outside of us as technologies of thought, poetry does not tell but indicates, and therefore the lessons we perceive in poetry seem to us as if we ourselves thought of them. Insights thus discovered strike the reader as phenomenologically real, that is, not just facts, but *truths* (Lentricchia, 1975).

In this sense, poetry shares a cultural function with myth, performance, and ritual, promoting ways of being that are not instructional but, instead, are performative (Pelias & Lockford 2004), relying on the enactment and reenactment of the verse itself, rather than on argumentation. As in MacLeish's well known couplet, "a poem should be equal to/not true", the ideas presented in enacted media are not arguments that are refutable; to understand a poem is to agree with it, at least provisionally, and to follow it where it leads. It is this suspension of disbelief that allows an emic understanding (Pike, 1954) of cultural forms, where on is able to contextualize oneself in the discursive space provided by an author.

The relation of poetic knowing to more mainstream forms of theoretical knowledge is particularly poignant in the field of Management, where one of the greatest criticisms of organizational theories is that they do not resound with the

everyday lived experiences of managers (e.g., Kleinrichert, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004).

Indeed, proponents of the "scientist-practitioner model" of organizational thinking

(e.g., Jex, 2002) stress the importance of integrating technical and theoretical

knowledge, with a sensitivity to the everyday lives of managers: their daily concerns

and lived experiences at work. Because of the emphasis in poetic works on

understanding as it appears *from within a person's own experience*, the study of

poetry is one way to integrate theory with experience. With regards to work-related

knowledge, the poetry of Frost is particularly appropriate here, with its origins in the

stoic laborial ethic of the New England farmer, its humanistic focus, and its virtually

unending considerations of the relations of work to life, happiness, and the world.

<center>Frost's Expression of the Existential Significance of Work</center>

We begin with the thesis that there is an essential ambiguity in the meaning of

work, or labor, in human life. At times, work is a means toward self-realization

(Ivancevich & Donnely, 1975; Maslow, 1943), at others it is done out of duty, being a

kind of necessary evil (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). Here, we seek to explore how

the work of Frost embodies these aspects of work's relationship with life, both

showing and attempting to reconcile the different experiences of work. Our purpose

here is not to delineate these aspects of working life in such a way as to create them as

completely independent; indeed, following Frost himself, we frame the relationship

between expressive and dutiful work as complex: at times oppositional and at times

complementary. In order to frame our discussion, we treat each part separately and

then try to show how Frost himself tentatively tries to unify the two sides of work.

Work as Self-Realization

The first manner in which work may relate to human experience is through its

ability to bring about self-realization. By this we mean to say that work allows

humanity to define itself through acts which are transformational. For example, work allows the transmutation of the environment which surrounds us and, to do this, it necessarily requires environmental interaction. Further, through such interaction, work allows the expression of personal identities and internal energies, which may bring about a kind of emotional and existential catharsis. Below, we explore each of these ways in which work relates to our lives and how Frost chose to express them.

The human as a creative, productive force of nature. One way in which humans may be realized through work is by its ability to bring about interaction with their environment. More specifically, human-environment interactions which allow the "taming" of the wild give humanity the ability to define themselves not only as apart from their environment, and therefore actualized, but also as apart-and-above their environment, by obtaining an identity as masters of their domain (e.g., Goody, 1977). Frost clearly illustrates this function of work in the first two stanzas of his poem *The Aim was Song*:

> Before man came to blow it right
>
> The wind once blew itself untaught,
>
> And did its loudest day and night
>
> In any rough place where it caught.

> Man came to tell it what was wrong:
>
> It hadn't found the place to blow;
>
> It blew too hard—the aim was song.
>
> And listen how it ought to go!

Above, Frost explores the rather comical notion that humans have a tendency to identify themselves as not only holding privileged knowledge about what is best for nature, but also as being able to enact that knowledge. Thus, human beings are given the task of carrying on a progression of nature through their work.

A key notion in the above passage is found in the penultimate line, a line which reveals, upon analysis, the ambiguous relationship between oppression and liberation in Frost's conception of work. The problem with the wind, we read, is that "it blew too hard". Frost had written elsewhere that the key to poetry, and to living well, was the principle of "enthusiasm tamed to metaphor" (Frost, 1966: 36). That is, the unhampered will, according to Frost, is not the source of a well-lived life, but becomes liberating once it is shaped by "the prism of the intellect and spread on the screen in a color" (Frost, 1966: 36). In this sense, the wind provided a raw material that humans, through the prism of their telos, shaped into song. The idea of taming, then, is as once a normative statement about the relationship of humans to nature, and an attempt to conceptualize human labor as a "prism" through which nature passes, and which evidences nature in its forms.

Work as a catharsis. Another way in which work functions to allow the self is through catharsis. While work functions to imbue objects with value, it often has the ancillary function of providing us with a mechanism by which we can give "a loose to our soul", as expressed by Frost in *Two Tramps in Mud Time*. In this poem, Frost is chopping logs in the woods, when two loggers arrive and attempt to induce Frost to pay them to do the work instead:

The blows that a life of self control

 Spares to strike for the common good,

>That day giving a loose to my soul,
>
>I spent on the unimportant wood.

Here, the meaning-giving properties of work are illuminated as a kind of sublimation (Freud, 1914) of socially originating meanings. The first two lines hint that the origins of the "blows" given are social, but held back because of the normative constraint against expression of aggression in a society. Nature is conceptualized as a passive medium into which these aggressions may be sublimated.

The notion of sublimation is here considered as an important omission from mainstream sensemaking perspectives (e.g., Weick, 1979). Not only is work considered meaning given, but a suggestion of why work is a medium for sensemaking is given in the *Two Tramps* poem. This suggestion is that work provides a cathartic mechanism that allows the socially destabilizing features of human agency to be vented in a way that serves, rather than subverts, the "common good".

Work as a way to solve the existential emptiness of humanity. Following Weick (1979), the drive to work has implications for the discovery or construction of meaning in people's live. In this sense, work allows us to come to terms with its existence, with our own existence. For example, consider the following passage from Frost's *The Oven Bird*:

>The bird would cease and be as other birds
>
>But that he knows in singing not to sing.
>
>The question that he frames in all but words
>
>Is what to make of a diminished thing.

This somewhat tragic musing frames work against an otherwise bleak existential picture: The oven bird (and, by implication, human beings) find themselves approaching the coming winter, with no fundamental reason to sing, but sing anyway. In this way, the work of the bird is a self-constructed solution to a fundamentally meaningless situation. This perspective shows the dialectic nature of work and non-work and brings to light an important point: work functions as a way for us to understand non-work. Put differently, our actions and existence allow us a glimpse into our own non-existence and, in doing so, provide us with a means to come to terms with the two.

Work as Necessity and Alienation

The second way we conceptualize work's role in life as expressed through poetry is by exploring the necessity of work. While work may have a great many benefits for what could be called the spiritual nature of humanity, as noted above, by virtue of the fact that we must work to survive, it may also be seen as a kind of necessary evil, and through its imposition of necessity on human life, can be experienced as a force of alienation. Such experiences of work are furthered through society's regulation of work, which places work in conditions outside of those chosen by individuals themselves.

Work and the tyranny of management. In Frost's poem *The Code*, we see how managed labor can lead to an animosity toward one's work. In the following passage, we see the manager depicted as a tyrannical driver of workers:

Them that he couldn't lead he'd get behind

And drive, the way you can, you know, in mowing—

Keep at their heels and threaten to mow their legs off

This poem culminates in an act of workplace retaliation (Folger, 1993), in which the workers almost kill the manager by dropping a bail of hay onto his head. The "code" involved, is that a leader should always respect the integrity of the worker, in order to preserve the sanctity of work, and allow work to emanate from the freedom of workers, not their control.

Similarly, in *The Death of the Hired Man*, Frost describes a man who is attempting to get a job doing work in the fields, so that he may pay off a pressuring debtor:

> I shouldn't mind his bettering himself
>
> If that was what it was. You can be certain,
>
> When he begins like that, there's someone at him
>
> Trying to coax him off with pocket-money, —

In the first line, it is evident that what is demeaning about the job is not the work itself; in fact, were the hired man working in order to "better himself", the work would not be experienced as alienating. However, the force of social pressure undermines the expressive and self-actualizing potential of labor.

Work as a necessity and not as a love. Perhaps the most offending aspect of work's role in most lives is the fact that it must be done. However, this fact is made even more offensive because the structure of modern life is such that the work which could be enjoyed as pleasure is often appropriated for the sole purpose of production. This is put most brilliantly by Frost in *Two Tramps in Mud Time*, cited above, after his work is interrupted by loggers:

They thought all chopping was theirs of right.

Men of the woods and lumberjacks,

They judged me by their appropriate tool.

Except as a fellow handled an ax

They had no way of knowing a fool.

Nothing on either side was said.

They knew they had but to stay their stay

And all their logic would fill my head:

As that I had no right to play

With what was another man's work for gain.

My right might be love but theirs was need.

And where the two exist in twain

Theirs was the better right—agreed.

The imposition of the "tramps" is manifest in multiple ways: in their judgement, which disturbs the quiet serenity of the author's labor, in their expectations to take over the work and demand payment, but above all, in the logic that the author himself comes to believe through mere exposure to a social field. The final line of the poem, which breaks meter with the hyphenated statement "agreed", is the only break in meter in the entire poem. This rhythmic innovation is significant in that it is the only place where the experience of the author gives way to the perverse logic of "work for pay". The sacrifice of love for need, which is not inherent in work

itself but rather in its social conditions of existence, is here faced as an inescapable
exigency to which the author, reluctantly, agrees.

Work as a compulsion that drives man to abuse nature. While the above
examples deal with outside impositions on the creative internal satisfaction of work,
Frost also has something to say about the negative aspects of this internal drive itself.
In the poem *The Wood Pile*, Frost watches the remains of a woodcutter's activity,
after the worker is long gone. Seeing the environmental destruction, Frost reflects on
the compulsion that drives humans to use nature:

> I thought that only
>
> Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
>
> Could so forget his handiwork on which
>
> He spent himself the labour of his axe,
>
> And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
>
> To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
>
> With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

Here, Frost suggests that the residues of one's labors must not be forgotten in
the compulsion of work. Further, he indicates that work for works sake can lead to a
disrespecting of nature, and can lead people to effectively waste the fruits of their
labor. In this passage, Frost turns his gaze from the worker to the work, and shows a
picture of nature after human activity. We see the reverse side of the first point made
here, that after nature is appropriated in a human "useful fireplace", traces of the
activity remain outside of human use, and continue their histories independent of
humans.

The negative consequences of work on the products of labor and the external environment are a poignant theme in Frost. While much of his poetry focuses on the importance of vitality through labor, this vitality is usually indicated through a communion or respect for nature. When such a partnership breaks down, work becomes futile and frustrating. In Frost's *Plowmen*, for example, we see the consequences of a one-sided approach to cultivation that ignores the wonders of nature:

> A plow, they say, to plow the snow.
>
> They cannot mean to plant it, no–
>
> Unless in bitterness to mock
>
> At having cultivated rock.

The ironic tone of the poem plays on the notion of "plow", which is both a means to till soil and a way to clear concrete. The double use illustrates the self-mockery of those who would "cultivate rock", and the futile attempts to work a land that, through human misuse, has lost its fertility.

Work as a Unifying Principle

The multiple ways in which work is framed in Frosts' oeuvre show the often contradictory dimensions of work, which is both framed as an internal expression of individuality, and a cultural exigency that must be fulfilled without regard to the individual. While many of the above passages illustrate these two sides of work separately, there are many ways in which they may be integrated as singular expressions, both personal and cultural, both natural and active upon nature.

Work as homage to the beauty of nature. For example, in his poem *Mowing*, Frost describes his work of mowing a field with a scythe. Rather than focus on the

transformation of nature through human activity, though, Frost focuses on the silence of his scythe, the passivity of his work against the grandness of nature, and describes the joy of his work through its homage to this grandness:

> The fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows.
>
> My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

The author here does appropriate the hay as his own, but frames his action as continuous with a natural process, liberating for both parties. Frost does not cut the hay, it cuts itself, the whisper of the scythe only a homage to the self-productive movement of the world. A similar devotion to natural worship through cultivation is apparent in *Putting in the Seed*:

> Slave to a Springtime passion for the earth.
>
> How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
>
> On through the watching for that early birth
>
> When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
>
> The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
>
> Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs

Human beings planting seeds are here seen both as slaves to their passion, and as parents, watching carefully for the birth of a plant. Here we see a clear instance of Frost's idea of the dual nature of work as subordination and mastery of humans with regard to the world.

The attempt to combine necessity and intrinsic satisfaction of work. As argued above, work may be understood as being a function of pleasure or necessity. However, work may encapsulate both, and, in doing so, allow a more unified perspective on life. This is put so well by Frost, again, in *Two Tramps in Mud Time.* The first passage from this poem, cited above, revealed the cathartic features of work, and the second, the appropriation of work through social logics, culminating in the authors' resignation to the appropriative right of "need" versus "love". However, the final stanza of the poem attempts a grand unification of these two themes:

But yield who will to their separation,

My object in living is to unite

My avocation and my vocation

As my two eyes make one in sight.

Only where love and need are one,

And work is play for mortal stakes,

Is the deed ever really done

For Heaven and the future's sakes.

As can be felt, the best work that can be done is that which is loved, while concurrently providing that which one needs. As Frost indicates, only when these two derivatives of work coexist can a task be said to be truly finished.

Work as itself a metaphor for the movement of life. Finally, the last way we explore work's relationship to life is in its continuation into infinitude. Frost puts this well in *Gathering Leaves*, where he explores the fact that, perhaps especially with pointless chores, we may get a glimpse into the cycle of life. In this poem, an elderly

author is attempting to gather together all the past fallen leaves in a field, collecting

the manifold memories that have fallen around, disorganized, over the years:

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

Here the work of harvesting has metaphorically taken off from a simple human action

to become a symbol for human life itself. The harvest is life, and the collection is the

attempt to give meaning. The use of harvesting labor as a metaphor for life itself is

echoed in Frost's well known *After Apple Picking*:

> And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
>
> Beside it, and there may be two or three
>
> Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
>
> But I am done with apple-picking now.

In these examples, the unification of work and life is complete – work is not a means

to life, but the act of life itself.

Discussion

In the above section, we have attempted to illustrate the various ways in which

work is portrayed within the oeuvre of Robert Frost. Moving beyond an analysis of

content, however, we can attempt to draw a broad lesson about a common poetic

feature favored by Frost and present in virtually all of his works – the synecdoche, or

part-whole relation. Bagby (1986: 386) describes Frost's synecdochic style as "reflect[ing] a whole way of perceiving reality: fundamental epistemological assumptions, perceptual habits, linguistic assumptions, and structural preferences". Thus we should pause to explore the significance of part-whole thinking in Frost's understanding of work.

Synecdoche rests on the idea that a part of some topic area can stand for a more general concept, as in when one says "the throne" rather than "the queen". In much poetry, and particularly the nature-oriented poetry of writers like Frost or Emerson, the part is framed as one piece of nature, and, in the poem, comes to take on the idea of Nature as a whole (e.g., Emerson's "the universe in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour"). According to Frost, this type of thinking is not simply hyperbole, but is fundamental in understanding the nature of the subject matter: "Poetry is simply made of metaphor. So also is philosophy – and science, too, for that matter, if it will take the soft impeachment from a friend" (Frost, 1966: 24). As Bagby (1986) points out, Frost's poems have a relatively predicable structure; they begin with a concrete event or observation, with a detailed empirical outline of the patterns in the event, and then reproduce that pattern at the level of a general lesson about the world. This process of using a seemingly trivial instance of everyday life, such as doing a chore or working in a field, to gain insight about our lives, is a key part of critical thinking not only in poetry, but in science as well.

We suggest that organizational studies is a particularly relevant place for us to import this use of synecdoche. Many authors have underscored the need for workers to see in their work a sense of something greater than themselves (e.g., Weick, 1994), and to give meaning to organizational processes through placing them in a larger scheme of national and global developments. Much of the critical literature in

organization studies has lamented the focus on micro processes in our theories, without placing these processes as both components and reflections of contextual factors such as the capitalist mode of production (e.g., Parker, 1999; Scheiberg, 2001), the expansionist ethic (e.g., Lammers, 2003; Frenkel & Shehav, 2003), or the triumph of rationalism (Parker, 1992). In this sense, an ability to see work as a metaphor for wider processes seems a key competency that scholars could develop through a thorough reading of Frost.

In conclusion, we have attempted to argue that an understanding of poetry is a way for scholars to expand their understandings of the world of work, both through paying attention to the contents of poems and, more generally, from considering a poetic form of expression as shot-through with theoretical and epistemic insights. We have explored the work of Frost as exemplary of the possibilities of poetry in organizational studies. While the breadth of scholarship on poetry and its criticism is impossibly broad to do justice to the various forms of understandings of poetry, we attempt to show, with a few concrete cases, how experience can be condensed into poetic forms and how it may illustrate general truths that can inform organizational scholarship. Through this expansion, we thus reproduce the metaphorical imperative given by Frost, and reiterate the integrative spirit that both inspires poetry and brings together domains of scholarship. We hope that such an attempt is one step toward a bringing together of minds from the various academic corners where ideas are harvested.

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